Stability Amidst Flux: The Arab Parties Come of Age in the 2006 General Elections

HILLEL FRISCH

The 2006 election, one of the most prominent experts on Arab Israeli politics predicted, would be the swan-song of Israel's Arab parties which had dominated the Arab electoral scene for the past two decades in favour of a massive return to the Zionist parties.[1] Nothing proved further from the truth. Despite a low, though hardly an exceptionally low, voting participation rate, the three Arab political parties which passed the newly increased 2 percent threshold—the United Arab List–Arab Movement for Change (UAL–AMC); Hadash (the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality); and the Balad (National Democratic Assembly)—succeeded in gaining ten seats in the Knesset. Hadash won 85,823 of the votes to secure three seats, Balad, 71,299 votes and three seats, securing the third seat only as a result of a surplus vote agreement with Hadash, and the UAL–AMC, which showed the strongest performance by drawing 94,457 of the votes, gained four seats (see Table 1).[2]

Combined, this was as good an electoral performance as these parties have ever had, especially after considering heavy voter fatigue (five national elections in ten years); the voices during the campaign that vociferously criticized the political fragmentation in the Arab sector; and the excessive focus on the leaders of these parties to the detriment of their political agendas. The latter might have been the reason why only 56.5 percent of the Arab electorate cast their vote, the lowest Arab participation rate ever in a legislative party election, considerably lower than the Jewish electorate, which also produced the lowest turnout in all national elections to date.[3] The Arab parties altogether secured an estimated 77 percent of the Arab vote and a total of ten seats in the Knesset. All in all, they secured 8 percent of the total number of votes in the 2006 election.[4]

Even more surprising, and ironic, for the first time in at least a quarter of a century, Arab politics seemed to be on a surer footing than the politics of the Jewish majority. Not only did ten candidates from Arab, or predominantly Arab, parties make it into the Knesset, they were almost

Hillel Frisch is a senior lecturer in the department of political studies at Bar-Ilan University.

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TABLE 1
THE VOTE FOR ARAB PARTIES IN THE 2006 AND 2003 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Party	2003 General Elections Votes	Seats	2006 General Elections Votes	Seats
UAL–AMC	65,551	2	94,457	4
Hadash	93,819	3	85,823	3
Balad	72,012	3	71,299	3
Others	1,925	–	3,429	–

Source: *Adcan* No. 4, 11 April 2006, p. 13.

equally divided amongst three parties, each with a relatively distinct ideological identity. These included a very pronounced secular party, Hadash, dedicated to social causes and to Arab–Jewish co-existence as much as nationalist issues; the traditional-Islamic UAL; and the radical-nationalist Balad. This solid portrait contrasted sharply with an Israeli Jewish electoral scene brimming with surprises, crass opportunism, and a lack of political identity.

Though the Arab parties presented an ideological choice to the constituents within the Arab sector, they continued to present a united front regarding issues affecting the Arab sector, joining forces to press for more equality, recognition as a national cultural and political minority, and a view of foreign affairs that almost inevitably favoured the stances and policy positions taken by the Palestinians, Arab states and Iran, over the official positions of the state backed by the majority community.

Despite the relatively strong showing of the Arab parties and the paltry support for Arab Zionist parties (estimated at 23 percent), few Arab politicians celebrated the results.[5] After all, the Arab electorate accounted for nearly 15 percent of the total potential voters, meaning that only slightly more than half of their potential voters showed up at the polls to actually cast their vote for them.

There were two basic reasons, one internal and structural and the other contextual, relating to Israel's external reality, that was bound to hurt the prospects of Arab empowerment during the period that mattered most—the period after the elections.

Internally, the results of the 2006 general elections brought in its wake the third major electoral transition in Israeli politics since the emergence of the state: three decades of centre-party dominance; its replacement by a loose two-party system in the 1980s and 1990s; and after the 2006 election a weak centre-party constellation with the largest party commanding only 29 seats. In the first period the satellite Arab lists in the orbit of the dominant party Mapai could expect patronage (however limited such patronage was compared to the total resources the system distributed at the time), and in the second period independent Arab parties

played the informal balancing role at the height of bi-polarity during Rabin's second term in office to secure more resources than ever. But a weak centre-party structure offered few prospects for the Arab parties or their voters. With so few seats, Kadima obviously had to buy support amongst parties closer to the political centre and reach out in ever wider concentric circles to bolster its precarious position. The Arabs could only be last in line both as prospective partners and in securing resources.

