

# The Transformation of Arab Politics and Arab Voter Behavior in Israeli Elections (1999-2009)

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**Abstract:** This article delves into the transformative decade between 1999 and 2009, exploring the intricate web of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel and the consequential impact of Jewish-Arab tensions on Arab politics and Arab voter behavior in Israeli elections. During this decade, internal factors, such as generational shifts, leadership changes, and political pluralism, played a pivotal role in reshaping the societal landscape in the Arab sector. On the other hand, external factors, including the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation process and the eruption of the Second Intifada, intensified the predicament of Israeli citizens of Arab origin, amplifying their national identity dilemma. The primary objective of this study is to analyze voting patterns within the Arab sector based on voting-eligible population turnout rates and vote choices during the elections of 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2009, thereby highlighting the profound political implications of the Jewish-Arab tensions on Arab political engagement and voting behaviors. By doing so, this research provides insights into the changing patterns of Arab votes and their impact on the broader political landscape of Israel. The findings reveal that the growing social marginalization and disconnection from the Jewish sector significantly influenced the Arab sector’s electoral participation. This period witnessed a decline in Arab voter turnout and a shift in support from left-wing Jewish-Zionist parties to Arab parties, paradoxically contributing to the electoral performances of both Arab parties and right-wing Jewish-Zionist parties.

**Keywords:** Israel, Knesset, Arab, Minority, Elections.

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# Arap Siyasetinin Dönüşümü ve İsrail Seçimlerinde Arap Seçmen Davranışı (1999-2009)

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**Öz:** Bu makale, 1999-2009 yılları arasındaki döneme odaklanarak İsrail’deki Yahudi-Arap ilişkilerinin karmaşık ağının ülkedeki Arap siyaseti ve Arap seçmen tercihlerine etkilerini araştırmaktadır. Bu on yıllık dönemde, liderlik değişimleri ve siyasi çoğulculuk başta olmak üzere çeşitli iç faktörler Arap azınlıktaki toplumsal manzaranın yeniden şekillenmesinde önemli bir rol oynamışken İsrail-Filistin barış sürecinin çökmesi ve İkinci İntifada’nın patlak vermesi gibi dış faktörlerse Arap kökenli İsrail vatandaşlarının ulusal kimlik ikilemelerini arttırmıştır. 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006 ve 2009 yıllarında yapılan seçimlerde İsrail’deki Arap azınlığın oy verme eğilimlerini analiz eden bu çalışmanın temel amacı gitgide artan Yahudi-Arap geriliminin İsrail vatandaşı Arapların siyasi katılım ve oy verme davranışları üzerindeki derin etkilerini vurgulamak ve böylece Arap seçmenlerin değişen eğilimlerinin İsrail’in genel siyasi manzarasına olan etkilerini ortaya koymaktır. Bulgular, sosyal marjinalizasyon ve artan Yahudi-Arap geriliminin Arap azınlığın seçimlere katılımını önemli ölçüde etkilediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca Arap seçmenlerin Yahudi-Siyonist partilerden uzaklaşması paradoksal bir şekilde hem Arap partilerinin hem de sağ kanattaki Yahudi-Siyonist partilerin seçim performanslarına katkı sağlamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İsrail, Knesset, Arap, Azınlık, Seçimler.

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# تحولات السياسة العربية وسلوك الناخب العربي في الانتخابات الإسرائيلية (1999–2009)

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## الملخص

يناقش هذا المقال تأثير الطبيعة المعقدة للعلاقات بين اليهود والعرب في إسرائيل على السياسة العربية وتوجهات الناخب العربي في إسرائيل، من خلال دراسة هذه المسألة للفترة بين عامي 1999–2009. في ذلك الوقت الذي لعبت فيه عوامل داخلية مختلفة خلال تلك السنوات العشر، لا سيما التغييرات القيادية والتعددية السياسية، دورا مهما في إعادة تشكيل المشهد الاجتماعي لدى الأقلية العربية، كما ساهمت عوامل خارجية مثل انهيار عملية السلام الإسرائيلية الفلسطينية واندلاع الانتفاضة الثانية، في زيادة معضلات الهوية الوطنية للمواطنين الإسرائيليين من أصل عربي. تقوم هذه الدراسة بتحليل توجهات أصوات الأقلية العربية في إسرائيل في الانتخابات التي أجريت في الأعوام 1999 و 2001 و 2003 و 2006 و 2009، وتهدف الدراسة بشكل أساسي إلى التأكيد على الآثار العميقة للتوترات المتصاعدة بين اليهود والعرب على المشاركة السياسية والسلوك الانتخابي للمواطنين العرب في إسرائيل، وبالتالي تأثير التوجهات المتغيرة للناخب العربي على المشهد السياسي العام في إسرائيل. وتكشف نتائج هذه الدراسة أن التهميش الاجتماعي وتصاعد التوترات اليهودية العربية تؤثر بشكل كبير على مشاركة الأقلية العربية في الانتخابات. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن ابتعاد الناخبين العرب عن الأحزاب اليهودية الصهيونية ساهم بشكل متناقض في الأداء الانتخابي لكل من الأحزاب العربية والأحزاب اليمينية اليهودية الصهيونية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إسرائيل، الكنيست، العرب، الأقلية، الانتخابات.

