

THE ARAB VOTE

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There are four major issues which characterize the present election campaign in the Arab sector:

1. The inability of the Arab parties to unite, thus weakening and marginalizing the political weight of the Arab electorate;
2. The significant erosion in the image and status of Arab MKs, in the eyes of the Arab public (the most recent Bishara/Tibi affair notwithstanding).
3. The low prestige and profile of the Zionist parties in the Arab sector.
4. The increasing legitimization of the call to boycott the elections and the search for other separatist alternatives.

I will focus today on the latter point, but would like to begin by first analyzing developments in the Arab sector in the last few years. In the period since the elections to the 15th Knesset elections in 1999, Jewish-Arab relationship in Israel have deteriorated to an unprecedented low. The tension and friction culminated and exploded in October 2000, when thousands of Arab demonstrators took to the streets in an unexpected wave of violence and fierce clashes with the police, resulting in the killing of 13 Israeli Arab citizens, and the injury of dozens of policemen.

The October riots were the results of three major factors:

1. On the one hand the eruption of the Palestinian Intifada, which intensified a developing process of national awakening, and solidarity with the Palestinian cause.
2. It also reflected the strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism within the Arab community in Israel.

3. Concurrently, the explosive response of the Arabs was an expression of protest against the cumulative widening socio-economic gaps, coupled with pent-up anger at the consistent government neglect of the Arab sector's needs.

Since October 2000, the situation has not improved; on the contrary, it has further deteriorated. Jews and Arabs have become increasingly polarized and alienated to each other. The Jewish "street" reacted with signs of fear, shock and anxiety. Mistrust of Arabs reached new heights. According to polls, 65% of the Jews considered the Arabs as a security threat. Only 30% believe Arabs are loyal to the State (3.1.02, *Ma'ariv*).

The airing of anti-Arab sentiment mounted. Moreover, the Jewish public avoided contacts with Arab communities, which exacerbated their economic crisis. Hostility further deepened due to the steep rise in Arab involvement in terrorist activity. In the first 10 months of 2002, 31 cases of such involvement by Israeli Arabs were uncovered by the security forces, 31 cases in which 68 Arab citizens were engaged. To compare: In 2001 - there were 25 cases; in 1999 - 2.

On the Arab side, a growing sense of exclusion and de-legitimization by the Jewish majority proliferated. A series of recent steps adopted by the present government has exacerbated this sense of alienation.

These include, the decision to revoke citizenship of Arabs involved in terror acts; GSS (Shabak) recommendation to outlaw the Islamic Movement and the closure order issued to its organ, and the decision by the Central Election Committee to disqualify MKs 'Azmi Bishara and Ahmad Tibi.

It is against this background that the elections are taking place. One major question which preoccupies the Arab (and Jewish) sector, is will the Arabs make it to the ballots next Tuesday? Traditionally, the Arab turnout rate in past Israeli elections has consistently been high, almost equal to that of the Jewish electorate. In the 1999 elections it stood at 76%. Furthermore, the relatively high percentage of participation was conceived as a sign of integration of the Arab minority into Israeli politics, and as an outspoken endorsement by the Arabs of the legitimacy of Israel's parliamentary system.

In the elections for Prime Minister in February 2001, however, the trend was dramatically reversed. Most of the Arab voters boycotted the election, the turnout dropping to a mere 18%. The boycott was an expression of the exclusion, frustration and bitterness that characterized the atmosphere in the Arab sector, following the October 2000 events. In particular, it was a protest [non] vote against Ehud Barak. 95% of

the Arabs had voted for him in 1999. He, however, neglected the Arab sector in blatant disregard for its needs.

In the approach to the present Knesset elections, the notion of boycott re-emerged. It is undoubtedly fueled by the general atmosphere of alienation and deteriorating Jewish-Arab relations discussed earlier. The call for boycott is advocated by three groups:

1. Radical ultra - nationalist secular movements such as the “Sons of the Village”.
2. The “Northern Faction” of the Islamic Movement, known for its dogmatic and doctrinarian position.
3. Independent intellectuals.

The reasons cited for boycotting the elections can be divided into two categories: pragmatic and ideological. On the **conceptual level**, the ideological rejection of Knesset participation was best articulated by the Islamic Movement.

The staunch Islamists of Umm al-Fahm confront the dual difficulty of reconciling their Shar‘i traditional Islamic outlook to:

1. The Zionist-Jewish nature of Israel.
2. The modern, alien concepts of constitutionalism, parliamentarism and Western democracy.

Their argument is that, the Qur‘an is the source of Divine Law ; it thus constitutes the sole permissible constitution, and cannot be replaced by any secular legislative system, let alone a Jewish one. In the past, the hard-liners have resorted to a Fatwa, relying on one by Shaykh Yussuf Qardawi who, in fierce language, with strong Anti-Semitic overtones declared it absolutely forbidden to participate in the Knesset.

On the **pragmatic practical level**, the argument raised is that voting for the Knesset is a waste of time and energy, since the Arab sector does not really benefit from parliamentary participation.

A finger of blame is pointed at the **Arab Mks**, over their ineffectiveness and the fact that they perpetuate division. In recent years, the Arab public has become increasingly impatient and critical of its Knesset representatives. The rise in number of Arab MKs (13, including Druze, in the present Knesset) has not produced any corresponding improvement in the political or socio-economic status of the Arabs in Israel. Arab MKs have never been invited to participate in government coalitions.