Arab empowerment during Rabin's second term in office was also closely related to the prospects of a peace process and the disunity it caused in the Israeli electorate during the Oslo years. The electoral triumph of Hamas and its adamant refusal to recognize the state could only unite Zionist parties in their stance and marginalize the Arab sectors and the parties representing them. So, too, did it reduce the prospects of unilateral disengagement that would have allowed the Arab parties the possibility of being a key informal ally to Kadima. The prospects of unilateral withdrawal declined in almost direct proportion to the strengthening of the ballistic and terrorist siege around Israel characterized by the kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers in Gaza and on the northern border in June–July 2006, and the tacit Hamas–Hizballah alliance over the release of Palestinian and Lebanese prisoners. Israel's Arab parties only make gains in times of relative tranquillity and lose ground in times of violence, particularly when that violence is focused on Israel within the pre-1967 borders.

THE ARAB PARTIES COME OF AGE

Ironically, just as predominantly Arab parties were being incessantly criticized for being one-man parties, highly unlikely to pass the threshold that had been raised since the previous general elections to 2 percent, they proved that they had both staying power and a uniqueness that could justify their existence as parties rather than as platforms for individual politicians.

Balad (The National Democratic Assembly)

Balad, the party that experts predicted would have the lowest prospects of attaining a seat in the Knesset, is perhaps the best example. A nationalist Arab party whose full name is the National Democratic Assembly (NDA) (or al-Tajammu for short in Arabic), is frequently referred to by Arabs as Balad, its acronym in Hebrew. Being a nationalist party dedicated to fighting 'Israelization', calling the party by its Hebrew name would be odd to say the least, if not for the fact that the acronym in Hebrew creates a word in Arabic meaning 'the land', a symbol for a party that claims, in contrast to the Zionist parties, to represent the true natives of the land.

The party was established by Dr Azmi Bishara to contest the general elections in 1996 together with the veteran Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality). The alliance secured four seats but did not last for

personal and ideological reasons; Bishara and Hashem Mahameed broke away from Hadash–Balad to form an independent parliamentary group.

Neither party, however, gained much by the move. Balad, in the 1999 election campaign, teamed up with Ahmad Tibi's Arab Movement for Change (AMC), a truly one-man show, to receive two seats in the fifteenth Knesset while Mahameed failed to enter the Knesset at all. The alliance split once more, with Bishara remaining its only member.[6]

Gaining little by alliance, the party decided to contest the 2003 elections alone. The gamble paid off, with the party attaining three seats to become the second largest Arab party. The same occurred in the 2006 election, though this time round it made strenuous efforts to team up with Hadash out of fear that the party would be punished for going it alone. Though the results could hardly be considered a victory, they were much better than the polls predicted. Balad received almost the same number of votes as in the previous elections, but in light of a growing electorate, maintained its three seats thanks only to a surplus vote agreement with Hadash. Its failure to draw in more votes could be attributed to the overpowering dominance of its founder, and his intense involvement in external Palestinian and Arab affairs. Bishara is a prolific and highly visible writer, commentator and lecturer in both the local and regional press, activities which voters feel might come at the expense of dealing with more concrete 'bread and butter' issues that concern them. He and his party are also constrained by the fact that he is Christian. Bishara and others are hardly willing to concede these points, particularly the latter, which runs against their anti-sectarian thinking, and instead are convinced that the authorities target Balad more than the other two predominantly Arab parties.

Without doubt, Balad is the most radical of the three predominantly Arab parties. While on its English internet site it features itself as a party that 'advocates that [Israel] should be a state for all its citizens', the Arabic version focuses on its strong Arab and Palestinian nationalist identity: 'The National Democratic Assembly is a democratic party that represents the Arabs in Israel, a pan-Arab (Qawmi) party, national Palestinian and democratic party in form and substance and in terms of its political and social goal'.[7] As a pan-Arab nationalist party, its positions are hard to square with requirements set in the 1992 revised party law that states that the platforms of all parties must accept Israel as a Jewish democratic state.[8] The party seeks to change the Jewish symbols of the state, for the recognition of the Israeli Arabs as a national minority and for that minority to be allowed to maintain cultural autonomy presided over by an elected assembly and executive. To make matters worse, at least from the perspective of the Jewish majority, the official narrative of the party site regarding the establishment of the State of Israel tells a story of expulsion of the original dwellers and its usurpation by outsiders.