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## Introduction

The decade between 1999 and 2009 marked a substantive period in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel due to a combination of social and political events that shaped the dynamics between the two communities for decades to come. The generational shift within the Arab sector introduced new leadership structures and representative bodies, which had significant implications for decision-making and policy development. With increased social and political activism, the assertive Arab leadership unprecedentedly challenged the dominant Jewish narrative that emphasizes Israel's identity as a Jewish state. While some Jewish circles considered the new wave of Arab activism legitimate efforts for equality, others perceived them as activities against the state's interests, in some cases even as an existential threat to the Jewish predicament. Moreover, the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation process following the Camp David Summit (2000) contributed to a sense of despair and frustration on both sides, and the subsequent eruption of the Second Intifada further strained already delicate Jewish-Arab relations. Such developments sharpened the dilemma of national identity experienced by Israeli citizens of Arab origin, precipitating growing national isolation from the Zionist-Jewish sector and solidarity with the external Palestinian issue. This seismic shift of political-national orientation from "Israelization" to "Palestinization" was further exacerbated throughout the decade by sporadic episodes of large-scale military escalations between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and Gazan paramilitary organizations.

This paper analyzes voting behavior in the Arab sector in the elections of 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2009 based on voting-eligible population turnout rates and vote choices to outline the far-reaching political implications of the plethora of Arab-Jewish tensions in the period 1999-2009 on the Arab sector's political participation and voting patterns. While doing so, the paper shall also present a brief account of how changing patterns of Arab voting affected the overall political landscape in Israel. The findings suggest that the burgeoning social marginalization and dissociation from the Jewish sector had profound implications for the Arab sector's participation in the elections, which had previously been characterized by high voter turnout and pronounced support for left-wing Jewish-Zionist parties, most notably the Labor Party. However, over this tumultuous decade, Arab political participation experienced a remarkable decline, and support for left-wing Jewish-Zionist parties dwindled, paradoxically contributing to the electoral successes of both Arab parties and right-wing Jewish-Zionist parties.

## **Election for the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset and Prime Minister (May 1999)**

During the Rabin-Peres administration of 1992-1996, the Arab sector enjoyed unprecedented governmental attention and special budgetary allocations aimed towards alleviating socioeconomic disparity between the Jews and Arabs in exchange for Hadash and the Democratic Arab Party's (Mada) parliamentary support for the ruling coalition. However, the three-year premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu (1996-1999) marked a regression in such affirmative policies, and the socioeconomic needs of the Arab sector were severely disregarded. Furthermore, the Netanyahu-led right-wing government tenaciously refused to implement Israeli commitments under the Oslo II agreement, bringing the peace process to a virtual halt. Hence, the frustrated and alienated Arab sector commenced preparations for the May 1999 elections as soon as the motion was passed in the Knesset to vote the Likud-dominated government and Netanyahu out of office.

Like in 1996, the early elections of May 1999 were contested on separate tracks for the prime minister (PM) and the Knesset. The double voting system, which was implemented to produce more stable governments, inherently encouraged sectarian voting, as voters could express loyalty to their co-ethnic or co-religious representatives in the parliament without compromising support for their preferred candidate for the premiership. Consequently, bolstered by the new era of national awakening among Israeli Arabs, Arab parties enjoyed significant support from Arab constituents. In the May 1999 elections, Arab parties garnered 70 percent of Arab votes, compared to 65 percent and 47 percent in May 1996 and June 1992, respectively. Hence, despite a two-point decline in Arab voter turnout from 77 percent to 75 percent, a total of 14 Arab MKs entered the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset<sup>1</sup>. Ten of them were elected from the lists of Arab parties (Ra'am, Hadash, and Balad), compared to nine Arab MKs<sup>2</sup> elected to the 14<sup>th</sup> Knesset from the lists of Hadash-Balad and Mada-Ra'am and only five Arab MKs<sup>3</sup> elected to the 13<sup>th</sup> Knesset from the lists of Hadash and Mada. If all eligible Arab voters had cast their vote, they theoretically could have sent up to 20 Arab representatives to the 15<sup>th</sup> Knesset<sup>4</sup>.

