The Legitimation Process of the Hilltop Youth

From Outcasts to the Israeli Cabinet

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ABSTRACT: Over the years, the ‘hilltop youth’ have acted in opposition to both Israeli state authorities and the settler leadership. Israeli society viewed them as a group acting to realize an extremist religious ideology while violating Israeli law and ignoring the state’s decisions. However, after coming to feel that their social position was making it difficult for them to realize their vision, they embarked upon a process of trying to gain political legitimacy. By turning to mass media and by disseminating messages with which the public at large could identify, they have worked to move closer to Israeli consensus opinion. We identify the steps through which this was carried out and trace its success. The process reached a significant point in 2023 when politicians identified with the hilltop youth took up important ministerial positions in government, marking their transition from actors who opposed the state to ones responsible for its decisions.

KEYWORDS: hilltop youth, legitimation, elections, right-wing, settlements, extremism

This article examines the manner in which members of the religious-ideological formation known as the ‘hilltop youth’ acted to improve their image and gain legitimacy in Israeli society, and how this corresponds with the unprecedented strengthening of the parties of the extreme religious right and the transformation of some of their key figures (who are identified with the hilltop youth) from marginal characters in Israeli politics to senior government ministers. In the first section of the article, we explain the concept of legitimacy and identify the basic features of the
hilttop youth. In the second section, after describing our methodology, we trace the actions taken by the hilltop youth in order to gain legitimacy in Israeli society. Finally, we examine the partial success that the hilltop youth have achieved in becoming legitimate players in Israeli society, as politicians who identify with them become government ministers and undergo similar processes of legitimation.

**Legitimation**

Researchers have defined the concept of legitimacy in a variety of ways. Although often identified with the sociologist Max Weber (1968), discussions of political legitimacy date back to the early modern philosophers (Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) and have continued across a variety of disciplines (see Peter 2010). It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt a comprehensive overview of these discussions. We instead offer a few definitions of legitimacy or legitimation that we consider most relevant to our case study. Morris Zelditch defined ‘legitimation’ as “a process that brings the unaccepted into accord with accepted norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures” (2001a: 9). For Mark Suchman, ‘legitimacy’ is defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (1995: 574).

Cathryn Johnson, Timothy J. Dowd, and Cecilia L. Ridgeway (2006) identify a set of characteristics common to different definitions of legitimacy: (1) the idea of congruence between a political actor and the norms, values, and beliefs that constitute the accepted social order in a particular society; (2) a view of legitimacy as a collective phenomenon; and (3) the dependency of legitimacy on a semblance of consensus (if not on actual consensus) among the target audience from which it is sought—in other words, for a collective to see an actor as legitimate, most members of the collective must either perceive it as such, or believe that it is widely perceived as such (see also Zelditch 2001b). Additionally, the concept of legitimacy contains within it a normative component alongside the descriptive component. This means that ‘legitimate’ describes not only correspondence to an existing social order but also alignment with what is considered just and true according to that social order (Johnson et al. 2006).

When a group attempts to gain political legitimacy, it directs its efforts toward different target audiences that can—explicitly or implicitly—grant it to them. As Roy Suddaby, Alex Bitektine, and Patrick Haack (2017) explain, the questions that should be asked about legitimacy include not only what it is but also where and how it occurs. Target audiences can vary
but their strength likely exceeds or equals that of the actor seeking legitimacy, since audiences are understood by legitimacy-seekers as sources of authority, as having the potential to serve or pose risks to the interests of the legitimacy-seeker, or as key intermediaries with the ability to influence other target audiences (Schoon 2016; von Billerbeck and Gippert 2017). This is the source of many of the dilemmas and difficulties that constitute part of efforts to gain legitimacy, since the aspiration to achieve legitimacy simultaneously from a number of target audiences often forces those seeking it to speak in several voices, to emphasize different messages, and to use diverse tools. In addressing different audiences, the messages involved may even contradict one another as a result of gaps between the values of the social order and those of the various target audiences (Schoon 2016; von Billerbeck and Gippert 2017; Zariski 1986).

