



LIBERAL COLONIALISM? ISRAEL'S 2013 ELECTIONS AND THE "ETHNOCRATIC BUBBLE"

OREN YIFTACHEL

Israel's 2013 Knesset elections, in which the incumbent ruling party was returned to power for the first time in a quarter-century, were noteworthy in several respects. The basic divisions of Israeli politics into geopolitical and socioeconomic blocs were unchanged, only small electoral shifts being registered. On the other hand, as this report shows, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu barely achieved an electoral victory despite his overwhelming preponderance in public-opinion polls. Due to the rise of the new, personality-driven Yesh Atid party and the latter's unlikely alliance with the settler-based Jewish Home, which together garnered as many Knesset seats as the winning Likud-Yisrael Beitenu list, for the first time in decades ultra-Orthodox parties were excluded from the governing coalition. The elections were marked by the near-invisibility of the Palestinian issue and Palestinian citizens of Israel. The report concludes that the continuing governing consensus in favor of "liberal colonialism" is unsustainable, although exploiting the "cracks" in that consensus is difficult and unlikely in the short term.

TWO OBSERVATIONS, concerning seemingly insignificant details, serve to illuminate a striking feature of Israel's January 2013 Knesset elections. The first observation involves some maps that appeared on the front pages of leading Hebrew and Arabic-language newspapers during the elections. The progressive *Ha'Aretz* drew its own map, while the two school maps in the popular *Al-Sinara* were in the background of a photograph showing Prime Minister Netanyahu casting his vote. All three maps depicted the entire territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea as Israel, marked up with Hebrew letters and place names, and with no hint of disputed—much less occupied—territory.

The second observation concerns what might have been an off-handed remark to the media during the early stages of coalition talks by one of the main victors of the 2013 elections. Yair Lapid, whose new party Yesh Atid ("There is a Future") garnered more votes than any party except the ruling

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Likud, chose to signal his intentions through a reference to Knesset member (MK) Haneen Zoabi of the Balad (Tajammu') party,¹ who, as a result of her bold and sometimes provocative statements—and her participation in the famous Turkish aid flotilla to the Gaza Strip—had come to symbolize the stubborn resistance of Israel's Palestinian citizens to state policies (see Press section in this issue). Using her name in the plural as a stand-in for the entire Arab minority, he announced, "We won't attempt to build an opposition bloc against Netanyahu; do you think I can form a bloc with the Haneen Zoabies?"² In other words, "we," the Jewish mainstream, will not countenance cooperation with the Palestinian citizens. The eleven seats won by the non-Zionist (mainly Arab) parties were therefore all but electorally wasted. In the past, Arab MKs were critical to forming anti-nationalist blocs that allowed the center-left to rule or to pass or block controversial legislation. Lapid's rebuttal, however, made them "illegitimate" partners for such a bloc, thereby negating the only genuine power Arab MKs ever held in the Israeli parliament.

The 2013 election period was rife with such details, scarcely noticed by the Jewish majority but illustrative of one of the most noteworthy features of the campaign: the strange disappearance of Palestine and Palestinians as an issue or topic of debate. For generations, the question of Palestine (or "the Arabs") had been central to Israeli politics and identity. Indeed it still is, as will be clear from our discussion of the core geopolitical positions that dominate the political landscape. The difference today is that the "Palestinian question" has been internalized in such a manner as to require scant attention or mention, except in the guise of references to "terrorism" or the "Islamic threat." Thus in the current elections it was shelved and treated as marginal by most parties. Certainly, the ethnic exclusivity of politics is not new, and in fact typifies ethnocratic and settler societies such as Israel. Equally familiar is the "Jewish bubble"—the tendency to be preoccupied with internal Jewish matters and to act unilaterally. But the extent to which the Zionist-Palestinian conflict was (apparently) absent, and the deafening silence in the campaign about the prospects of peace, were unprecedented.

OVERVIEW

The 2013 elections saw the ruling party returned to power for the first time in twenty-five years (see table 1).³ True, the Likud had won on its own in the 2009 elections, whereas in 2013 it won as the lead party on a joint ticket—Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu, formed for the elections with an agreement to collaborate for the entire Knesset term. Still, it remained the ruling party, despite having lost about a quarter of its seats, from 27 to 20, compared to the previous elections.

Israel's political landscape at the time of the elections, at least on the surface, looked quite different from what it had been three years earlier.

Table 1. Knesset election results, 1981–2013

	<u>WINNING PARTY</u>	<u>PRIME MINISTER</u>
1981	Likud	Menachem Begin
1984	Labor-Likud (draw)	Shimon Peres/Yitzhak Shamir (unity government)
1988	Likud	Yitzhak Shamir
1992	Labor	Yitzhak Rabin
1996	Likud	Binyamin Netanyahu
1999	Labor	Ehud Barak
2003	Likud	Ariel Sharon
2006	Kadima	Ehud Olmert
2009	Likud	Binyamin Netanyahu
2013	Likud/Yisrael Beitunu	Binyamin Netanyahu

The Kadima party, which had been neck and neck with Likud in the 2009 elections, virtually disappeared, its leader having bolted along with other party members to form—less than two months before the elections—a new party, Hatnua (“The Movement”).⁴ Most significantly, a reincarnation of Shinui, which had been absent in the 2006 and 2009 elections,⁵ made a dramatic comeback as Yesh Atid under the dynamic leadership of Yair Lapid,⁶ winning just one less seat than Likud.