Prominent members of the party are also involved in non-governmental organizations that devote considerable time and resources to promoting separatist causes. The Arab Centre for Applied Social Research-al-Karmal (MADA), a Palestinian-run research institute based in Haifa, founded in 2000, is one of the newest. The name of the organization would suggest an agenda that is scientific, instrumental and non-political. Yet already in the introductory lines of its homepage one senses the gap between appearance and substance:

> Mada fuses in-depth theoretical and applied research with public policy recommendations to advance the national rights and the social, political and economic conditions of Palestinian citizens in Israel, and to craft new social policies toward this indigenous minority … Mada has set the following goals: To provide an institutional base and an intellectual climate to study the needs and collective future of Palestinians in Israel, their relationship with Israel, the Palestinian nation, and the Arab World... to foster partnerships with Israeli, Palestinian, and international academics, NGO activists, and political actors … to formulate public policy proposals designed to improve the economic, political, and social conditions of Palestinian citizens … to train Palestinian social scientists in new critical approaches … and to promote a new and critical discourse on Palestinian–Jewish relations in the country.[9]

One should pause to reflect on the blatantly political, if not separatist, nature of some of these objectives. By claiming to be a scientific research organization that will study the needs and collective future of Palestinians in Israel and their relationship with Israel, MADA is intimating that Arab citizens are not necessarily citizens within an established state but a national group that will in some sense negotiate over the final terms of the contract, as well as define their relationship to the Palestinian nation and the Arab world. That the organization promotes a separatist narrative and identity is without doubt; in the *Mada News Survey*, the organization established a project entitled 'Constructing the Historical Narrative of the Palestinians in Israel'. As part of the project, MADA convened a successful seminar on the *Catastrophe and Expulsion*.

MADA's close links to Balad are reflected in the composition of its general assembly. All four of the 18 members of the governing council whose political affiliation is given belong to the NDA. This includes Azmi Bishara, the founder and chairperson of Balad as well as an MK for the party, Jamal Zahalka. He is also a founding member and member of the Executive Committee of the party's leadership. Dr Fathi Daka, a cardiologist at a private hospital in Herzliya is both a member of the Executive Committee of the party and the Popular Committee to Combat Collaborators, a committee that opposes settling Palestinian collaborators in Arab–Israeli localities. Ms Raghida Zoabi, one of three women in the

MADA foundation's assembly, is likewise a member of the Balad Executive Committee. The last three have been involved in broad-based service to the local community.

The UAL and the AMC

With Sheikh Ibrahim Sarsur at its helm and another Sheikh, Abbas Zakur, fourth on the list, the UAL–AMC clearly presented a religious-traditional alternative to the more secular Hadash and Balad. Sarsur is the leader of the Islamic Movement (southern branch) that in 1996 decided to contest the Knesset elections, which had led to the historical split within the movement between those under Raid Salah, who opposed contesting national elections on the grounds that it granted legitimacy to the state, and those like Sarsur who supported it. Sarsur won in internal party primaries against incumbent leader 'Abd al-Malik Dahamsha, in a contest over the leadership—a rare event in Arab institutions where leadership is often viewed as a life-long position. It was one more indication of a party that has come of age.

Whether such rotation was instrumental in the list's success at securing votes is hard to say. As the results became known, it was evident that the party managed to erase the electoral defeat it experienced in the 2003 general elections when party representation in the Knesset dropped from five to two. Some observe that the list's campaign was much more resonant with Islamic symbols than in the past, having been heavily influenced by the successful campaign waged by Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza.[10] In the 2006 election, it was able to double its number of Knesset seats after it drew nearly 30,000 more votes, to become once again the party with most votes in the Arab sector. Nevertheless, it had known better days. In the 1999 elections it had secured five seats.

Such electoral volatility suggests that much more than an ideological or spiritual disposition was at stake in casting a vote for the party. The geographic and social distribution of its leadership was certainly an advantage. Taleeb al-Sanaa, as a member of one of the largest tribes in the Negev, draws a high percentage of the Bedouin vote, while Sarsur from the 'Triangle' area succeeded in doing much the same in the concentration of the Arab population in the middle of the country. The party remains weak in the Galilee, where the more secular Arab parties do better. Even in Nazareth, where tensions mounted in the late 1990s over the construction of a mosque near the Church of the Basilica, the party's performance was weak. It secured only 23.2 percent of the vote compared to 43.8 percent for Hadash and 21 percent for Balad.[11]

The UAL's success raises the question of whether it was linked in any way to the striking electoral gains of other Islamist parties in the region, most notably in the Palestinian Authority, where Hamas won 45 per cent of the votes and 65 per cent of the seats in an election that took place six

weeks before the Israeli general elections, as well as in Egypt. Analyzing survey data over time is one way to explore the linkage. Indeed, in a poll from November 2005, only 7.4 percent of those polled chose UAL, which through extrapolation suggested that the list would have won less than 30,000 votes, insufficient to secure any Knesset seats and one-third the number of votes actually cast for the party on election day.[12] By contrast, in two polls conducted at the end of February 2006, one month after the Hamas victory, the party was estimated to gain three seats, though in neither poll did the UAL emerge as the party with the most support.[13]

The problem with such an exercise stems from the wide divergence in the results of the polls even when conducted at the same time. Arab respondents in polls have a tendency to tailor their preferences according to the perceived desires of those sponsoring the polls.