Legitimacy is not static; it is a dynamic process in which social groups and the authorities are in an ongoing dialogue and negotiation (Deephouse et al. 2017). Furthermore, since some groups feel that their norms and values have been marginalized, they try to challenge existing norms and to reach positions of power from which they can ensure that their ideology is accepted as legitimate (Dietz et al. 2019). The process through which a player who is not initially perceived as legitimate attains legitimacy from a target audience occurs gradually over time. Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway (2006) divided this process into four stages: (1) the emergence of a new player who is not initially perceived as matching an existing social order; (2) the development of a perception among a limited and local target audience that the values and goals of the new player do not completely contradict, and may even be tangential to, the existing social order; and (3) the expansion of that localized legitimacy to additional target audiences until (4) a sufficiently large group of people have come to perceive the player as conforming to the existing social order, at which point it can be said that the player has attained legitimacy. It is of course worth noting that completion of this process is not guaranteed: some players succeed, others get stuck at a certain stage and remain there, and yet others simply fade away altogether.

The process of gaining legitimacy is of paramount importance: it helps the legitimacy-seeking player achieve goals that can only be achieved by those who are seen as legitimate in the eyes of the general public (von Billerbeck and Gippert 2017). Legitimacy is an asset that allows players to survive, stabilize, and grow in numbers, power, and influence (Khan 2009; Reyes 2011; Roberts 2008). The more a player is accepted as legitimate, the less likely that threats to its existence and power will arise, since legitimate actors are not perceived as threatening. All this occurs alongside the player’s growing chances of mobilizing support and resources (Roberts
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Legitimacy not only underwrites stability but also helps preserve a player’s acquisition of status, since it becomes more difficult to challenge legitimate actors (Johnson et al. 2006; Zariski 1986), especially when they manage to translate their legitimacy into changes in the rulemaking and enforcement activities of the state (Deephouse and Suchman 2008).

The path to legitimacy can pass through a variety of channels and involve different methods of action (see, for example Podder 2014; Reyes 2011). One of the main routes is via the mass media. This is due primarily to the mass media’s ability to convey messages to, and exert significant influence over, a very wide audience. A player aspiring to legitimacy selects media tools tailored to the audiences it hopes to convince, taking into consideration that the more closely the player’s ideology and political orientation match those of the target audience, the more likely it is that media narratives aligned with the player’s goals will circulate (Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018; Ubayasiri 2021). It is evident, therefore, that in order to maximize prospects for legitimacy, a player must act vigorously and in diverse ways to convince target audiences that its views are compatible with the existing social order.

The Hilltop Youth

‘Hilltop youth’ is an inclusive term for a diverse group with a wider variety of characteristics than is often conveyed in public discourse. This study will focus on its main component: religious-ideological youth who, motivated by their belief in the Jewish right to the entire Land of Israel, make every effort to settle on isolated hilltops in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) in contravention of Israeli law (Eiran and Krause 2018; Friedman 2015). Some of them are ‘idealists’ while others are ‘individualists’ undergoing a process of self-discovery (Mash et al. 2018); some are independent teenagers as young as 15 years old who are still in the process of forming their identities (Borstein 2004); and some have experienced social, familial, or educational setbacks and are seeking out a new home or an alternative social framework (Eiran and Krause 2018; Peleg 2022). In the main, they are teenagers and young adults in their twenties with a religious Jewish background, extremely committed to a vision of the ‘greater Land of Israel’ within its biblical-historical borders whose settlement by Jews will lead to the redemption of Israel. In their view, the realization of this concept takes precedence over obedience to the laws of the State of Israel and its institutions (Friedman 2015). To achieve their desired end goal, they establish illegal outposts on isolated hills in the West Bank, which are typically inhabited by a few singles or young families who live a simple, spiritual,
and ‘biblical’ lifestyle often in the absence of running water and electricity (Eiran and Krause 2018; Friedman 2015; Peleg 2022).