- 1 "Knesset Members of the Fifteenth Knesset," Knesset, accessed October 29, 2022, [https://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkindexByKnesset\\_eng.asp?knesset=15](https://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkindexByKnesset_eng.asp?knesset=15).
- 2 "Members of the Fourteenth Knesset," Knesset, accessed January 03, 2023, [https://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkindexByKnesset\\_eng.asp?knesset=14](https://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkindexByKnesset_eng.asp?knesset=14).
- 3 "Members of the Thirteenth Knesset," Knesset, accessed January 03, 2023, [https://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkindexByKnesset\\_eng.asp?knesset=13](https://knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mkindexByKnesset_eng.asp?knesset=13).
- 4 Alexander Bligh, "Political Trends in the Israeli Arab Population and Its Vote in Parliamentary Elections," *Israel Affairs* 19 (2013): 28.

The rise of Arab parties had a detrimental effect on left-wing Jewish-Zionist parties, which had long enjoyed considerable support from Arab constituents. Arab support for the Labor Party was slashed by almost a third between 1992 and 1999 to a mere eight percent; meanwhile, support for Meretz plunged to only five percent, *albeit* its positions were closest to the Arab consensus. The remaining Arab vote for Jewish-Zionist parties was predominantly cast for small Jewish parties. Larger Jewish-Zionist parties such as Likud and Yisrael B'Aliya received less than five percent each<sup>5</sup>. Surprisingly, the only Jewish-Zionist party that increased its support in the Arab sector was Shas. Campaigning on a platform promising an increase in social welfare benefits and the rectification of institutional disadvantages experienced by non-Ashkenazim, the party of ultra-orthodox Sephardim was able to garner almost five percent of Arab votes, compared to less than two percent in May 1996<sup>6</sup>.

Although Arab constituents increasingly turned away from Jewish-Zionist parties towards Arab parties, Labor's candidate Ehud Barak enjoyed overwhelming Arab support in the race for prime minister, albeit his constant avoidance of engagement with Arab politicians in fear that this would reduce his support among Jewish constituents. Following Balad Chairperson Azim Bishara's withdrawal from the race in favor of him, Barak was able to garner approximately 94 percent of valid Arab votes, compared to only 51 percent of the valid Jewish vote<sup>7</sup>. In a clear expression of Arab protest against the policies of the Netanyahu-led right-wing government, support for Barak exceeded 96 percent in the majority of Arab towns and villages<sup>8</sup>. Hence, the sweeping support from Arab voters, who constituted approximately 11 percent of the Israeli electorate back then, played a vital role in Barak's landslide victory over Netanyahu, 54 percent to 46 percent.

### The Race for Prime Minister (February 2001)

The electoral victory of Ehud Barak nourished expectations in the Arab sector regarding a revival of the paralyzed peace process with the Palestinian Administration (PA) and the reimplementation of affirmative action policies of the Rabin-Peres government. The Arabs also expected the new administration to be more attentive to their acute problems, including, *inter-alia*, low Arab representation in senior public positions and the growing number of

5 Asad Ghanem and Sarah Ozacky-Lazar, "Israel as an Ethnic State: The Arab Vote," In *The Elections in Israel - 1999*, ed. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 132.

6 Hillel Frisch, "The Arab Vote in the Israeli Elections: The Bid for Leadership," *Israel Affairs* 7 (1999): 155.

7 Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar, "Israel as an Ethnic State: The Arab Vote," 135.

8 Saul Zadka, "Israel's New Agenda: Reflections on the 1999 Elections," *Security Dialogue* 30 (1999): 462.

unrecognized Arab localities. Some even envisioned the formation of a Barak-led coalition government that would include Arab parliamentarians. However, such euphoria swiftly vanished when Barak shied away from acknowledging the Arab sector's contribution to his victory and completely ignored Arab parties during coalition negotiations. In an effort to avoid being perceived as dependent on Arab MKs, which could hurt his support among Jewish-Zionist constituents, Barak opted to expand his coalition through partnerships with several right-wing parties that previously supported Netanyahu, including Shas, Yisrael B'Aliyah, the National Religious Party, and United Torah Judaism. The Arab sector's frustration with Barak was later further exacerbated by the failure of the July 2000 Camp David Summit to produce an Israeli-Palestinian final-status agreement and the death of 12 Arab Israelis in clashes with the Israeli police during the October 2000 riots. Hence, once the incumbent PM resigned and the Knesset voted to hold early elections in February 2001, Arab support for Barak had already plummeted.

