

“Were it Not for Fear of the Government”

Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Citizens and the Police

Guy Ben-Porat | Tehila Gado



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ABSTRACT

The trust of minority groups in the police and the legitimacy they grant it often reflect broader issues of citizenship and belonging. Haredim often feel that police enforcement is arbitrary, discriminatory, and deliberately ignores their lifestyle. Haredi demands to protect their way of life often lead to clashes with the police, which are reported extensively in the media. In most cases extremist ultra-Orthodox groups participate in these confrontations, but in other cases, as during the Covid-19 pandemic, other groups have also been involved. During the pandemic, there was heightened criticism of the police among the ultra-Orthodox and an upsurge in claims of unequal enforcement and of police violence against Haredim. However, Covid-19 also had a serious impact on the Haredi public and led to internal criticism of the community's leadership, which struggled to cope with the crisis. The pandemic heightened the dependence of Haredi society on state institutions, including the police, in order to enforce the instructions issued by the Health Ministry. Tension has emerged between the low level of trust in the police, and in state institutions in general, and the growing recognition of the need for efficient and effective policing. This tension, which is connected to trends of integration and rapprochement, forms the starting point for this study.

The study examines ultra-Orthodox attitudes toward the police, trust and legitimacy of the police, and perceptions regarding reforms that could foster cooperation between the Haredim and the police. The research literature shows that trust in the police and the legitimacy it enjoys among minority groups are connected to the concept of "moral alignment"—the sense that the police acts in accordance with values close to those of the group and that its everyday conduct toward the

group is fair. Fairness relates to perceived over-policing, an aggressive and discriminatory treatment of the group, and to perceived under-policing—neglect of the group's needs. This study examines these perceptions through attitude surveys (based on a comparison between Haredim and non-Haredi Israeli Jews), focus groups, in-depth interviews, and a review of the ultra-Orthodox press at two points during the Covid-19 crisis.

The examination of trust in the police and legitimacy for its work encourages the exploration of broader questions about Haredi citizenship. Suspicion and hostility stemming from principled disagreements regarding the way of life or Haredi claims against the status quo create a sense of alienation from the police, which is identified with the state and its values, and influence the perception of the police and the legitimacy it enjoys. The perception that the police harasses Haredim, uses harsh tactics against them, and ignores their needs is also connected to this fundamental disagreement. However, despite the disagreements and mistrust, ultra-Orthodox citizens also need the police in some instances—in emergencies and crises, or when the Haredi communities are unable to resolve internal violence. Thus the dilemmas examined here concerning the police in Haredi society and the trust and cooperation it receives are connected to broader questions about the state and its institutions, but also to practical questions regarding law and order and the security the police provides. These dilemmas correspond with processes of rapprochement and growing identification with the state and Israeli society, as well as with the ongoing strengthening of national identity.

The first part of the study presents a review of the Haredi media at two points during the Covid-19 crisis, when widely reported confrontations erupted between the police and ultra-Orthodox citizens. The review confirms the twin trends of alienation and rapprochement. On the one hand, the reporting of clashes between police officers and Haredim is accompanied by claims of discriminatory policing and selective enforcement. On the other, the reports expose the serious damage caused by the pandemic among the Haredi communities and the loss

of trust in the Haredi leadership, which was considered to have failed to cope with the crisis, thereby enhancing recognition of the need for effective policing for the good of the Haredi community.

The following sections of the study extend the examination of Haredi attitudes toward the police from the starting point of the Covid-19 crisis. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative tools—attitude surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews—and also addresses broader questions of identity, belonging, and legitimacy. Trust in the police is lower among ultra-Orthodox citizens than among non-Haredi Jews, as is the rating of police actions and the sense of security the force provides. Within the ultra-Orthodox population, differences were found between modern and conservative groups: the level of trust was lower among the latter. Although the gaps between Haredim and non-Haredi Jews on more general questions about the sense of belonging and pride in Israeli identity are narrower, the sense of shared values with the police is lower among Haredim than among other Israeli Jews. Differences were also found regarding the fairness of the police: Haredim are more likely than other groups to question the assumption that police operations are based on professional considerations and are more likely to believe that they are subjected to over-policing. These perceptions were supported by the findings from the focus groups and in-depth interviews. However, Haredim are not avoiding police services and state that they will file reports with the police when necessary.

The working assumption is that, although it will be difficult to bridge the disagreements about values, the ultra-Orthodox public recognizes the need for an efficient and effective police force. A pragmatic approach, including identifying the needs of the community through bottom-up work, can create effective channels for action that will enhance trust in the police. The policy recommendations of this study relate to several areas:

A. Recruiting Haredim to the Police

Recruiting Haredim to the police is a complex process; young ultra-Orthodox men studying in yeshiva are unlikely to rush to join the police, just as they do not rush to join the army. Recruitment requires attention to training processes and service tracks, placement in positions where they can contribute to Haredi society and thereby enhance the legitimacy of service in the police, and the creation of a support system to remove obstacles. To this end, it is worth trying to learn from the experience of Haredi men and women who have served or are serving in the police, both in terms of their integration into the organization and their relationships with the Haredi community.

B. Strengthening Cultural Capacity

Police forces around the world hold training sessions that introduce officers to different communities, explaining their needs and sensitivities, and at the same time introduce the community to the police and its work in order to reduce suspicion and enhance trust. Cultural training sessions of this kind in the Haredi communities should have the following characteristics: (1) they should be based on existing knowledge and input from key figures in the Haredi communities; (2) they should introduce police officers to the needs and sensitivities of the Haredi communities; (3) they should open channels of communication between the police and the Haredim, so that members of the community—both leaders and the rank and file—can raise issues that are important to them; (4) it is important to ensure that the sessions are translated into rules and methods reflected in everyday work.

C. Reexamining the Use of Mediators

The police often uses ultra-Orthodox community activists as mediators in order to reach the Haredi community, solve problems, and formulate agreements. The study reveals criticism of these activists in the Haredi community, including claims that they do not necessarily represent the interests of all Haredim, but only of particular groups or of their own associates. Accordingly, the police should reconsider its work with the activists and develop new mechanisms for adapted dialogue with the various Haredi communities.

D. Enhancing Access to the Police

There is a high level of willingness to report to the police and cooperate with it among most of the Haredi groups, reflecting pragmatic approaches that largely supersede arguments about values. To encourage this trend, the police should: (1) develop channels of communication with the ultra-Orthodox communities that encourage the raising of problems and discussion of priorities; (2) identify existing obstacles in the Haredi communities that prevent or delay contact with the police; (3) consider the possibility of creating additional mechanisms for reporting and filing complaints that include officers who have cultural capacity or officers from Haredi society.

E. Addressing Police Violence

Police violence, particularly when it is documented, is a key cause of the lack of legitimacy of the force. Strengthening trust in the police requires an efficient, transparent, and trusted mechanism for clarifying and processing complaints and for reporting to the victims and the public on the outcomes of this process.

On the whole, Haredim regard themselves as a law-observing public and distinguish between the “normative” majority and extremist groups responsible for clashes with the police. However, they are critical of what they regard as the excessive use of force by the police. Regarding the reforms that could enhance trust in the police and willingness to cooperate with it, there is cautious support for recruiting Haredim to the police, particularly among the more modern groups. They also suggest that reinforcing cultural training and supervising the work of the police, particularly in violent incidents, could have a positive impact.

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