Not only are the polls problematic, at least one other development that occurred between the first and second and third polls cited—the alliance between the list and Ahmad Tibi sealed in early February—makes it more difficult to establish the causal linkage between the Hamas victory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's strong showing in the Egyptian elections. Tibi was placed second after Hadash had declined to give him the same slot. This was the third election in which Tibi preferred being a number two as an outsider, rather than choosing to head the list, run alone and directly test his popularity. He gets away with avoiding direct contestation because in so small and divided an electorate, running under a proportional list system, parties fear that without him they will be short of the incremental seat or even of passing the higher threshold.

To describe the UAL as traditional is of course, as with all adjectives, relative to the context in which it is employed. Traditional in Denmark and traditional in the charged political scene between a minority seeking to be recognized as a national minority in a polity that perceives it as a threat does not necessarily mean the same thing. The UAL is traditional only compared to Balad, as the uproar over Sarsur's statement that 'we believe in Islam, we believe in the rule of the Caliphate and we do not support a separation between state and religion', suggests.[14] Some construed this statement to mean that Israel would eventually be a state ruled by the *shari'a*, Islamic law. If there could have been any doubt about the party's disposition towards the state, the testimony of a journalist for a Jordanian newspaper dispelled it when he observed the banner behind Sarsur as he addressed potential voters in Kafr Kassem. It read: 'Voting for the Zionist parties is supporting those who spilled our blood, robbed our land and violated our holy places'.[15]

Hadash

Hadash, for many years the dominant party in the Arab sector—in 1977 it secured 51 percent of the vote—has demonstrated a staying power few

other Communist-dominated parties elsewhere have shown. This anomalous success can hardly be explained by a reverence for a form of Stalinism that still dominates the Communist core of the list. Nor can it be explained by Jewish–Arab solidarity at the polls; though Hadash placed a Jewish advocate in a realistic slot, few Jews vote for the party and practically none for the other two Arab parties. Ramat Hasharon is an example: an almost exclusively Jewish town and one of the most liberal (and wealthiest) localities in the country, its inhabitants vote for left-of-centre Zionist parties in far higher proportion than the national average (9.5 percent for Meretz-Yahad compared to 3.5 per cent nation-wide). Hadash, by contrast, received a mere 0.6 percent of the Ramat Hasharon vote compared to 2.7 amongst all voters, with the other two Arab parties receiving none.

Paradoxically, it is the party's identification with Palestinian nationalism in a bi-national reality that gives the list its staying power. For all the focus on Jewish–Arab solidarity, Hadash remains basically a nationalist Palestinian party. A look at the very sophisticated and colourful internet site in Arabic six days into the conflagration between Hizballah and Israel in mid-July 2006 underscored this reality graphically. 'Front Demonstrations against the Aggression in Lebanon in Nazareth, Um al-Fahum and the Acre Area', reads the headline banner above a picture of a small peaceful demonstration along an undesignated street, while another headline of a smaller feature announces that 'Israeli Crimes Extend from Gaza and the [West] Bank... and the World Is Silent', with a harrowing picture above the caption depicting a Lebanese child dismembered, presumably as a result of an Israeli Air Force attack.[16] Needless to say, none of this appeared on the Hebrew site.[17]

Leaflets distributed by Hadash during the election campaign expressed a similar tone. For a party list considered to be dominated by a non- (even anti-)nationalist and religious Communist party, it may be surprising to find, according to the quote of a well-known local poet featured prominently in the leaflet that 'the Front is the source of national action and the democratic struggle, which is the source of our Arab and Islamic civilization and true and proper [pan-Arab] nationalism'.[18] Nevertheless, Hadash, unlike the other two Arab lists, has a Hebrew site in addition to the traditional Jewish member of the Knesset.