Despite these changes on the surface, the 2013 elections largely maintained the political status quo, especially with regard to the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. This larger picture becomes more easily apparent if we look at the election results in terms of how the various parties stand on this most basic issue for Israel’s future. Reporting in these pages on the 2009 elections,⁷ I introduced as an analytical frame three main blocs that broadly summarize the country’s core “geopolitical” positions, mainly as they relate to the occupation and colonization of the Palestinian territories and Arab-Jewish relations. Naturally, boundaries between the blocs are not clear-cut, with a degree of overlap due to natural fuzziness and change over time, but by and large the three blocs can be described as follows:

- The **colonialist bloc** is made up of parties that actively promote the Judaization of the occupied Palestinian territories and of the contested spheres inside Israel, and that oppose the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. These parties include Likud, Yisrael Beitenu (Likud’s partner on the joint ticket), the ultra-Orthodox (“Haredi”) parties (the Mizrahi Shas and the Ashkenazi United Torah Judaism), and the “Jewish Home,” which represents a modern Orthodox constituency as well as most settlers.
- The **ethnocratic bloc** is composed of centrist nationalist-liberal parties that favor a return to genuine negotiations, the dismantlement of at least the outlying settlements, and a two-state solution. This bloc also promotes the Jewish character of Israel while endorsing individual equality for Arab citizens. Following the recent elections, its constituent parties are Yesh Atid, Labor, Kadima, and the new Hatnua party.

- The **democratic bloc** supports the establishment of a viable Palestinian state on all the occupied Palestinian territories and promotes a liberal, nonethnic, multicultural, or binational democracy with collective rights for the Arab minority. It comprises Meretz, Hadash, the United Arab List, and the National Democratic Alliance (Balad/Tajammu').

Table 2 shows how the three blocs fared in the 2013 elections compared to those of 2009. The colonialist bloc, the traditional backbone of Likud rule, shrank in 2013, but only by four seats compared to 2009. Together, the colonialist parties this time won the narrowest possible majority, or 61 of the 120 Knesset seats. It was this paper-thin, one-seat lead that allowed Netanyahu to prevent any other candidate from forming a parliamentary majority, and was thus a crucial factor in making him the next prime minister.

As for the ethnocratic bloc, it remained relatively stable, gaining one seat compared to 2009. The balance of power among its constituent parties, however, was greatly altered by the sudden rise of Lapid's Yesh Atid and the

Table 2. Blocs and parties in Israeli elections, 2009-13
(in Knesset seats)

<u>BLOC</u>	<u>PARTY</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2013</u>
COLONIALIST	Ichud Leumi (National Union)	4	merged with Jewish Home
	HaBayit HaYehudi (Jewish Home)	3	12
	Shas	11	11
	United Torah Judaism	5	7
	Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home)	15	11
	Likud	27	20
	subtotal	65	61
ETHNOCRATIC	Kadima (Forward)	28	2
	Labor	13	15
	Hatnua (The Movement)	} did not exist	6
	Yesh Atid (There is a Future)		19
	subtotal	41	42
DEMOCRATIC	Meretz	3	6
	Hadash	4	4
	United Arab List (Ra'am-Ta'al)	4	4
	National Democratic Assembly (Balad/Tajammu')	4	3
	subtotal	14	17
TOTAL		120	120

dramatic diminishing of Kadima due to several factors, including the defection of many of its members to form Hatnua. Labor also made a slight gain compared to the previous elections, winning an additional two seats.

Finally, the small democratic camp gained three seats, giving it more than it has had at any time since 1999. However, the gains were not sufficient to have a genuine impact, especially in light of the factors discussed in the introduction.

The election results are also noteworthy for other reasons. The 2013 elections marked the first time in over a decade that voter turnout grew, from 65.2 to 67.8 percent. A record number of new MKs—48—entered the Israeli legislature. The new Knesset will also boast the highest number ever of religious MKs, with Jewish religious parties winning 29 seats and 40 MKs in total identifying themselves as religious. Women's representation reached an all-time high of 26. Another noteworthy result is the ongoing dominance of Ashkenazi Jews, who will fill about 60 percent of the Knesset seats despite constituting only about a third of the Israeli population. More importantly, they continue to form the leadership of all major parties except for the Mizrahi Shas. Accordingly, party leaders Netanyahu (Likud), Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beitunu), Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid), Shelly Yachimovich (Labor), Naftali Bennett (Jewish Home), Yakov Litzman (United Torah Judaism), Tzipi Livni (Hatnua), and Zahava Gal-On (Meretz) are all Ashkenazim. The parties headed by Ashkenazis hold a staggering 96 of the 120 seats and make up three-quarters of the new government's ministers, demonstrating the extent to which Zionism's founders and their descendants are still at the country's helm.

Following the elections, Netanyahu attempted to reconstitute his previous coalition of nationalist, colonialist, and ultra-Orthodox parties, with some additions from centrist lists. However, he ran up against a new political alliance between the two surprise "victors" of the 2013 vote, Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid and Naftali Bennett of a rejuvenated Jewish Home, representing Israel's Orthodox-national sector (as distinct from the ultra-Orthodox Haredi sector). Together, their two parties held 31 seats, exactly the same number as the Likud-Yisrael Beitunu ticket. Lapid and Bennett, despite their differing stances on the Palestinian issue, both project the image of modern, updated, Western-oriented liberals ("liberal" within the Israeli context). During the coalition negotiations, they vowed to enter the government either together or not at all. Having campaigned against the financial privileges of the ultra-Orthodox and their exemption from military service, they also demanded the exclusion of the Haredi parties from the cabinet. This move left Netanyahu with little choice but to comply with their demands, and the ruling coalition was thus devoid of Haredi representation for the first time in several decades. The coalition, finalized in mid-March, comprises five parties—Likud, Yisrael Beitunu (these two united in a joint parliamentary group), Jewish Home, Yesh Atid, and Hatnua—which together hold 68 Knesset seats. Of these, 43 seats represent "colonialist" parties.