They proved ineffective in using their parliamentary power to obtain leverage over government policies and action. Arab parliamentary representatives have plunged into a state of exclusion and marginality. They failed to deliver. Zuhayr Andra'us has cynically and acidly named them: "The present absentees".

Concurrently, the Arab public is deeply disappointed and disenchanted with the divisiveness of the Arab body politic which continues to be fragmented and factionalized. In each election campaign the ritual repeats itself: division, frustration at the ensuing weakening of the Arab electorate. Call for unity and pressure (including from the outside, i.e. the Palestinian Authority and other Arab governments) to establish one united list; failure to achieve unity; continued division. This year's elections are no exception.

There are 9 incumbent Arab MKs, who lead 8 parties in 4 lists:

- A. United Arab List - (1) Arab Democratic Party (ADP); (2) Islamic Movement; (3) Arab National Party.
- B. (4) DFPE (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, Hadash) and (5) Arab Movement for Change (TIBI)
- C. (6) National Democratic Alliance (Balad)
- D. (7) National Unity Front and (8) The National Progressive Alliance

The Arab voters fail to understand why unity is not accomplished. When one examines the platforms of the competing Arab parties there are but minor political and ideological differences.

Furthermore, many are angry at the price of this division - massive loss of votes, since it is doubtful that, at least one party (see D above) will pass the minimal threshold of votes required to obtain a seat in parliament. So the Arab public is tired and skeptical, doubting the interests which motivate the Arab MK. Also, bear in mind, that these are the same politicians who in 2001 insisted that the Arabs avoid the ballot. Now, however, when it concerns their own seats - they are all for it.

The call to boycott the elections is supplemented by separatist notions. The idea is that if we can achieve nothing from the Knesset, then we should develop our own autonomous institutions, to replace the Knesset. An Arab academic, As'ad Ghanem, argued, for example, that if a significant number of voters boycott the elections, then the possibility of establishing "an Arab-Palestinian political body to be elected in country-

wide elections should be considered” (*Ha'aretz*, 12 February 2001). “Abna al-Balad” similarly called for the institution of an all-Arab parliament (*Kull al-Arab*, 9.2.2001)

Separatist ideas have emerged in the last seven-eight (7-8) years and are not necessarily linked only to the question of Knesset participation. Rather, they reflect a profound political and ideological change which the Arab community in Israel is undergoing.

One conclusion which was drawn from the reassessment after Oslo was that, from the Arab perspective, full equality to the Jews cannot be achieved due to the “Jewishness” of the State, and therefore the nature of the state needs to be changed.

Various modalities have been discussed; a “State of all its citizens”; a bi-national state; autonomy. One trend which has gathered momentum within the autonomous concept was the one advocating the establishment of separate community institutions, particular to the Arab sector. The rationale: we cannot be integrated / or do not want to be integrated into the State’s institutions; so we shall set up our own.

In recent years, these ideas have been significantly elaborated upon both on the conceptual and the pragmatic level. One body, which has been much involved in this process, is the Supreme Follow-Up Committee of Arab community leaders . But the lead, once again, goes to the Islamic Movement which has established an impressive network of religious and communal institutions which provide educational, cultural, social, welfare, medical and recreational services to Arab villages.

To sum up: the election campaign in the Arab sector has not really picked up yet. The prevailing atmosphere is one of apathy and indifference. People are frustrated, disappointed, perhaps even despaired. This mood has an affect on the Zionist parties.

The general assumption is that the Arab vote for Zionist parties will continue to decline in comparison to votes for the Arab parties, as was the case in 1999 when the ratio was 70:30 in favor of the Arab parties, compared to 62:38 in 1996. Labor plunged to the low ebb of 7.7% (from 16.7% 1996). Meretz is the most active Zionist party in the Arab sector; it included a lengthy and elaborate chapter on the Arabs in Israel in its platform. As for Labor, when Mitzna took over, hopes went up for

substantial Arab support, but the projected setback for Labor amongst Jewish voters radiates into the Arab sector as well. Likud may get a serious chunk by the Arab vote, particularly among the Druze, as will Shass, both acting as “patronage parties”.

The major question that remains is the turnout.

While some decline is expected, it is assumed that the 2001 massive boycott will not recur. Assessments vary between 50 to 70 percent. The disqualification of Bishara and Tibi and the Supreme Court’s decision to reverse the banning order has certainly changed the mood in the Arab street. More voters will probably come to the ballots in solidarity with Bishara / Tibi whose national image has been significantly boosted as a result of this unfortunate affair, and in response to their appeal to their electorate not to play into the hands of Jewish right.

However, the boycott option is still viable. The best proof is that the Arab MKs and their parties continue to ceaselessly and passionately urge the voters to come out and vote.

The idea to boycott the elections and set up separate representative institutions is not new and has been voiced in the past. The new element introduced in 2003 is the increasing **legitimization** of these tendencies. It is no longer an “extreme group”, but rather the mainstream which is promoting such ideas, illustrating the deep erosion of Jewish-Arab relations. In this respect, the election results may represent a significant turning point in the evolvement of an issue which will undoubtedly preoccupy Israel ever more in the years to come.