Coping with the tension between nationalist rhetoric and a commitment to Arab–Jewish solidarity is not the only tension with which the list is forced to cope. A deep commitment to secularism in the party platform was hardly evoked in the actual campaign, where one leaflet celebrated a reality in which Christians defended Muslim holy places and Muslims their Christian counterparts.[19] But then again, the very same leaflet expresses another paradox of the list: though Hadash is dedicated to effacing the communal division of the Arab sector, it almost always makes sure that

the first three seats are divided between a Muslim, Christian and Jew. This author has noted previously that the same paradox bedevilled the Soviet Union.

Location also goes a long way in explaining Hadash's sensitivity to relations between Muslims and Christians. The party is heavily identified with Nazareth and Haifa, particularly the former, where controversy over a religious site continues to act as a cloud over generally amicable relations between the two more or less equally divided communities. Nor can Hadash or any other political force deny the power and totality of confessional groups in the Middle East, particularly in an area like Galilee bordering a state riveted by confessional politics such as Lebanon.

This is not to say that Hadash, or Balad and the UAL for that matter, do not focus on more instrumental civic concerns over discrimination, the election publicity of both parties featured brightly drawn charts and pictograms showing the discriminatory allocation of resources, but the data is almost inevitably placed within the paradigm of a much wider national-ethnic and, in the case of the UAL, a religious divide between Arabs and the Jewish majority and the state that bears its symbols and maintains its identity.

Hadash's failure to draw the Jewish vote, unlike in Northern Ireland, for example, where at least one political force, the Alliance Party, draws both Protestant and Catholic voters, reflects the almost unbridgeable identity divide between the Jewish and Arab electorates from the perspective, long overlooked, of the Jewish electorate. It is also a reflection of a deeper political and sociological phenomenon: the absence of a liberal non-nationalist upper middle class which exists, though it is increasingly fraying, in Northern Ireland. (After all, the party secured only 3.8 per cent of the vote in the 2003 elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly).[20] This author would argue that had the few Jewish voters for Hadash known Arabic and entered the Arabic site of the party (to which they have no access from the Hebrew site) or read its organ, *al-Ittihad*, even fewer Jews would have cast their vote for the party.

Ethno-nationalism also contributes to the continued marginalization of Arab women in national politics beyond the social constraints facing them in a patriarchal society. Not one woman was placed in a realistic slot amongst the predominantly Arab parties, two of which describe themselves as being 'progressive' and eager to promote gender equality.

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Both nationalist and instrumental concerns framed the basic campaigns of these parties. All three united over two themes: instrumentally, they strove incessantly against attempts to organize the boycott against participation in the elections by more radical elements in the Arab sector—the Sons of the

Land and those affiliated or at least sympathetic to the (southern) Islamic Movement. In January a Sons of the Land activist incorrectly predicted a boycott by at least 50 percent.[21] Ideologically, they joined forces in delegitimizing the vote for Zionist parties. Neither of these issues was new or unique to the 2006 election campaign, but polls early on in the campaign suggested that they threatened for the very first time the very ability of the Arab parties to pass the elevated threshold and achieve any kind of representation in the Knesset.

Fortunately for the Arab parties, their campaign was abetted by the failure of others. Despite considerable noise, the anti-boycott campaign never took off, in part because the (southern) Islamic Movement, weakened by state action, including the year-and-a-half-long incarceration of its leaders, never firmly endorsed it. The Islamic Movement, by organizing over ten years its massive 'Save the al-Aqsa Mosque' annual conventions, attended by tens of thousands, had clearly established the movement as the major mobilizing force in the Arab sector. Instead, it chose to remain on the sidelines of this particular battle. Without the movement's organizational abilities, the ability to woo potential Arab voters away from the polling booths declined considerably.

Even if the anti-boycott campaign was weak and the pro-participation stance taken by the parties strong, the question remains to what extent the lower participation rate (56.3 compared 63.2 percent for the Jewish sector) was ideological. Could the declining turnout be part of a larger phenomenon of declining voter turnouts and dissatisfaction with political parties characterizing advanced democracies in the past two decades?[22] Comparing the relative decline in voter turnout between the Arab sector and the overall population participation rate could provide a partial answer. A steeper decline in the Arab sector would suggest that it could not be explained by voter fatigue alone. The differences are relatively insignificant, declining from 67.8 to 62 percent amongst the general voting public and from 62 to 56.3 percent in the Arab sector.[23] Voter turnout results in a town such as Umm al-Fahum, dominated by the southern section of the Islamic Movement, offered further proof that the reduction might not necessarily be related to the boycott. The 55 percent participation rate in Umm al-Fahum was only slightly lower than the sectoral average.[24] One caveat, however, is required—at least one observer felt that turnout might have been even lower had not votes been purchased in exchange for gas coupons.[25]