SETTINGS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

In the previous elections in 2009, Likud under Netanyahu had outbid the centrist Kadima party under Tzipi Livni in forming the government (despite Kadima winning one more seat than Likud). Those elections saw the farthest swing to the right in Israel's history, with 65 of 120 MKs supporting a colonialist agenda.⁸ Since then, several important transformations occurred that had bearing on the results of the current elections.

The first, short-lived and hollow, was manifested in Netanyahu's 14 June 2009 "Bar-Ilan speech," in which he announced support for the two-state solution (albeit with heavy qualifying conditions). Netanyahu's speech, which sent shock waves through the Jewish colonialist right, reflected the pressures exerted by the newly elected U.S. president, Barack Obama—pressures that also led to Netanyahu's freezing, in November of that year, new construction in Jewish settlements for ten months in what appeared to be a change of policy. Clearly, this was a phantom transformation, and on the rare occasions during the campaign that Netanyahu and his partner Avigdor Lieberman repeated their "commitment" to the Bar-Ilan speech, it was almost as a footnote. Once the ten-month moratorium on settlement building expired, the main change on the ground, instead of Obama's desired movement toward a Palestinian state, was accelerated settlement activity: some 100,000 new settlers (through natural increase and immigration) were added during the 2009 government's term. Jewish colonization in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) continued at a breakneck pace, bringing the Jewish population east of the Green Line to over half a million by the end of 2012. Settlers have near-total domination over Area C, some 60 percent of the West Bank. Furthermore, despite occasional statements about the "need for peace," the coalition agreement, signed in March 2013 between Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu as the basis of the new government, does not even mention a strategy toward the Palestinians or peace, beyond an effort "to combat terrorism." No change in the intransigent colonial policy is therefore in sight.

Two other, more genuine, transformations had an impact on the elections. The first and most important was the "Arab Spring" and the rise of political Islam in its train. This process is still underway, but the main contours are already quite clear: popular (and populist) Islamic governments are replacing previous despots, some of whom had been part of Israel's "security belt" in the Middle East. The prominence of aggressive policies toward Israel from Iran and Turkey (despite major differences between them) added to widespread Israeli concerns about a new Islamic Middle East. Such worries were amplified during the last few years by repeated Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks on Jewish civilians, and by Hamas Politburo chief Khalid Mishal's visit to Gaza and inflammatory speeches following Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense attack on the Strip in December 2012. Netanyahu and the Jewish right made effective use of

the politics of fear to rally support for their own brand of hard-line politics. This dialectic appears to be well entrenched.

The second transformation concerned Israel itself, which, like the Arab world, was undergoing social ferment. For seven weeks during the summer and fall of 2011, tent cities occupying the centers of Israel's main urban areas were the scene of unprecedented social protest. The first and most prominent of the tent cities sprang up on Tel Aviv's fashionable Rothschild Boulevard. The protests culminated in mass rallies organized around the battle cry "the people demand social justice," echoing both the mass protests in the Arab world and the tent movements for social justice in southern Europe. Netanyahu's government made some small, mainly cosmetic, gestures to the protesters, but had no real answers to their systemic concerns: housing, social inequalities, health, and the twin processes of privatization and rapidly rising living costs.

Finally, and partly related, was a shift to the right within the Israeli colonialist camp. The lack of an Israeli constitution and/or effective opposition spawned outbidding among some rightist MKs for sponsoring nationalist and antidemocratic legislation. The outgoing Knesset will be (infamously) remembered for passing a spate of such laws, including the "Nakba" and "boycott" laws, restrictions on human-rights organizations, a "selection committee" law protecting the Jewish nature of suburban and rural localities; and a series of bills tightening control over Palestinians.⁹ Ariel College in the heart of the West Bank was upgraded without justification to university status to send a message of "normalizing" the occupation. Likud, once a mix of nationalists and liberals, became dominated by hard-line colonialists and annexationists.

Against this background, and in the absence of a viable alternative leader, Netanyahu considered his options. He knew that Israel's impressive economic growth was slowing dangerously, and that a huge budget deficit would soon threaten the social benefits of many Likud voters. Given the changing and uncertain situation in the Arab world and the fears about the Iranian threat, he was confident that most Israelis would fall back on his experience. There was also a window of opportunity provided by the temporary respite in Israeli-Hamas violence. Thus, on 9 October 2012, with opinion polls giving him an almost unassailable lead and his main rival, the centrist Kadima, in total disarray, Netanyahu called for snap early elections, set for January 2013. His gamble succeeded, but only just.

THE CAMPAIGN

The 2012–13 campaign was one of the shortest and least turbulent in Israel's history. Netanyahu's first move—made just weeks after he called the elections—was to amalgamate into a single list the two main pillars of the government in place: his own Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu, the secular, predominantly "Russian" right-wing party led by hard-liner Lieberman, his

former foreign minister. Between them they had 42 MKs, more than twice the number that Labor, then running second in most polls, was expected to win in the coming elections. The center-left parties—Labor, Yesh Atid, and Hatnua—attempted to create a counter bloc, but failed because of internal rivalries and suspicions. This being the case, most experts and politicians predicted from the outset that Netanyahu would be the next prime minister. On election day, however, the voters almost wiped out his expected majority.