It is arguably the case, as the hilltop youth themselves claim, that such activities are not novel: indeed, the settlement enterprise in the West Bank has existed since 1967, after the State of Israel took control of the territory. It can even be said that the hilltop youth represent nothing more than a variation on the Zionist settlement movement and the establishment of ‘wall and watchtower’ (homa u’migdal) settlements virtually overnight prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. In all instances, the goal was to establish a Jewish-Israeli presence on the ground. In the past, this was justified as necessary for security and territorial continuity, while the contemporary hilltop youth present it is part of an effort to achieve the ‘Greater Land of Israel.’ Although differences exist between settlements that are initiated by the government, settlements that the government has retroactively authorized, outposts built in violation of Israeli law, and other statuses (see, for example, Sasson 2005), the hilltop youth do not see their illegal settlements as distinct but rather view all settlements as part of the same ideological enterprise.

The phenomenon of the hilltop youth has entered the public consciousness over the last two decades. Building illegal outposts and settling on isolated hilltops occurred previously, but it intensified substantially following the realization of the Israeli government’s ‘disengagement plan’ in 2005, in which all Israeli citizens who had settled in the Gaza Strip after 1967 were evicted from their homes and the territory was handed over to Palestinian control. After 2005, the young people settling on hilltops came primarily from among the disengagement evacuees. Their experience of this event had been traumatic: they witnessed, actively resisted, and ultimately failed to prevent the evacuation of their homes and families. They perceived the disengagement as a threat to their religious beliefs and ideologies, and indeed to their very identity and future (Friedman 2015; Peleg 2022). They felt betrayed by the state, which they saw as violating rather than fostering their values, especially because the evacuation was initiated by Ariel Sharon, a prime minister who was perceived as a close ally of the settlers.

In addition, many Gaza Strip evacuees felt betrayed by the settler leadership, their teachers, their rabbis, and their parents, who in their view did not fight hard enough to prevent the disengagement (Bar-Siman-Tov 2009; Friedman 2015; Peleg 2022). The sense of powerlessness they experienced and the challenge to their identity radically increased the importance of the ideological and religious components in the worldview of the hilltop youth. The importance of correcting the injustice that they believed had been perpetrated against them became the central motif of their existence, resulting
in their settlement of the isolated hills of the West Bank as an alternative to continuing the ‘traditional’ activities of the settlement movement.

Unlike the veteran settlers, who see themselves as an inseparable part of Israeli society and who perceive the state and its powers as legitimate and generally cooperate with it, the attitude of the hilltop youth in relation to the state and its authorities is hostile and uncompromising. While the settlement movement always experienced tensions between its desire to ‘settle in the hearts’ of the Israeli public and actions that at times put the movement into direct conflict with government decisions (Yassan 2022), the case of the hilltop youth is different. They perceive the state and its authorities as the main and immediate adversary that endangers them, their activities, and the Jewish people, at times even more so than the Palestinian population, since the latter are not subject to the laws of Judaism and do not evict the outposts they build (Eiran and Krause 2018; Laufer and Schori 2009; Peleg 2022).

A small number of the hilltop youth take violent action in order to prevent the state from thwarting their plans. The goal of the violence is to reduce the Israeli authorities’ motivation and ability to evacuate the outposts. Such acts, which are neither reflective of the activity of all hilltop youth nor perpetrated exclusively by them, are known as ‘price tag’ actions, named for the ‘price tag’ that the perpetrators are attempting to attach to each evacuation of an outpost. When such actions target Palestinians, they include vandalism, such as cutting down olive trees, burning cars or houses of prayer, graffiti, throwing stones or Molotov cocktails, and in a few instances have resulted in loss of life. But the Palestinians are seen only as levers of pressure that can be used to create an awareness among Israeli decision-makers that any evacuation of an outpost might lead to violence that could inflame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is for this reason that ‘price tag’ graffiti is written in Hebrew and not Arabic, since the target audience is in fact the Israeli leadership and public, not the population that directly bears the brunt of the violence. At other times, acts of violence are directed against Israeli military, Israeli police, left-wing organizations that oppose the building of outposts, and even the religious-nationalist leadership (Eiran and Krause 2018).