The February 2001 prime ministerial election was noteworthy for two reasons. First, it marked the end of the dual voting system, under which candidates for the prime minister post were catapulted to significant electoral victories but could not build strong coalitions that would enable them to finish their terms due to the highly fragmented nature of the Knesset. Secondly, voter turnout plunged to its lowest ebb at 62,3 percent, which was at least partially due to the boycott of Israeli Arabs. While Arab voter turnout ranged between 68 to 90 percent in elections between 1948-1999, only 18 percent of Arab constituents voted in February 2001, and Arab support for Barak dropped to 72,8 percent<sup>9</sup>. As many of those who shunned the polls in 2001 had previously voted for Barak, high voter abstention handed Ariel Sharon a landslide victory with 62,4 percent, *albeit* the number of votes he received was almost 100,000 less than Barak did in the previous election<sup>10</sup>.

The mass boycott of the Arab electorate in the February 2001 elections heated the internal debate in the Arab sector for the foundation of alternative, non-Knesset representational bodies, such as a separate parliament that would serve as the national leadership for Israeli Arabs. Although supporters of the notion, including NDA Chairperson Azim Bishara, claimed that such a body would link Israeli Arabs with the Israeli establishment and hence serve as an integrative tool, its opponents dismissed it as a separatist move that

9 Amal Jamal, "Abstention as Participation: The Labyrinth of Arab Politics in Israel," In *The Elections in Israel - 2001*, ed. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2002), 57.

10 Asher Arian and Michal Shamir, "Introduction," In *The Elections in Israel: 2001*, ed. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2002), 7.

would harm their community's interests<sup>11</sup>. For instance, Arab members of the Israel Communist Party argued that the establishment of an Arab parliament would provide radical circles within the Israeli government with an excuse to perpetuate discrimination against Arab citizens<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, the Islamists justified their disapproval from a religious perspective, asserting that no secular legislative body could not replace the Quran's constitutional authority<sup>13</sup>.

### Elections for the 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset (February 2003)

The interim period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset elections was tremendously tumultuous for Arab Israelis. Besides the economic downturn, which disproportionately affected the income levels of Arabs compared to Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews<sup>14</sup>. The most dramatic incident for the Arab sector was arguably Operation Defensive Shield (March-May 2002), launched by the IDF in response to a series of bombings inside the Israeli territory perpetrated by Palestinian militants and the construction of the so-called "West Bank Fence".

The six-week-long Operation Defensive Shield, the largest military operation in the West Bank since the Six-Day War, was the scene of heavy IDF-Palestinian militia clashes in the cities of Ramallah, Nablus, Tulkarem, Qalqilia, Bethlehem, and Jenin, resulting in the deaths of nearly 500 Palestinians per UN reports and the incarceration of approximately 7,000 more. Several incidents took place during this period, including, *inter-alia*, the bombing of the Palestinian Legislative Council and large-scale demolitions in the Jenin refugee camp and the Old City of Nablus, which profoundly impacted the psyche of Arab Israelis and deepened the rift between Jews and Arabs within the Green Line. In a public opinion poll conducted by Mada in April 2003, 74 percent of Arab Israeli respondents answered that the ultimate

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11 Azmi Bishara, "On Ethnic Democracy and Other Models: A Discussion of the Status of Arabs in Politics," *Panim* 9 (1999): 115.

12 Elie Rekhess, "The Arabs of Israel after Oslo: Localization of the National Struggle," *Israel Studies* 7 (2002): 17.

13 Elie Rekhess, "The Islamic Movement in Israel and its Affinity to Political Islam in the Territories," In *The Jewish-Arab Rift in Israel: A Reader*, ed. Ruth Gavison and Dafna Hacker (Jerusalem: The Israel Institute of Democracy, 2000), 291.

14 According to Swirski & Konor-Attias (2002, p.10), while the monthly income of an Arab employee was 24 percent lower than the average national income in 1994, this gap widened to 33 percent by 2000. Furthermore, in the pre-election study conducted by Arian & Shamir (2003, p.52), more than half of the Arab participants declared that their economic situation worsened compared to the previous year, and, alongside heightened instability amid the raging Intifada, the economic downturn was the most critical issue facing the government.



goal of Operation Defensive Shield was to break the will of the Palestinian people, and, most importantly, 76 percent of Arab respondents considered the IDF's policy in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as war crimes<sup>15</sup>.