Given their strong lead in the polls, Netanyahu and Lieberman played it safe. They avoided controversial statements and worked hard to mute the many radical, racist, and colonialist voices in their midst. As noted above, the two-state solution to which the two men had formally committed themselves was barely mentioned. Such was their desire to keep a low profile that their new joint list did not even publish a manifesto or platform. Asked about this, Yisrael Katz, a senior Likud minister, replied, “We don’t need a program. Everybody knows Netanyahu and what he does best, and our nation needs it, and will vote for him to continue.”¹⁰ The main Likud message therefore became personal: “A strong nation—a strong leader.” The entire emphasis was on marketing Netanyahu, his putative strength, international fame, past experience, and uncompromising nationalism. The focus on Netanyahu was all the more pronounced in that Lieberman, his electoral partner as leader of Yisrael Beitenu, was totally hidden in the campaign owing to his jarring hard line and a range of unresolved legal woes. Thus, the banners hung on city walls on the eve of the elections proclaimed that “Only Netanyahu will guard Jerusalem,” epitomizing the Likud message (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Likud/Yisrael Beitenu banners in Jerusalem: “Only Netanyahu will guard Jerusalem.” (Photo by Oren Yiftachel)

The focus on the party heads and the prevalence of promises too general to be held to account characterized most of the 2013 campaigns. Yesh Atid assembled a slate of relative unknowns, none of whom had parliamentary experience, and zeroed in on Lapid's celebrity as a popular television star, as well as his vague promises of a new deal for Israel's middle classes. He also campaigned for "equalizing the burden"—a reference to making military service universal and an attack on the longstanding draft exemption for the ultra-Orthodox, much resented by secular Israeli Jews. Lapid was adept at channeling the frustration of the 2011 protests originating from Tel Aviv's middle classes, who found in him a fresh new leader, with slogans vague enough for many to follow.

Labor, too, focused its campaign on its relatively new leader, Shelly Yachimovich, who, like Lapid, hailed from Israel's popular media. In a major tactical decision, Yachimovich moved her party rightwards in geopolitical terms, trying to reposition Labor at the center of Israeli territorial politics. To this end, she issued repeated statements emphasizing her empathy with the settlers and refusing to commit herself to a genuine pursuit of peace. Instead, she focused strongly on a social-democratic socio-economic agenda, attempting (with only limited success) to capture the sentiment of the 2011 protests.

The same campaign profile applied to the Jewish Home (HaBayit HaYehudi), a religious-national party¹¹ traditionally at the core of the colonialist camp. The party's dynamic new Western-style leader, Naftali Bennett, gave Jewish Home new life and was the center of the campaign. A successful high-tech entrepreneur, Bennett had earlier served as the director of Netanyahu's office and had been head of the Yesha (settlers) Council.¹² He led his party in a double move. First, he hardened its program, openly calling for the annexation of Area C (that is, 60 percent of the West Bank)—a fitting move for a party studded with key figures from the intransigent circles of West Bank settlers. Second, he "softly" packaged this hard-line colonialist party, among other things by emphasizing the meaning of Jewishness, home, family, and the great contributions made by national-religious Jews (as distinct from Haredim) to the Israeli army.

The foregrounding of party heads was less marked in the campaigns of the two main Haredi parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism (though Shas strongly emphasized the glory of its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, while the return of its convicted party leader, Aryeh Deri, after thirteen years of absence added spice and enthusiasm to the campaign). The issue of universal military service has long been a bone of contention between the Israeli mainstream and the ultra-Orthodox parties; Shas' emphasis on maintaining the status quo with regard to government-Haredi relations reflected the ultra-Orthodox's determination to retain the military exemptions under attack. Shas and United Torah Judaism both ran campaigns focusing almost exclusively on identity politics. Both emphasized the dangers to the state's Jewishness and accused other communities (especially

“Russians”¹³) of “assimilation” because of their support for relaxing the religious requirements for conversion to Judaism, thus inflaming intercommunal relations. As in previous elections, Haredi parties also campaigned strongly against “foreigners” (mainly African refugees and workers) and against the secular “Russians” who represent, in their eyes, a threat to Israel’s Jewish identity.

The smaller parties ran more focused campaigns. The veteran leftist Meretz and Tzipi Livni’s new Hatnua emphasized the need for peace negotiations and for ending the occupation, while Arab-dominated parties (Hadash, Balad/Tajammu’, and the United Arab List) stressed the rights of the Palestinian minority and the need for restructuring Arab-Jewish relations.

TRENDS

Without doubt, the “geopolitical” realm—issues pertaining to Jewish colonization and control, the Jewish nature of Israel proper, the fate of the territories and their Palestinian inhabitants, etc.—has been the main battleground of Israeli politics. It far outstrips, for example, the socioeconomic considerations that also feed into government policy and voter considerations. In charting how these core geopolitical issues have fared over time with the Israeli electorate, it is useful to return to the framework of geopolitical blocs—colonialist, ethnocratic, and democratic—introduced at the beginning of this article. For the figures below, however, the emphasis is on the blocs per se, without their constituent parties, so as to better highlight the trends.

Figure 2 shows the evolution of the blocs (in terms of number of Knesset seats) over the past two elections.