The hilltop youth phenomenon, including the violent actions of some members, has received harsh condemnation from across the political spectrum, not only from the Israeli center-left, but also from the right, from the leadership of the religious-nationalist public, and from veteran settlers who, while they benefit from being viewed as more moderate in comparison to the extremists (see Hirsch-Hoefer and Mudde 2020), nonetheless believe that violent or illegal actions have substantial potential for endangering the entire settlement enterprise (Eiran and Krause 2018).
For a long time, it seemed that the hilltop youth were indifferent to the image attached to them, and to the accompanying lack of legitimacy. However, over the years, hilltop youth members came to understand that this lack of legitimacy in the eyes of Israeli society, the legal authorities, and the settler movement, could be an obstacle to the realization of their ideological goals and even a threat to their existence. As a result, indifference to their image was replaced by efforts to improve it so as to recruit public legitimacy for their work. The remainder of this article examines these efforts, which achieved a modicum of success in 2022 when politicians identified with the hilltop youth ideology were elected to the Knesset and became senior ministers in the Israeli government.

Methodology

In order to understand how this process came about, we focus on the legitimacy-seeking efforts of the hilltop youth since 2016. Our characterization of these efforts is based on information available on the websites of Israel’s three leading television organizations (the Broadcasting Authority, Reshet, and Keshet) and from the highly visible official social media accounts of the hilltop youth on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. As our intention is to flesh out the patterns of behavior, the modus operandi, and the substance of the messages used by the hilltop youth en route to attaining legitimacy, we focus on content published by or in collaboration with the hilltop youth themselves, since this content reflects the messages that the hilltop youth wish to convey, as opposed to content about the hilltop youth by third-party creators with their own perspectives and agendas.

The purpose of this method is to identify and illuminate the group’s attempts to move from the fringes to the heart of the consensus. It is a continuation of similar studies conducted in recent years on the infiltration of groups and messages from the extreme right fringes of different societies into the mainstream through the use of mass media. Thus, for example, Linda Bos, Wouter Van Der Brug, and Claes De Vreese (2011) examine the use of the media by right-wing populist leaders in the Netherlands. Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon (2021) show how coverage of populism in The Guardian newspaper contributed to the mainstreaming of the extreme right in Britain. Tal Orian Harel, Jessica Katz Jameson, and Ifat Maoz (2020) examine the process of normalizing hatred in Israeli society through the website of the extreme right-wing singer The Shadow. Enniken Hagelund and Jens Kjeldsen (2021) examine the effect that the representation of anti-immigration positions in Scandinavian media had on their penetration
into the mainstream. Zsuzsanna Vidra and Jon Fox (2018) deal with the mainstreaming of racist anti-Roma discourse in the Hungarian media. And Dror Walter, Yotam Ophir, Ayse D. Lokmanoglu, and Meredith L. Pruden (2022) demonstrate the success of far-right elements in infiltrating biased information about health and vaccinations into the heart of mainstream media coverage.

The Efforts of the Hilltop Youth to Gain Legitimacy

It would appear that the Duma attack of July 2015, which was perpetrated by at least one member of the hilltop youth, was a major catalyst for the group’s legitimacy-seeking efforts. During the attack, perpetrators burned two Palestinian houses, murdering nearly an entire family in one of them. The arson attack was condemned by all of Israeli society, including right-wing leaders and settlers. Following the attack, among other measures, administrative detention orders were served against three hilltop youth (a measure that in the vast majority of cases is used only against Palestinians suspected of involvement in security incidents); others were served with administrative restraining orders barring them from the West Bank; and the enactment of an anti-terrorism law was expedited. The main suspect in the attack was sentenced to three life terms and another 20 years in prison.