Because of expectations of a low voter turnout, appeals to sub-community identification and localism were rife in the campaign. Thus, Shakib Shanan, the Druze Labour candidate, campaigned locally under the slogan 'The [ethnic] community—most deserves your vote'. The *Kull al-'Arab* journalist writing on the topic noted that the Hadash posters in Umm al-Fahum focused exclusively on their candidate in the fourth slot from the town itself.[26] It served Hadash in good stead. Hadash as a secular party

TABLE 2
ARAB PARTICIPATION IN KNESSET ELECTIONS

Year of Elections	Nationwide (%)	Arab vote (%)	Percentage of Arab eligible Voters
1949 (Knesset 1)	86.9	69.3	9.5
1951 (Knesset 2)	75.1	85.5	11.6
1955 (Knesset 3)	82.8	91.0	9.0
1959 (Knesset 4)	81.6	88.9	8.2
1961 (Knesset 5)	81.4	85.5	7.7
1965 (Knesset 6)	83.0	87.8	8.3
1969 (Knesset 7)	81.7	82.0	8.4
1973 (Knesset 8)	78.6	80.0	8.4
1977 (Knesset 9)	78.5	75.0	9.2
1981 (Knesset 10)	78.5	69.7	9.8
1984 (Knesset 11)	78.8	73.7	13.0
1988 (Knesset 12)	79.7	73.9	14.3
1992 (Knesset 13)	78.2	69.7	13.3
1996 (Knesset 14)	79.3	77.0	10.3
1999 (Knesset 15)	77.2	75.0	11.0
2003 (Knesset 16)	67.8	62.0	13.0
2006 (Knesset 17)	62.0	56.3	

Sources: Slightly modified table from Elie Rekhess, 'Arab Politics in Israel and the 17th Knesset Elections', The Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 22 March 2006, p. 2; Data on the 1949–92 elections (Knesset I–Knesset 13) derived from Benjamin Neuberger, 'The Knesset Elections in the Arab and Druze Population', *Information and Contents Papers*, No. 3, Tel Aviv University, May 1996, p. 3; Data on the 1996 elections (Knesset 14) are based on: IIana Kofman and Rachel Israeli, 'The Israeli Arab Vote in the 1996 Elections', in Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (eds.), *The 1996 Elections in Israel*, Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 12, 126; Data on 1999 elections (Knesset 15) based on: As'ad Ghanem, 'Arab Vote in the 15th Knesset Elections', in Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (eds.), *The 1999 Elections in Israel*, Jerusalem, 2001, pp. 8, 171, 190; Data on the 2003 elections (Knesset 16) based on: Nadim Rouhana, Nabil Salih and Nimr Soultany, 'A Vote without Voice: The Vote of the Palestinian Minority in the Sixteenth Knesset Elections', in Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (eds.), *The 2003 Elections in Israel*, Jerusalem, 2004, pp. 18, 329.

based in the Galilee has been traditionally weak in the all-Muslim triangle. In Umm al-Fahum the votes for Hadash increased by 255 percent from the previous elections.[27] However, it hardly increased voter turnout in the town, which declined from 61 to 55 per cent, below the national average, suggesting the effectiveness of the boycott in a town known to be a stronghold of the southern movement that informally supported the boycott.[28] (See Table 2.)

Fortunately for the Arab parties, the Zionist parties failed to take advantage of voter displeasure against the former to bolster their own electoral prospects in the Arab sector. The newly formed but prospective winner, Kadima, made a mistake when Ehud Olmert, who personally drew up the list, realized after the event that he had failed to include one non-Druze Arab candidate amongst the 44 or so slots which polls at the time erroneously predicted Kadima would take in the coming elections. The Druze candidate, firmly placed in the eighteenth slot, was incumbent

TABLE 3
THE (ESTIMATED) ARAB VOTE FOR JEWISH PARTIES

Party	2003 Election (%)	2006 Election (%)
Avodah	13.5	10.6
Kadima	–	5.7
Shas	3.1	2.4
Meretz	4.1	2.7
Likud	4.0	0.8
Religious	1.2	0.4

Source: *Adcan* No. 4, 11 April 2006, p. 15; Elie Rekhess, 'The 17th Knesset Elections in the Arab Sector—An Overview', Symposium: The Arab Minority in Israel and the 17th Knesset, 14 June 2006.