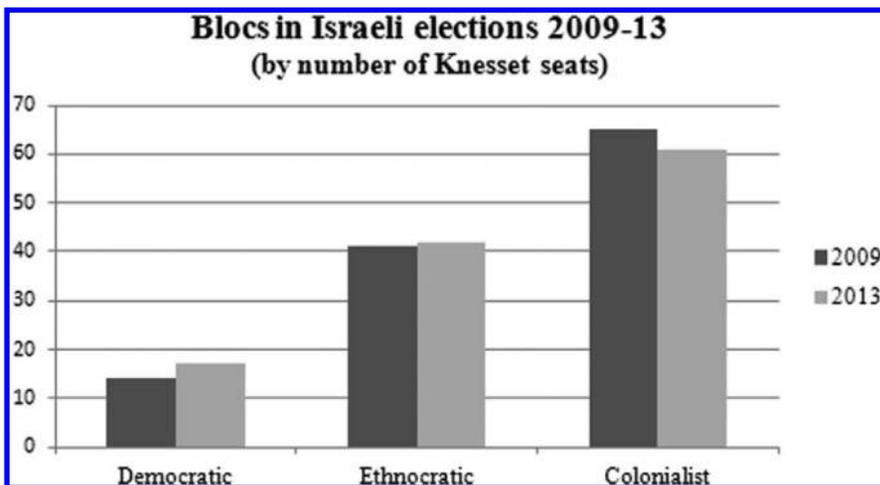


Figure 2.

Table 3. Geopolitical blocs in Israeli elections, 2003-13
(in Knesset seats)

<u>BLOC</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2013</u>
COLONIALIST	69	50	65	61
(ultra-Orthodox)	22	27	16	18
ETHNOCRATIC	37	55	41	42
DEMOCRATIC	14	15	14	17
TOTAL	120	120	120	120

Table 3 gives a more detailed picture of the evolving trend of the main geopolitical positions in the country over the last four elections, using amalgamated figures for each bloc. It also includes as a subcategory of the colonialist bloc the ultra-Orthodox component. These parties, like others of that bloc, promote Judaization across Israel and the occupied territories, but with greater emphasis on religious, rather than merely territorial, Judaization. It should be noted that the composition of the blocs has changed over the decade covered, with some parties dropping out and others being formed. With regard to first, for example, Mafdal (the National Religious Party) and Ichud Leumi (National Union), both part of the colonialist bloc, ceased to exist independently but merged into Jewish Home before the 2009 and 2013 elections, respectively. As for new parties coming into being, Kadima was created prior to the 2006 elections, largely out of Likud, whereas Hatnua, as already mentioned, was created prior to the 2013 elections, mainly from disaffected members of Kadima.

If one considers the ethnocratic and democratic camps as constituting one broad “noncolonial” bloc as distinguished from the colonialist bloc, one notes a relatively even distribution of votes between these two main blocs over the years. Two of the four elections, however, show clear victories in one or the other opposing camps: the noncolonialist camp in 2006 and the colonialist camp in 2009. The 2013 election returned the Israeli polity to a virtual draw, though it bears mention that the shift to the right of the Israeli electorate in general and parties like Labor in particular somewhat blur the distinction between these broad camps. This caveat notwithstanding, the election results brought almost identical support for each bloc. Significantly, even if the results had been a draw, the noncolonialist bloc could not have formed a government due to the deep chasm between some Jewish and Arab parties. On the other hand, under such circumstances the noncolonialists might have forced the government to slow down or even halt the colonial push.

As noted above, socioeconomic considerations are not the deciding issue in Israeli politics, but they are important. This being the case, it is interesting to divide Israel’s main parties by socioeconomic orientation into blocs, as an added layer of complexity and nuance. Though the socioeconomic groupings significantly overlap with the geopolitical blocs, they do not coincide. Again, the divisions are fuzzy, with significant gradations: for example, both

the Labor Party and Hadash, the successor to the Communist Party, are in the “progressive” category. The socioeconomic groupings are as follows:

- The **neoliberal capitalist** trend promotes the ongoing neoliberalization of the Israeli economy with further cuts in social allowances and public-sector spending, privatization, and objection to greater government intervention. This bloc includes Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, Kadima, Yesh Atid, and Hatnua.
- The **Jewish welfarist** group supports bigger government in service provision and market regulation, but limiting (most) social provisions to Jewish sectors. This group comprises United Torah Judaism, Shas, and Jewish Home.
- The **progressive** trend supports a significantly greater government role in service provision and market regulation, and a genuine move to social justice and redistribution of wealth among all Israeli groups. The progressive parties on socioeconomic issues are Labor, Meretz, the United Arab List, Hadash, and Balad/Tajammu’.

Tallying up the seats won by the various parties in terms of their positions on socioeconomic issues, the results show that here too there was a swing away from the total dominance of the neoliberal agenda in the previous Knesset (elected in 2009), where 70 seats were held by parties subscribing to that agenda. In the new Knesset elected in 2013, only 58 were won by such parties. The swing can be attributed to the social protests that engulfed Israel during 2011 and to the worsening social inequalities and general hardships of growing parts of the population. The small gains by welfare, social-democratic, and socialist parties mean that Israel’s race toward privatization and regressive distribution of wealth could be halted, although it is not likely to be reversed, given the position of most welfarist parties outside the ruling coalition.

On the other hand, the ruling coalition put together in March is more “unified” with regard to socioeconomic orientation than it is with regard to the larger geostrategic issues: four of the five parties comprising the coalition are neoliberal, that is, promoting the “free market” as a solution to Israel’s growing social problems and lack of affordability of housing and social services. The neoliberal bloc now holds 56 of the coalition’s 68 Knesset seats, as contrasted to the colonialists’ 43 out of 68. Moreover, the fifth party of the new coalition, Jewish Home, though classed with the Jewish welfarists, is closer to neoliberal thinking than are any parties in the progressive bloc.