The hilltop youth felt the regulatory, legal, and image-related consequences of the incident. Beyond the measures taken against them by the state, intense criticism of the hilltop youth by the public and its leaders was widely reflected in the media. Based on comments made at the time, it seems that the hilltop youth leadership began to feel that the deterioration of their image and the accompanying lack of legitimacy was putting them and their ideas in danger. Thus, for example, in the aftermath of the attack, one of the leading figures of the hilltop youth, Meir Ettinger, said, “I am mostly very scared . . . I feel that this is ushering us into a period when letting of the blood of the hilltop youth will be permitted” (Shapira 2018). On the ‘About’ page of the hilltop youth’s most active Facebook page, the following appeared: “Recently, the persecution against the hilltop youth has increased in an unprecedented way. The police say they have now decided to eliminate the hilltop youth.” (Noar Hagvaot-Lehakir Mikarov n.d.). These public statements appeared almost exclusively in the months and years following the attack and not prior to it. It was then too that the group’s efforts to gain legitimacy began, as will be described below.

Social and mass media are the two main platforms used by the hilltop youth in their efforts to gain legitimacy. Members of the group manage pages on the leading social media platforms, which are accessible to and
address the general public. On Facebook, there are several pages linked to the hilltop youth. The most prominent and active one, which also has the largest number of followers, is a public group called Noar Hagvaot-Lehakir Mikarov (Hilltop youth—Get to know us up close). The page went live in June 2017 and includes contact information for hilltop youth representatives. The name of the page, its ‘About’ section, and its posts all clearly indicate its purpose: to provide the general public with positive access to the hilltop youth and their work.

Phrases such as “on this page you’ll get closely acquainted with the hilltop youth,” “join us, follow us, and come and visit,” “meet pioneering youth with values who are breaking conventions,” “the hilltop youth—not at all what you thought!” “moral youth . . . not aliens” (Noar Hagvaot-Lehakir Mikarov n.d.) acknowledge the negative image attached to the group and express a desire to change it. The same name, language, and identifying contact information also appear on the most active hilltop youth Twitter page, created in December 2020, as well as on Instagram and YouTube accounts. In all instances, it is clear that the target audience is the general Jewish-Israeli public, since the content is written in Hebrew and addresses those who hold views that are not necessarily sympathetic to the hilltop youth.

The mass media is another platform used by the hilltop youth to gain legitimacy. The hilltop youth departed from their traditional practice of avoiding the media in general, and ‘mainstream’ media in particular, by inviting journalists to spend time with them in their outposts and agreeing to formal interviews and in-depth profiles in an attempt to improve their image and boost their legitimacy. In the words of Elisha Yared, a prominent figure in the hilltop youth, “It is important to us that the People of Israel should really know what is happening here, and the way to reach them is through the screen” (Shalmor 2021). To this end, they have cooperated with a number of television programs on Kan 11 and Channel 13.

They have also written opinion pieces and circulated other materials created by hilltop youth, such as personal diaries and promotional videos. But because the narratives and messages conveyed by these materials are tightly controlled by their creators and reflect hilltop youth ideology, we found no instances in which they were published by major mainstream media outlets. However, right-wing media entities, such as Channel 7 and Channel 14, as well as nationalist-religious publications such as Giluy Da’at (Exposé) and Olam Katan (Small world) do facilitate their publication, in some cases on a regular basis. To one such outlet, the hilltop youth expressed themselves as follows: “How many of you really know us?”; “You think we have horns, a long nose, a tail”; and “[We wish you would] talk to us like Jews, face to face” (Gruner 2017). In other words, even when
addressing a right-wing audience, the hilltop youth feel that they lack legitimacy. Moreover, even in these channels they attempt to connect with broader audiences through the use of familiar formats—for example, short videos that resemble reality television segments well-known to mainstream Israeli audiences.

The hilltop youth also organize and advertise events and visits to their outposts, engaging in direct dialogue with visitors. Such events have included a Passover ‘happening’ and a three-day educational series entitled “Studying and Building the Land.” This is in addition to tabling for their cause in major Israeli cities.