In the midst of Operation Defensive Shield, on April 14, 2002, the Sharon administration approved plans for building a 110-kilometer-long fence roughly following the pre-1967 frontier dividing Israel from the West Bank. The construction work that began in the Seam Zone in late June 2002 was later expanded to other border areas, and the total length of the fence reached almost 710 km upon completion. While hawkish circles in Israeli politics opposed the project over fears that it would pre-determine the border between Israel and a Palestinian political entity, many Arab politicians and opinion leaders in Israel dismissed it as a project of racial segregation aimed at cutting their ties with their co-ethnics living in the areas under the control of the Palestinian Administration and *de facto* annexing chunks of the West Bank under the guise of security.

The first two years of the Second Intifada also marked a period during which Arab parties and political movements experienced unprecedented pressure from the Israeli establishment. For instance, Israeli police investigated Arab political figures, mainly from the nationalist NDA and the extra-parliamentary Islamic movement, on twenty occasions on a plethora of charges, including, *inter-alia*, offending police officers, incitement, supporting the intifada, and so forth<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, Knesset plenary meetings turned into a battleground between Arab MKs who fiercely rejected Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians and Jewish MKs who dismissed their behavior as unacceptable, even sometimes as treason. The deepening rift between Arab and Jewish MKs was profoundly reflected in the rulings handed down by the Attorney General and the Central Elections Committee (CEC). First, Balad's Chairman, Azmi Bishara, lost his parliamentary immunity. Later, the CEC disqualified Azmi Bishara and Ahmad Tibi of Ta'al from running for the 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset under Section 7A of the Knesset Basic Law, which enables the disqualification of parties and politicians that reject the Jewish and democratic character of the state or extend support for armed struggle against it<sup>17</sup>. It should be underlined that the same CEC overturned the appeal against the candidacy of former

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15 Amid Sa'abni, Nadim Rouhana and Suleiman Mahameed, Series of Public Opinion Polls among Palestinians in Israel (Haifa: The Arab Center for Applied Social Research, 2003), 57.

16 Nadim Rouhana, Nabil Sale and Nimer Sultany, "Voting Without Vote: About the Vote of the Palestinian Minority in the 16th Knesset Elections," In *The Elections in Israel: 2003*, ed. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2005), 224.

17 "Constitution for Israel: The Knesset Basic Law," Knesset, accessed: January 06, 2023, [https://knesset.gov.il/constitution/ConstP2\\_eng.htm](https://knesset.gov.il/constitution/ConstP2_eng.htm).

Kach member Baruch Marzel. The two Arab MKs were later allowed to run in the election when the Supreme Court overturned the CEC's decisions against them.

The growing resentment of Arab Israelis over the aforementioned events that took place between 2000-2003 led to a sharp decline in Arab voter turnout rates in the elections for the 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset. While the abstention rate was around 25 percent in the previous Knesset elections, this figure jumped to 38 percent in February 2003<sup>18</sup>. The widened gap between abstention rates in the Arab and Jewish sectors (38 percent to 32 percent) had a non-negligible effect on Arab political representation, as the number of Arab MKs dropped to 12. Furthermore, the widened fracture between the Israeli establishment and the Arab public during the Second Intifada elicited Arab voters' further separation from the Jewish-Zionist parties, which notably narrowed the social base of left-wing Jewish-Zionist parties, most prominently Labor and Meretz. So much so that Arab support for Labor Party and Meretz dropped to 7,5 percent and 4,2 percent, respectively, while overall support for the Jewish-Zionist parties remained almost constant at 29,4 percent<sup>19</sup>. Overall, only four Arab MKs entered the 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset from the lists of Jewish-Zionist parties, and the remaining eight Arab MKs were elected from the lists of Arab parties.

The results of the February 2003 elections also indicated a shift in the internal balance of power in Arab politics in favor of the nationalists. The Arab support for Ra'am dropped by almost one-third to 18 percent as severe internal wrangling over candidate placements in the top slots of the electoral list threw the party's campaign into disarray and instilled fear among potential voters that it would soon disappear from the political arena<sup>20</sup>. Hence, Ra'am could only send two parliamentarians to the 16<sup>th</sup> Knesset. Meanwhile, running on an electoral campaign with nationalistic overtones, Balad was able to increase its support among the Arab constituents by three points to 20 percent and send three parliamentarians to the Knesset. Although Arab support for Hadash increased by 4 points to 26 percent and gained three seats at the Knesset, it should be underlined that Hadash participated in the elections with a joint list formed with Ta'al. Following the joint list's split during the parliamentary session, Hadash was left with two seats in the Knesset.

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18 Rouhana *et al.*, "Voting Without Vote: About the Vote of the Palestinian Minority in the 16th Knesset Elections," 230.

19 Don Peretz, Rebecca Kook and Gideon Doron, "Knesset Election 2003: Why Likud Regained Its Political Domination and Labor Continued to Fade Out," *Middle East Journal* 57 (2003), 600.