At a macro level, the Israeli electorate could be said to have reverted to the even split on the Palestinian issue that characterized it in the 1980s and 1990s, where neither side can force its long-term agenda. In this sense, the regime is trapped in a colonial system viewed by most Israelis as democratic, and no internal force able to break this deadlock. The entrapment is framed by the strength of the colonial and capitalist-liberal project, neither of which can prevail or be reversed. The fact that crucial support for the

Likud bloc derives from West Bank settlers, and the inability of Israel's non-colonialist (left and center) blocs to end the colonization project, means the continuation of a "creeping apartheid" process, already in train for the last two decades. Given the prominence of both religious-colonial and secular-liberal forces, the Israeli political system overall can be seen as promoting "liberal colonialism"—an unsustainable project, replete with contradictions that are likely to shape Israel/Palestine in the foreseeable future.

DISSECTING THE VOTE

Let us examine the results in more depth, focusing on the Jewish social periphery, the settlers, the rural communities, and the Arab minority.

The Jewish Social Periphery

The Jewish periphery is most typically represented by the "development towns," a group of some twenty-five towns and cities accommodating more than half a million residents. They were built during the 1950s to house waves of mainly Mizrahi immigrants and refugees who were used by the Israeli state as reluctant pioneers to populate the peripheries. This policy created long-term patterns of marginalization, particularly for Mizrahim who remained in the towns, as distinct from Mizrahim who emigrated from the towns and assimilated into Israel's middle classes. The towns were vastly expanded during the 1990s with the absorption of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (known as "Russians"). The towns reached a population of half a million in 2009, comprising Jewish immigrants from the lower and lower-middle classes, mainly of "Russian" and Mizrahi origins.

Figure 3 displays the vote in the towns in comparison with the rest of the country. It clearly shows massive support for the colonialist bloc,

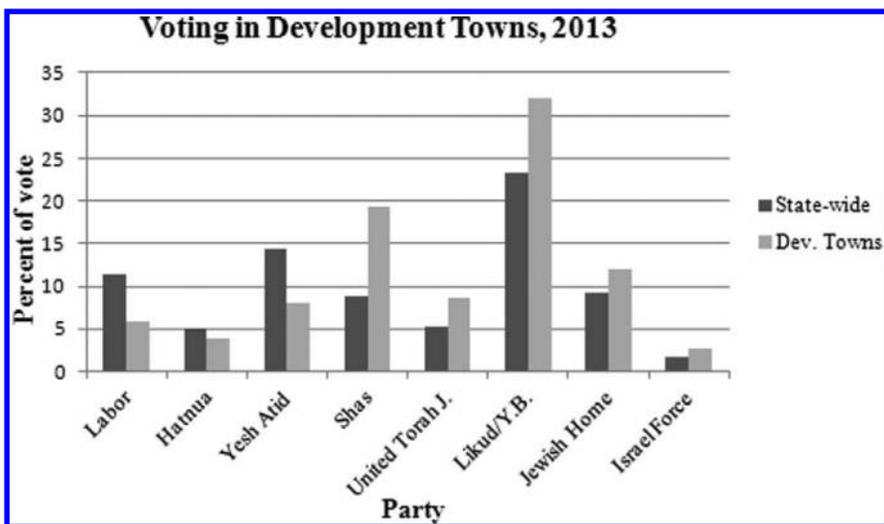


Figure 3.

amounting to 75 percent.¹⁴ How can this be explained? First and foremost, by the powerful politics of identity. Like most ethnocratic states, Israel developed a high degree of overlap between political ideologies, class, and ethnic identities. Since the 1970s, Likud has been the main political home of Mizrahi Jews who were commonly rejected by Ashkenazi Jewish circles. Because the Likud leadership is currently almost all Ashkenazi, and due to the combined ticket with the predominantly “Russian” Yisrael Beitenu, support for Likud weakened among peripheral Mizrahim, dropping some eight percent since 2009.¹⁵ These votes appeared to have moved to Shas and the Jewish Home. Nevertheless, the joint Likud-Yisrael Beitenu ticket maintained its dominance in the Jewish periphery. Support for the Haredi parties (Shas and United Torah Judaism) rose substantially, representing also the increased immigration of Haredim to the towns because of their more affordable housing. All liberal and social parties (dominated by Ashkenazi business and middle classes) fared poorly in the towns.

The Settlers

The most influential sector in Israeli society, at least in geopolitical terms, has been the Judea and Samaria (West Bank) settlement movement. Buoyed by four years of a colonialist, settlement-oriented government, the sector appears stronger than ever. Following this election, settler representation in the new Knesset reached a record high of fifteen MKs, 50 percent higher than in 2009. This is four times their proportion in Israeli society, six times that of the population in Israel/Palestine, and more than ten times their proportion in the West Bank. Settler support, predictably, is strongly oriented to the nationalist right: 89 percent supported the colonialist bloc, of which more than a third supported the annexationist Jewish Home or the transferist “Israel Force” (see figure 4). A notable rise was

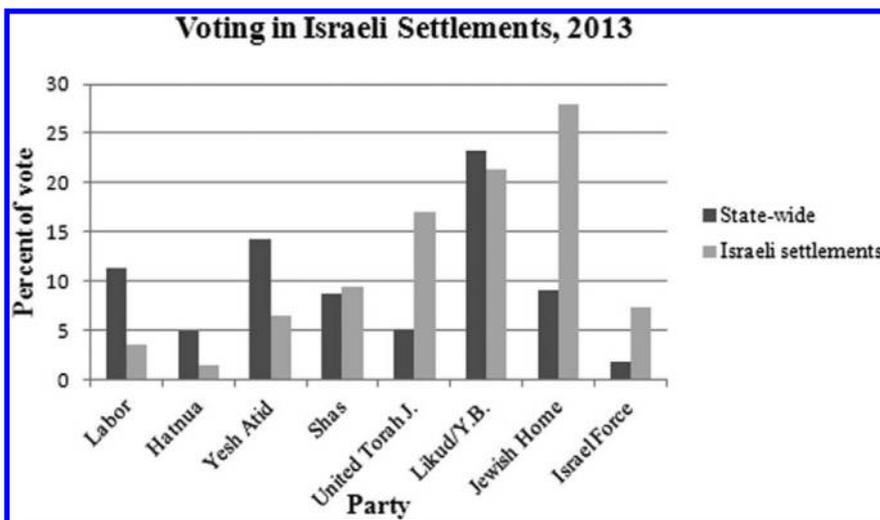


Figure 4.