The main messages that emerge from the various hilltop youth media described above can be divided into four categories: (1) establishing victimhood; (2) justifying goals and actions; (3) projecting a positive image; and (4) explicit calls for support. Their ultimate goal is to convince target audiences that their existence and activities are legitimate. Success in presenting themselves as victims, for example, can evoke feelings of empathy, which can lead to support of different types (Bar-Tal 2013).

The hilltop youth’s victimhood narrative maintains that state authorities have caused them suffering through the demolition of outposts, criminal and administrative penalties, the use of violence against them, and more. They describe police tactics as “persecution,” claim that “the police say they have decided to eradicate the hilltop youth now,” say that “you retched us up; you made us marginal” (Noar Hagvaot-Lehakir Mikarov n.d.), and report “experienc[ing] arrests on a daily basis for no reason, police raids in the middle of the night, severe police violence” (Yared 2021a). They view the state’s treatment of them as unjustified, violent, and uncompromising, as they consider themselves blameless: “the state takes out all the mental neuroses of this country on us” (Shapira 2018). These and similar expressions can be found across all of their platforms.

The hilltop youth address themselves to the Jewish-Israeli public primarily by emphasizing their love for the Land of Israel and what they believe is the Jewish right of ownership over it. They claim that they are acting responsibly and frame themselves as pioneers acting on behalf of the Israeli public. According to them, “The things we’ve done here are the least threatening in the Middle East . . . the Land of Israel belongs to the People of Israel because God gave it to us . . . There is a group of youth here that wants to do good for the nation of Israel . . . and that acts intelligently and responsibly” (Shapira 2018). These messages are intended to create a positive image of the hilltop youth, thereby reducing antagonism from the Israeli public. Across their various platforms, the hilltop youth are careful to distance themselves from the image of a group of troubled teenage outcasts, instead emphasizing values that are perceived positively
by the Jewish-Israeli public, such as pioneering, love of the Land of Israel, national security, and working the land. Thus, they say they are “pioneering youth of character who love the country,” “wonderful and dedicated” youth who “were not dropouts from educational institutions . . . but left them of their own volition” (Yared 2021b).

As mentioned earlier, the hilltop youth also express their desire for legitimacy via direct calls for support in promoting their goals: fundraising, assistance in building outposts, demonstrations of political support, and recruiting activists. Thus, for example, they “call on the public to share and to attend and to demonstrate on the destruction and the injury to the Land of Israel” (Noar Hagvaot-Lehakir Mikarov 2020) and urge that “instead of allocating huge resources and great force to dealing with the ‘problem of the hilltop youth,’ join us, help us, lend us a hand” (Yared 2021a). The hilltop youth do not ask for help when it comes to the Palestinian population, since, according to them, they are capable of dealing with such matters themselves. This accords with their perception of the Palestinians as constituting only a secondary threat to their ‘Greater Israel’ vision, which they view the state authorities as sabotaging.

Claiming victimization, justifying their goals and actions, creating a positive image of themselves, and calling for direct support are the hilltop youth’s primary messages—but they are not the only ones. It is also worth noting the types of messages that are absent from the hilltop youth’s efforts to gain legitimacy, even though the content of those messages would conform to their ideology—namely, calls for rebellion, the use of violence, or the overthrow of state institutions; messages that call for the establishment of a Jewish state based on Jewish law (Halakhah); and claims of responsibility for violent events directed against the security forces, the settler leadership, left-wing activists, or the Palestinian population. The absence of these messages serves as a further indication of the hilltop youth’s approach of appealing to their target audiences by emphasizing broadly shared values, with the aim of increasing their chances of gaining legitimacy. During the years under review, violent demonstrations against the authorities and racist statements on the part of the hilltop youth continued to be caught on camera and published in the media. It seems that by ignoring these episodes, avoiding claims of responsibility for them, or justifying them as self-defense, and by accusing the media of lacking objectivity, the hilltop youth are further attempting to gain broad public legitimacy.
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Legitimacy as Indicated by Political Power