20 Bligh, "Political Trends in the Israeli Arab Population and Its Vote in Parliamentary Elections," 37.

## **Elections for the 17th Knesset (March 2006)**

Sharon's hawkish stance on security issues landed Likud a convincing win by Israeli standards in the February 2003 elections, as his party secured 38 seats at the Knesset, while the second largest party in the parliament, Labor, won only 19 seats. However, the elation of Likud cadres swiftly faded due to intense internal divisions that emerged over some positions taken by Sharon, first and foremost his embrace of a "Disengagement Plan" to withdraw Israeli settlers and troops from the Gaza Strip. Later, in January 2005, the formation of a Likud-Labor coalition to maintain the Sharon-led 30<sup>th</sup> Government's majority support in the Knesset further stoked the resentment of intraparty opposition, which eventually resulted in the split of Sharon and 13 Likud MKs from the Likud faction to form a more centralist party, later to be named Kadima. On November 9, 2005, Amir Peretz's narrow victory in Labor's internal leadership election put the last nail in the coffin of the 30<sup>th</sup> government, as all Labor ministers resigned from the cabinet and the Sharon-led government lost its majority support in the Knesset within two days. Negotiations between Sharon and Peretz set the early election date for the 17<sup>th</sup> Knesset on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2006.

The 2006 vote once again demonstrated the continued trend of shunning away from polls among Arab constituents, as the abstention rate in the Arab sector neared 44 percent, a six-point increase compared to the previous elections. A significant factor in the rise in the abstention rate was the Arab minority's response to the call for an electoral boycott led by the Popular Committee for the Boycott of the Election, which justified non-participation in the elections based on the argument that Arabs should refrain from supporting the legitimacy of the Israeli political establishment that "was founded on the ruins of their nation."<sup>21</sup> Although such calls were not a new phenomenon, the boycott movement gathered significant momentum amid heightened national political consciousness and a sense of marginalization in the country's political life.

Before the March 2006 elections, many political observers expected a weakening of Arab national lists and a pragmatic turn of Arab voters towards Jewish-Zionist parties<sup>22</sup>. So much so that, a pre-election survey conducted by Elie Rekhess in November 2005 indicated that Labor and Kadima would

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21 Elie Rekhess, "The Arab Minority in Israel and the 17th Knesset Elections," In *The Elections in Israel - 2006*, ed. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir, (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2008), 177.

22 Michel Warschawski, "The 2006 Israeli Elections: A Drive to Normalcy and Separation," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35 (2006), 50.

win 33 percent and 10.7 percent of Arab votes, respectively<sup>23</sup>. However, in confirmation of a rising wave of national sentiment and identity in the Arab sector, the voting rate for the Arab parties among Arab constituents increased by three points to 72 percent. The only Jewish-Zionist party that saw an increase in Arab support was Labor, thanks to its newly elected, dovish leader, who put two Arab candidates on the electoral list. By increasing its share of the Arab popular vote by five points to 12,5 percent, the Labor Party maintained its status as the largest Jewish-Zionist party among the Arab constituents. Nonetheless, the overall Arab support gave it only about half a seat in the Knesset<sup>24</sup>. Meretz, on the other hand, continued its slide in the Arab popular vote, as the share of the votes captured by the party almost slashed by half to 2,8 percent. According to Issawi Freij, Meretz's only Arab candidate in the March 2006 elections, his placement on the seventh spot of the electoral list had adverse repercussions on Arab voting for his party<sup>25</sup>. At the other end of the political spectrum, the proportion of Arab votes for Likud plummeted to an unprecedented low of 0,9 percent as many of its Arab supporters shifted to Kadima. Overall, only three Arab politicians entered the 17<sup>th</sup> Knesset from the lists of Jewish-Zionist parties: two from Labor and one from Kadima.

Among Arab parties, Ra'am was the undeniable winner of the March 2006 elections. As its joint list with Ta'al, which was based upon the infrastructure laid out by Abd al-Wahhab Darawshe and successfully combined Islamist and Arab nationalist ideologies, enjoyed substantial popularity in the Arab sector, Ra'am was able to increase its support among Arab constituents by ten points to 28 percent and send three members to the Knesset. Besides Bedouin localities in the south, Ra'am also derived significant support from the Triangle Area, where it had been weak in the previous elections. By nominating local candidates in localities and cities like Taibeh, Kfar Qassem, and Baka Al-Gharbiyah, Ra'am was able to increase its votes by up to 330 percent and emerge as the number one party<sup>26</sup>. Although Arab support for Hadash dropped by five points to 23,2 percent, the party secured three seats at the Knesset, which demonstrated that a Jewish candidate on the ticket (Dov Borish Khenin) did not deter Arab voters. Balad retained its relative strength among Arab constituents by gaining 20,3 percent of their votes. Thanks to a vote-allocation agreement with Hadash, the party was able to win three seats in the Knesset. Other smaller Arab parties that participated in the March

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23 Elie Rekhess, "The Arab Vote in the Next Knesset Elections: Results of a Public Opinion Poll," (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2005) 5.