also registered in the vote for Haredi parties, now reaching over a quarter of the settler vote, and reflecting the rapid migration of this group to Haredi settlements beyond the Green Line. Only 11 percent of settlers, almost all in West Bank Jewish secular urban centers, gave their vote to centrist parties, which have promised to include “settlement blocs” in any future Israeli territorial swap.

The Kibbutzim

The backbone of the Jewish rural sector for generations has been the *kibbutzim* (collective villages), whose founders led Zionism’s pre-state settlement project. Together with the semicollective *moshavim*, they mobilized most of the post-1948 internal colonization, mainly in the Galilee and Negev, under Labor governments. During the 1950s and 1960s, kibbutzniks constituted an undisputed cultural, military, and, to some extent, political elite, strongly associated with the Labor movement (both the Labor Party and its predecessors and the Histadrut labor federation). The rise of Likud, the shift of the colonial project to the occupied Palestinian territories, and most recently the neoliberalization of the economy have stripped this sector of many of its political and cultural assets. Given their socialist background and long-term association with the Labor camp, the kibbutzim have been attached to the Zionist left. Their political decline reached a new low in the 2013 elections: for the first time in Israel’s history they will not have a representative in the Knesset.

Their vote, however, is still significant, as they represent the fast-growing rural and distant suburban sector of the mainly Ashkenazi and Westernizing middle classes. The kibbutzim also continue to possess most of the country’s rich agricultural lands. As shown in figure 5, the picture is clear: around 55 percent support liberal, pro-peace parties, and a further

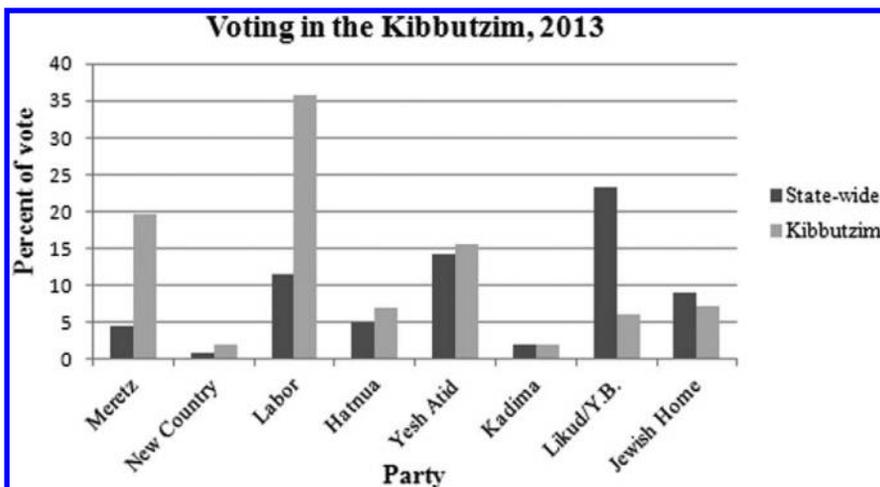


Figure 5.

24 percent the centrist ethnocratic bloc. This has remained stable since the 2009 elections, showing again the power of identity politics, this time among one of the core groups among Israel's Ashkenazim.

The Arab Vote

While constantly on the sidelines of Israeli politics, the Palestinian minority constitutes 16 percent of the electorate, and is therefore a potential tie-breaker in the struggle between colonialist and noncolonialist blocs. Their vote in this election came very close to establishing an opposition bloc that would have prevented the return of a colonialist government. That government launched ceaseless attacks on the value of Arab citizenship, initiated a wave of antidemocratic and anti-minority legislation, and sprinkled the public discourse with racist terms. This treatment appears to have caused an increase in Arab voter turnout to 55 percent, a rise of 2 percentage points over 2009 and after nearly two decades of decline (see figure 6). During the week preceding the elections, the leaders of all Arab parties urged the public to vote "to protect our citizenship rights" and to "stop Netanyahu and Lieberman." This campaign was needed because several groups, notably the Northern Islamic Movement led by Shaykh Ra'id Salah and several small radical secularist groups, relaunched a campaign to boycott the elections on the grounds that they provide Arab legitimacy to the Zionist regime.