The hilltop youth do not have a unified leadership and are not organized as a single, clearly identifiable group. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the efforts described above indicate a degree of organization, planning, and strategic formulation of narratives with the goal of attaining legitimacy. The need for legitimation arises from, among other things, the desire to survive and increase one’s influence, since legitimacy confers advantages in accruing material, public, and political support (Johnson et al. 2006; Zariski 1986). These desires are reflected in the efforts of the hilltop youth to gain legitimacy: they felt that a war was being waged against them by the authorities, with broad public support, threatening their survival and the continued progress of their ideology. The language and style in which they express themselves, the mainstream platforms they utilize, and the emphasis they place on broad commonalities with the Israeli-Jewish public all demonstrate these efforts.

As for the goals that motivate their legitimacy-seeking, it appears that the hilltop youth perceive the Jewish-Israeli public as having the ability to influence the behavior of the state authorities, on whose activities their survival as well as the effectiveness of their ideological program depends. Their hope is that the efforts described above will bring pressure on the authorities to desist from outpost evacuations and criminal and administrative enforcement against members of the hilltop youth, thus validating their settlement activity. Their outreach is directed at the public and not the authorities themselves, since cooperation with the latter is out of the question and direct confrontation with them does not achieve the desired results, at times even damaging the image of the hilltop youth. Beyond public and political support, the hilltop youth hope that their efforts will bring them additional material resources with which they can establish new outposts.

Since the existence of the hilltop youth is a fait accompli, it seems that they have succeeded in achieving the first step of gaining legitimacy: the creation of a new political actor. Furthermore, the second stage is in the process—the development of legitimacy among “a limited and targeted audience” (Johnson et al. 2006)—has already been completed: although they are still seen as comprising the extreme right flank of right-wing circles, one can find expressions of support for them among traditional settlers and members of the right-wing public who participate in some of the protests they organize. One prominent indication that they have reached the second stage is the way members of the hilltop youth have been welcomed in right-wing political parties that in the past were not willing to be affiliated with them.
The process has even spilled over into the third stage—the spread of ‘local’ legitimacy to wider target audiences (Johnson et al. 2006)—as figures associated with the hilltop youth have grown in influence in the state political system, thus indicating that their heretofore extreme ideas have been gaining legitimacy (Kallis 2013). The hilltop youth and their activity no longer completely contradict the existing social order, and in the November 2022 Knesset election, more than half a million Israeli citizens (about 11 percent of the electorate) voted for the extreme right-wing Religious Zionist Party, headed by two politicians perceived as representing and supporting the hilltop youth. The party won 14 seats in the Knesset and was able to join the governing coalition, with the positions of Finance Minister and National Security Minister going to party leaders Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, respectively. Even if most of its voters did not vote for the Religious Zionist Party out of ideological identification with the hilltop youth, support for the party at the very least indicates that indifference to hilltop youth ideology and goals has replaced active opposition.

While it would not be correct to assert an absolute identity between the hilltop youth and the Religious Zionist Party and its leaders, some party members were themselves hilltop youth, while other members supported them even when the Israeli right-wing considered them extreme. Among the latter one can count party leader Itamar Ben-Gvir, who over the years represented many of the hilltop youth in criminal and administrative proceedings, including one of the defendants in the Duma attack. The identification of the party’s leaders with the hilltop youth is also evident in how they express themselves: for example, four years prior to his appointment as National Security Minister, Ben-Gvir (2019) asserted that “the hilltop youth are the Zionists of our time.” Similarly, in February 2022, ten months before his appointment as Finance Minister, Smotrich explained that “in the past ‘hilltop youth’ was a kind of derogatory term . . . to be a hilltop youth today—that’s high praise” (Ben-Porat 2022).

