

Religious Councils

Religious Services, Public Administration, and Politics

Israel's religious councils are both inefficient and ineffective as a result of narrow political interests. Therefore, they must not operate as independent entities but rather be integrated as departments within local authorities.

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118

Today, 131 religious councils operate in Israel and supply religious services in a variety of fields including kashrut supervision and ritual slaughter, ritual baths (mikvaot), weddings, burial, religious leadership, Sabbath boundaries (eruvim), subsidies, and religious culture. In 2014, the councils' annual budget totaled 760 million shekels, most of the funds are received from local authorities' budgets and fees collected from residents and businesses, in addition to earmarked funds from the Ministry of Religious Services. And yet, even with this entire budget, an annual survey found that public trust in those who provide religious services was the lowest among 32 categories of public employees (including Knesset members, elected local officials, judges, and others).

In an annual survey of the public sector's performance, public trust in those who provide religious services was the lowest of all.

In 2014, the number of employees authorized by the Ministry of Religious Services for all religious councils in the country totaled



2,176

According to Finance Ministry data, the actual number of religious council employees in 2014 totaled

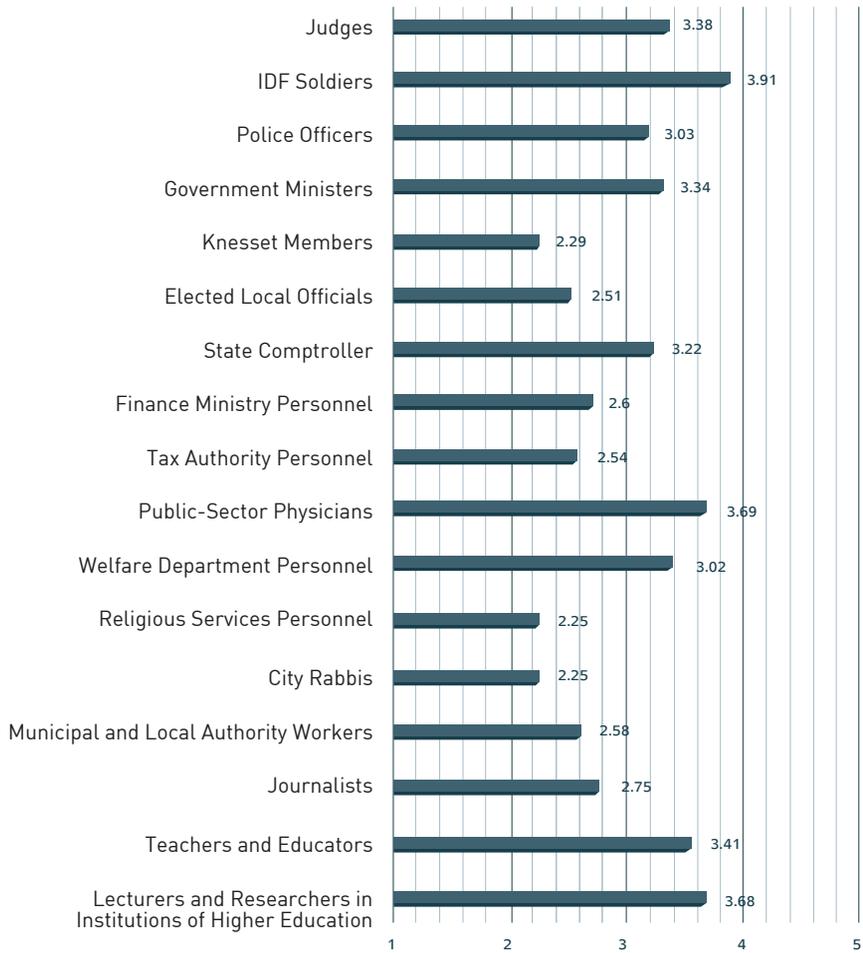


3,417

57% higher than authorized number

**Trust in Public
Service Employees, 2016**

1 - Extremely Dissatisfied
5 - Extremely Satisfied



Source: Eran Vigoda-Gadot, Nissim Cohen, and Shlomo Mizrahi, **Performance of the Public Sector in Israel: An Analysis of Citizens' Attitudes and Assessment of the National Situation (2016)**, University of Haifa and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2016.

In examining the efficiency and effectiveness of religious councils, we see that the problem is not just one of public image, but rather involves the especially poor level of services which they provide. Many deficiencies can be found in almost every area of activity.

Here are a few:

- ▶ Many kashrut supervisors fail to show up to the businesses they are meant to inspect
- ▶ Poor service in the wedding department
- ▶ Low standards of hygiene in the ritual baths
- ▶ Funds earmarked for burial rituals are misused to cover council deficits
- ▶ Budgeting of stipends, subventions, and Torah culture programs does not comply with the principles of sound management
- ▶ Mandatory fees are under-collected
- ▶ Council plenum meets infrequently
- ▶ Lack of transparency and access to information

What are the roots of the problem?

(1) Politicization and insufficient representation. As municipal bodies, religious councils are supposed to reflect the composition of the local population. In practice, however, it is the Minister of Religious Services who controls appointments to them.

(2) Unprofessional behavior. From the outset, religious councils were created as political bodies, therefore the imperative separation between the political and professional levels of the chairman and executive director has never been implemented. The professional requirements for its positions are minimal and sometimes not enforced at all.

What is the result?

- (1)** The religious councils serve the incumbent minister's political interests rather than those of local residents.
- (2)** Positions on the religious council are awarded on the basis of political considerations and not professional qualifications.
- (3)** Contrary to the public interest, some positions are split between several people instead of being filled by a single individual.

We recommend a comprehensive reform that includes:

- (1) Disbanding the independent religious councils and replacing them with departments of religious services that serve residents via local authorities.
 - ▶ We recommend following a model of operation similar to that of the social services and the education departments of local authorities. This would effectively give local municipalities control over their own religious councils while also making them subject to national regulations and entitled to receive budgets from the relevant government ministry.

- (2) Privatizing the responsibility of kashrut supervision.
 - ▶ Transfer this authority to private agencies, which would allow the local rabbi time to focus on spiritual leadership within their community.

Main Advantages

- (1) **Representation.** The municipality's interests in the field of religious services will be represented by the local authority rather than by the national Minister of Religious Services, as is the case today.
- (2) **Professionalism.** As part of the local authority, the religious services department will be subject to administrative and professional rules. Among other changes, the department director will not be appointed on the basis of political considerations, but rather will have to meet strict threshold requirements to be selected for the position.

Additional Advantages

- (1)** This model will make it possible for the local authorities' gatekeepers and members of the opposition to function as a control mechanism and impose checks and balances over the provision of religious services.
- (2)** Today, many religious councils are inefficient due, in part, to their small size. The transfer of these councils to a department within the local authority will increase their efficiency, while solving the problem of size.

Experience shows that local authorities are more attentive to needs on the ground than any other public body in the country, including needs related to religious services. The time has come to abolish the fabricated entity known as the "religious council" and transfer the provision of religious services to local authorities.

Ariel Finkelstein is a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute and a doctoral student in the Political Science Department at Bar-Ilan University, where he studies local government in Israel and the relationship between religion and state.

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