Majali Whbee, an exceptionally able spokesperson for the former Sharon government in the regional Arab media. However, as a staunch Zionist given wide coverage to boot, he could hardly draw votes amongst the Muslim and Christian sub-sectors. This was quite an oversight considering that the Muslim and Christian Arab electorate represented over 10 per cent of the potential vote. Lily Galili, a journalist for *Ha'aretz*, summed it up well when she titled the article on the incident 'They "Forgot" One Million People'.[29] Once alerted to the problem, the party quickly placed a small-town Arab mayor in the unrealistic fifty-first slot, adding insult to injury. By comparison, Kadima featured six 'Russian' immigrants in the first 44 slots.

Comparing the findings of public opinion surveys in November 2005 with the actual results suggests that Kadima lost at least one seat in the Knesset due to its failure to place one Arab in a secure slot. In November, 10.6 percent of those polled said they would vote for Kadima compared to 6.5 percent in the actual elections, a potential loss of approximately 20,000 votes which, with Kadima's surplus, could have yielded the party an extra seat.

Meretz-Yahad, too, failed to place an Arab candidate in a secure slot, though not without reason. A party which in the past had secured a high percentage of Arab votes for its dovish positions, and more recently for its recognition of the Arabs as a national minority, was both too small and divided to take the risk and too powerless to give the impression that a vote for the party would make any difference. In the party primaries, Issawi Freij from Kafr Kassem secured only seventh place, an unrealistic slot for a party that the polls rightly predicted would never attain more than 4–5 seats.[30] Yet, if this was wise from a purely parochial perspective, it added to the polarization between the Arab and Jewish electorates. In fact, of all the Jewish parties, only Labour apportioned secure slots to the Arab sector commensurate to their potential when a Christian, Nadia Khilu, was placed in the fifteenth slot (allotted in fact for women), Muslim Ghalib

Majadleh in the nineteenth and Druze, Shqib Shanan, in the twentieth position on the list.[31]

A reluctance to grant secure positions to Arab candidates in the Zionist parties was only part of the story. Arab commentators expressed amazement at the failure of all the Jewish parties, with the possible exception of Labour, to campaign almost at all in the Arab sector. It was as if they resigned themselves to a foregone conclusion of a polarized Jewish–Arab electorate.[32] Only Labour drew in Arab votes anywhere near the percentage of those it attracted amongst the electorate at large; 13.5 percent in the Arab sector compared to nearly 19 percent in the general electorate, mostly amongst the Druze.

Arab commentators are convinced that the Zionist parties, particularly the left-of-centre, with both a dovish and social-democratic profile, could do better in the Arab sector by attracting the instrumental voter who seeks material as opposed to ideological gratification or who feels that it is not his role to solve issues of ethnicity and nationalism. Unfortunately, penetration requires a greater presence in the Arab sector between elections. This is typically the work of a party machine, at a time when Israeli parties are moving away from the model of mass parties.

Instrumental voters also want to be assured that they are voting for parties that will be in government. As the Zionist parties become more fragmented, uncertainty grows as to who will be part of the government coalition and with it doubts regarding the benefits of such votes. Shas' relatively lacklustre performance may be attributable to the doubts voters might have had regarding the likelihood of Shas joining a Kadima-led coalition government. At least this is how party leader, Eli Yishai, perceived it when in *al-Sinnara*, a local newspaper, he emphasized that he did not rule out the possibility.[33]

At least one issue might have harmed all the Zionist parties—MK Avigdor Lieberman's plan to move the security fence around Arab–Israeli areas adjacent to Judea and Samaria, thus 'moving' them to the West Bank.[34] Sharon had raised that possibility two years before only to abandon it when confronted with the fact that stripping Arab citizens of their citizenship against their will contravened international law. Lieberman, a resident of a settlement in Judea, has accepted the left's perception of a demographic threat to the Jewish state.

Despite Lieberman's provocative plan, the 2006 election campaign in the Arab sector compared to others beforehand could well be described as lifeless, if not boring. For the first time since 1981, for example, the High Court of Justice did not have to rule on disqualifying an Arab party after a petition presented by Likud and the National Union–National Religious Party (NU–NRP) failed to disqualify the UAL because of Sheikh Ibrahim Sarsur's statement referred to above. The Central Elections Committee rejected the petition by an 18–16 vote after Sarsur claimed before the

committee that he was an 'Islamist who believes that the whole Muslim world should unify in order to achieve its goals', but that he favoured a two-state solution and that he had no intention of forcibly establishing Islamic rule.[35]

All the legislation that attempted to restrain anti-government activities had long since passed and the only major bill on the agenda—the revision of the citizenship and entry law limiting the acquisition of citizenship through marriage, which aimed at combating marriages of convenience between Israel's Arab citizens and Palestinians in Judea and Samaria and Gaza—affected too few people to become a major issue for the Arab sector.[36] While Arab members of the Knesset voicing criticism against the state regarding both the internal situation and the way Israel conducted its foreign affairs had become so commonplace that they hardly invited comment.