The transformation of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, who see the hilltop youth as idealists and whom the hilltop youth see as their emissaries, into the senior members of the Israeli cabinet indicates exactly how far the hilltop youth have come, moving from the margins of society to a place of legitimate and substantial representation in the government of Israel. Previous research has shown how the settlement movement penetrated state policy and how “a well-organized group can influence regime practices from within, even if these practices are inconsistent with formal government policy and domestic codified law” (Haklai 2007: 715). But the case of the hilltop youth is different since they are not as well-organized as the settlement movement and were even at one point seen as unacceptable.
by the leaders of the settlement movement. In many respects, the path to government blazed by Smotrich and Ben-Gvir resembles the process of legitimation undergone by the hilltop youth: from politicians who were once ostracized by the general public, including on the right, to figures now endowed with legitimacy by right-wing voters and other sectors of the Israeli public.

Similar to the rhetoric of the hilltop youth, the messages deployed by the Religious Zionist Party en route to the Knesset were rooted to a great extent in narratives of victimhood and persecution (Ben-Gvir, for example, claimed that he is “the most threatened MK in the State of Israel” [Gotliv 2021]) and emphasized elements with which a broad swath of the public could identify. The party’s campaign focused on the desire of Israel’s citizens for ‘personal security’ and the need for ‘someone to take charge,’ while downplaying the parts of its ideology that pertain to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Much of the party’s activity took place inside Israel’s pre-1967 borders as opposed to the West Bank. In addition, party leaders drew a distinction between state authorities per se and the incumbent leadership, attacking the latter (especially when it came to institutions whose popularity had recently declined, like the courts) and refraining from attacks on the lower echelons (especially when it came to widely popular institutions like the IDF and the police, which they actively supported). They also made sure to downplay aspects of their ideology with which most of Israelis would be unlikely to identify. In terms of target audience, and in a similar fashion to the hilltop youth, they appealed to the Israeli public writ large and not only to those on the settler right.

In much the same way as the legitimation process of the hilltop youth has achieved success, so too has the legitimation process of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. The 11 percent of the vote that they received came from all parts of the country, whereas only 18 months prior, during the March 2021 election, the Religious Zionist Party led by Smotrich received only about 5 percent of the vote, and Ben-Gvir did not even stand for election, having assumed that he would not pass the electoral threshold (after receiving less than 0.5 percent of the vote during the previous election). Thus, with similar organized efforts, both the hilltop youth and the extreme right-wing party made their way from the ostracized fringes of society to the heart of political legitimacy. Both turned to the broad Jewish-Israeli public with messages that most Israelis could connect with while downplaying the ideological elements that might have triggered antagonism with their target audience.

In the new constellation that took shape after the establishment of the governing coalition in 2022, the very people who had so often expressed distrust in the state authorities and claimed that they did not express the
will of the people, became the ones exercising responsibility over them. This is an important change, since one feature of legitimization is that “legitimacy results from rulemaking and enforcement activities within the agencies of the State” (Deephouse and Suchman 2008: 56). Since the 2022 elections, hilltop youth activity has continued with Smotrich and Ben-Gvir in their new roles. Thus, for example, in February 2023, hundreds of Jewish rioters burned houses and cars in the Palestinian town of Hawara in retaliation for the murder of two Jewish youths. The rioters were given an audience with and justified by some of the coalition members, including Smotrich and Ben-Gvir. In August 2023, two Israeli Jews were arrested for involvement in the killing of a Palestinian in the village of Burqa. One of them was Elisha Yared, a prominent figure in the hilltop youth movement and a former spokesman for one of the members of Knesset from the Religious Zionist Party who has been quoted a few times in this article. After their arrest, the two suspects were visited by members of the coalition who then backed their version of events.

In both recent cases, as in others, even as the hilltop youth were embraced by some members of the coalition, other members expressed their disgust and opposition. Ben-Gvir’s behavior in each instance (as in other instances not connected to the hilltop youth) led to clashes between him and the police force for which he is responsible, and between him and the Defense Minister. Thus, even as the hilltop youth experience growing legitimacy and support from actors within the government of Israel, some of their activities fall short of enjoying widespread legitimacy among the broader Israeli public and leadership. It therefore seems that Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, and the hilltop youth, who were once relegated to the margins of Israeli society, have become more central, but the process of legitimation has not yet fully succeeded even as its many gains are evident.
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