24 Bligh, "Political Trends in the Israeli Arab Population and Its Vote in Parliamentary Elections," 41.

25 Rekhess, "The Arab Minority in Israel and the 17th Knesset Elections," 169.

26 Rekhess, "The Arab Minority in Israel and the 17th Knesset Elections," 171.

2006 elections, such as, *inter-alia*, “The Progressive National Alliance” of Hashim Mahameed, “Arab National Party” of Muhammad Hassan Kan’an, and “Democratic Action Organization” of Asmaa Aghbariya, attained poorer results and failed to cross the electoral threshold.

### **Elections for the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset (February 2009)**

On September 21, 2008, Ehud Olmert, who became the acting Prime Minister and Kadima’s chairperson following a hemorrhagic stroke that incapacitated Sharon, handed his official resignation to President Shimon Peres over a criminal indictment in corruption probes. As his successor in Kadima’s chairpersonship, Tzipi Livni, could not form a new government, mainly due to the opposition of ultra-orthodox factions to a Kadima-Labor-led coalition, the Knesset was unavoidably dissolved on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, and the election date was set for February 10, 2009.

The campaign for the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset elections was largely overshadowed by the plethora of Jewish-Arab tensions following the Second Lebanon War, including, *inter-alia*, MK Azmi Bishara’s escape to Jordan to avoid trial on charges of abetting Hezbollah during the II. Lebanon War, the publication of “Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel” declarations composed by Arab opinion leaders that openly challenged the Zionist ethos and Israel’s Jewish character, the outbreak of Arab-Jewish clashes in Acre in October 2008, and, most importantly, the IDF campaign against Gazan paramilitary groups during December 2008-January 2009 (Operation Cast Lead) that claimed lives of 295 Palestinian civilians per IDF data. Hence, right-wing Jewish-Zionist parties placed the issue of security and the Arab sector’s loyalty to the State of Israel at the top of their electoral agendas. So much so that, Yisrael Beiteinu adopted “No loyalty, no citizenship” as their campaign slogan, and Lieberman, who previously claimed that Arab MKs Ahmad Tibi and Mohammad Barakeh were more dangerous than Khaled Mashal and Hassan Nasrallah, promised the legislation of a new bill requiring all Arabs with Israeli passports to swear loyalty to the Jewish state or lose their citizenship<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, Yisrael Beiteinu and the Jewish Home appealed for the disqualification of Balad and Ta’al from running for the elections on the grounds that they denied Israel’s existence as a Jewish state and encouraged terrorism against it<sup>28</sup>. As

27 Rory McCarthy, “Hardline Populist Lieberman Could be Surprise Kingmaker in Israeli Election.” *The Guardian*, February 05, 2009, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/05/israel-election-lieberman-opinion-polls>.

28 David Koren, “Arab Israeli Citizens in the 2009 Elections: Between Israeli Citizenship and Palestinian Arab Identity,” *Israel Affairs* 16 (2010), 126.

this proposal was supported by Kadima, Likud, and some MKs of Labor, the Central Elections Committee overwhelmingly voted to disqualify these two Arab parties, but the Supreme Court later overruled the decision.

Amid such a tense political climate, the electoral campaigns of Arab parties operated along two trajectories. On the one hand, there was Hadash, which followed a relatively more moderate trajectory in line with the campaign slogans of “True Arab-Jewish partnership” and “Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies.” Their platform focused on workers’ rights and social justice in Israel, as well as the national rights of the Arab minority and Palestinian sovereignty based on the principle of two nations for two peoples. On the other hand, Ra’am and Balad put up zealously nationalistic rhetoric and used slogans that emphasized Palestinian identity, such as, *inter-alia*, “I am an Arab-Palestinian. Full national identity” and “Vote to avenge the blood of the Palestinian dead in Gaza.” Despite their differences, all major Arab parties resisted calls for the boycott of elections, mainly emanating from the northern faction of the Islamic Movement and the Sons of the Land movement (*Abnaa el-Balad*), on the ground that a strong Arab presence in the Knesset was essential to counter right-wing parties’ incitements against the Arab sector<sup>29</sup>. They even published a joint declaration calling on Arab constituents to hit the polls and exercise their democratic rights. The inner struggle in the Arab sector regarding the electoral boycott escalated to a new level on election day, so much so that there were several cases of violent demonstrations and rock-throwing at voting stations in Arab towns across Israel.