Not that the Arab members of the Knesset were bereft of something worthy to say. In the aftermath of the victory of Hamas, a truly revolutionary and not entirely expected development, they joined forces to urge the Israeli government to negotiate with Hamas on the grounds that just as the right-wing Likud was more effective in bringing peace than the more moderate left, so Hamas could play the same role.[37] The new Hamas government's refusal to recognize Israel or the Oslo framework which facilitated its rise to power rendered this claim less credible. In short, the drama in the 2006 election campaign took place, if at all, in the Jewish sector.

CONCLUSIONS

Israel's Arab citizens were hardly in the limelight either during the course, or immediate aftermath, of the March 2006 election. During the campaign itself, their importance declined as the salience of the Palestinian issue rose with the Hamas victory in the Palestinian Authority; the tightening of the fundamentalist rocket siege around Israel; and as the clouds of war increased. Domestically, politics in the Arab sector were overshadowed by dramatic developments in the high politics of the state that took place almost exclusively within the Jewish electorate; the issue of unilateral withdrawal (which the Arab parties opposed), the disintegration of the Likud, the creation of Kadima at its expense, Sharon's stroke and his disappearance from the political scene.

No sooner has the government set itself up, than the Arab sector is marginalized further by external events. In times of geo-strategic crisis, the problematic relationship between the Jewish state and the Jewish majority and its Arab minority, never too salient, takes a backseat. In the face of a growing Iranian nuclear threat, calls by its leader to destroy the Jewish state, and acts of daily violence committed against Israeli citizens from the north and the south, the Jewish majority inevitably rallies under the flag. Under such circumstances, the majority's sole concern is to test the bonds

of loyalty of the Arab minority to what it perceives to be the crucial interests of the state.

Israel's Jewish citizens were bound to be disappointed. Arab members of the Knesset called for the government to enter into negotiations with the two organizations, Hizballah and Hamas, which kidnapped three Israeli soldiers, in return for the freeing of Hizballah and Palestinian fighters, a stance most political voices in the Jewish parties vehemently rejected. The internet sites of the Arab parties bore even worse news from their perspective; they continuously denounced 'Israel's aggression in Lebanon' in a manner little different from the local Arab press or the regional press for that matter. The chasm seemed to become unbridgeable even as Hizballah's primitive katyushas, lacking precision-guided mechanisms, rained unintentionally on Arab towns and villages during Israel's campaign against Hizballah, killing 18 Arab citizens.[38]

Nor could Jewish Israelis console themselves by claiming that these Arab parties, or their leaders, who express these opinions do not represent their constituency. Israel's Arab citizens can fairly claim to be up against discrimination and express a lack of identification with the Jewish symbols of the state. But one right they certainly have is electoral choice. All the array of possibilities from boycott or abstention, to voting for Arab parties with different ideological profiles, to voting for the array of Jewish parties, are clearly open to them. The choice they make is a choice that reflects their affinities, tastes and interests.

Yet, however radical (at least from the perspective of the Jewish majority) their choice, the reality of sheer co-existence between a million-strong Arab minority and the Jewish majority is simply too salient to disregard. Nor should the more mundane signs of continuity evincing considerable cooperation and acceptance of the status quo be ignored in the same way they are effaced from the media networks during times of drama. Most Arabs continued to vote in the general elections and most Arab politicians continue to work within the system. Perhaps most important of all, the winners of Israel's national cup competition in football, whose home base is Sahnin, a large town known for its participation in the Land Day protests in 1976 and in the riots at the beginning of the hostilities in October 2000, played in a European football competition under the blue and white Israeli flag with the Star of David at its centre. The mundane, in this case at least, is often the true drama of politics.

NOTES

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13. *Adcan*, No. 2, 1 March 2006, p. 3.
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25. Rekhess, 'The 17th Knesset Elections in the Arab Sector'.
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27. *Adcan*, No. 4, 11 April 2006, p. 15.
28. Ibid., p. 15.
29. 16 February 2006.
30. *Adcan*, No. 2, 1 March 2006, p. 17.
31. *Adcan*, No. 1, 1 February 2006, p. 17.
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