Amid growing feelings of estrangement and disassociation from the Israeli political system, the boycott movement resonated well among Arab constituents. Despite intensive campaigns run by Arab parties to bring their supporters to the polls, the abstention rate in the Arab sector rose to 46,6 percent, an increase of three points from the previous election. The participation rates were 66 percent and 46,8 percent, respectively, for Muslims and Christians in the Northern area; meanwhile, the voter turnout rates stood at less than 31 percent and 36 percent in Arab localities in the coastal areas and Bedouin localities of the Southern area, respectively<sup>30</sup>. Furthermore, in confirmation of the deepening of the existing rift between Arabs and Jews, the support rate among Arab constituents for Jewish-Zionist parties plummeted to less than nine percent, representing a twenty-one-point decrease over the decade. In many Muslim localities of the Triangle, such as Umm al-Fahm, Tayibe,

29 Manfred Gerstenfeld, “The Run-up to the Elections: A Political History of the 2009 Campaign,” *Israel Affairs* 16 (2010), 24.

30 Bligh, “Political Trends in the Israeli Arab Population and Its Vote in Parliamentary Elections,” 44-47.

Qalansawe, and Ar'ara, Arab support for Jewish-Zionist parties was less than three percent<sup>31</sup>. Among Jewish-Zionist parties, Labor took the biggest hit as it won less than 5,000 Arab votes, a five-fold decrease compared to the previous election<sup>32</sup>.

In the elections for the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset, the Ra'am-Ta'al joint list maintained its position as the most popular list among Arab constituents by winning approximately 40 percent of eligible Arab votes, an increase of three points from the previous election. Although there was hope within Ra'am party circles that the joint list with Ta'al would win them four seats at the Knesset, exceptionally high abstention rates among Bedouins in the Negev cost the party its fourth seat. Following the joint list's split during the parliamentary session, Ra'am was left with three seats. In the Triangle, Ra'am's intensive campaign to bring its supporters to the polls caused Christian Arab constituents to vote in large numbers for Balad, which was then led by Christian MK Jamal Zahalka, to prevent a potential Muslim takeover of their towns and villages. By winning the majority of the vote within the Christian population, Balad was able to cross the electoral threshold and maintain its three seats at the Knesset, albeit its image as a crisis-ridden party following Azmi Bishara's escape to Jordan. Out of all three major Arab parties, Hadash did the best in the February 2009 elections. The party gained the most Arab votes both in the Central and Northern areas, with 43 percent and 36 percent, respectively, and sent four members to the Knesset. The party leadership celebrated the results of the February 2009 election as a major victory, as they were able to "run a civilized race, drive out Zionist parties, and cooperate to raise voter turnout."<sup>33</sup> Overall, 11 Arabs entered the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset from the lists of Arab parties.

## Conclusion

This paper analyzed voting patterns in the Arab sector in the elections between 1999-2009, a period marked by a plethora of Arab-Jewish tensions in Israel. Contrary to expectations in the early 1990s that Israel's political system was gradually opening up to the needs of the Arab sector and willing to include them as legitimate partners, the voting patterns of Arab constituents in the aforementioned elections strongly indicated a process of alienation

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31 Koren, "Arab Israeli Citizens in the 2009 Elections: Between Israeli Citizenship and Palestinian Arab Identity," 136.

32 "אישל קניז הלטבא ימד מילבקה רפסמ; ראוני שדוחב 1%-ב עיתפמב ולע ב"הראב תוינועמקה תורכמה", Walla, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://finance.walla.co.il/item/1434846>.

33 Koren, "Arab Israeli Citizens in the 2009 Elections: Between Israeli Citizenship and Palestinian Arab Identity," 133.



from the Israeli political system. The first manifestation of this gradual disenfranchisement was the steady decline in voter turnout rates. Between 1999-2009, the abstention rates in the Arab sector jumped from 25 percent to 46,6 percent, substantially higher than the abstention rates among Jewish constituents. Secondly, the vote for Jewish-Zionist parties dwindled by 21 points to an unprecedented low rate of less than nine percent in 2009. Arab voters' growing abandonment of Jewish-Zionist parties particularly hurt the Labor Party and Meretz, the two left-wing parties that had traditionally won the Arab vote. This collective separatism of Arab constituents from the Jewish majority paradoxically contributed to the electoral successes of both Arab parties and right-wing Jewish-Zionist parties, as the social base of left-wing Jewish-Zionist parties notably narrowed.

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