Once the campaign got under way, a major effort was made by Arab civil society, leading intellectuals, and some local political leaders to unify the Arab parties. A larger bloc, they argued, would create enthusiasm, increase voter turnout, and result in larger Knesset representation. However, these efforts were frustrated by internal rivalries and lack of genuine leadership,

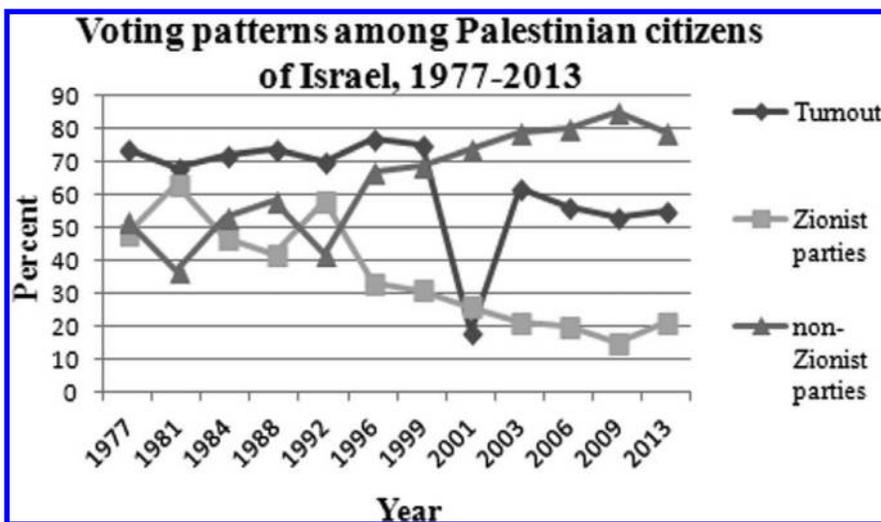


Figure 6.

forcing the three main Arab parties to compete against one another even though they all have very similar programs, particularly in their opposition to Jewish colonialism and their shared desire to make Israel a civil or multicultural democracy. Given these constraints, the campaign was relatively timid, lacking new ideas or personalities. Most Arab MKs will return for their third or fourth term, despite strong criticism of their inaction or inability to support their community. The party structure and campaign reflected a stalemate and a severe lack of visionary leadership.

Notably absent from the Arab election campaign was any debate about the “one-state solution,” despite it being the fastest-growing concept among Arab intellectuals, especially among the young. Several of the main promoters of this notion hail from among the founders of the online newspaper “Arabs 48,”¹⁶ including Asad Ghanem, Nadim Rouhana, Salman Natour, and—most famously—the self-exiled Azmi Bishara. Yet, no party, movement, or candidate promoted this idea during the campaign.¹⁷ Similarly, the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) campaign, so prominent among Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and abroad, was rarely mentioned. It was opposed by the main Arab parties worried about their leaders’ position, following the enactment of the “anti-boycott law,” which criminalizes the public promotion of a boycott of Israeli institutions or settlements by Israeli citizens. Further, very little in the way of Arab-Jewish collaboration was attempted during the election campaign, which would partially subvert the main logic of Jewish ethnocracy. These absences illustrate the entrapment of all Israeli citizens, including the Arabs, in the current geopolitical deadlock.

As in the other sectors, the election results among Palestinians in Israel signal continuity. All three Arab parties polled similarly to the previous elections, and ended up with the same total of eleven seats (one held by Dov Hanin, a Jewish MK of the Arab-Jewish Hadash). One more Arab entered the Knesset through Meretz, bringing the total number of Arab MKs to eleven, a drop of three from the previous Knesset, when Kadima and Yisrael Beitenu included three Arab Druze members.

Figure 6 also shows that the structural split in the Arab vote between Zionist and non-Zionist parties, which took root after Rabin’s assassination in 1995, was maintained, with a slight reduction in support for non-Zionist parties. The vote for Zionist parties came mostly from the Arab Druze population, traditionally aligned with the Jewish state; due to local support (based on kin relations), the vote went mainly to Shas and Meretz. Over 80 percent of Israel’s Palestinian citizens voted within the relatively firm national (Arab) consensus that emerged in the last decade and which found expression in the “Vision Documents” of 2006–07,¹⁸ which portray Arab goals in Israel as revolving around a struggle to de-Zionize the state structure, promote civil and collective rights for the Arab minority, recognize all Bedouin villages, close economic gaps, and immediately establish a sovereign Palestinian state. This firm consensus channeled over 90

percent of non-Druze votes to the three Arab parties, illustrating yet again the power of identity politics. Yet, the Arabs continue to be seriously underrepresented in the Knesset, with the number of MKs representing only half their proportion in the population.

Least represented are the Bedouin Arabs of the southern Negev. This most marginalized community, which counts for more than 200,000 people, will have only one MK in the new Knesset, as has been the case for the last two decades. The Bedouins in the “unrecognized villages” around Beersheba have been at the forefront of the Arab struggle for land and housing rights, suffering pervasive dispossession and displacement, countless house demolitions, and decades of neglect and denial. In these elections, the Bedouins demonstrated their growing alienation from the state by having the lowest turnout in the entire country. Only 45 percent of eligible persons voted, mostly in the Bedouin towns and cities. Within the unrecognized villages (often small informal towns), which accommodate half the Bedouin population, the turnout was only 31 percent, a sign of deep disillusion and the strong influence of the Northern Islamic Movement. However, it was the more pragmatic Southern Islamic Movement, part of the United Arab List that polled almost two-thirds of Bedouin votes, while Balad/Tajammu' reached about a quarter. This demonstrated a rise in national sentiments for a population that traditionally distanced itself from the Palestinian struggle. The Bedouin vote for all other parties, including the Arab-Jewish Hadash, was negligible.

IMPLICATIONS

What are the main implications of these elections for the Palestinian-Zionist conflict and Israeli society? On the most obvious level, the elections appear to maintain—but also stretch—the status quo on the Palestinian issue: Netanyahu returns to office, the ruling right remains in power, albeit with decreased power of the settlers, and the ruling coalition includes strong elements from centrist liberal parties, first and foremost Yesh Atid. While some “cracks” appeared in the system, to which we shall return, it is reasonable to assume a continuation of Israel's policies, both in the colonization of the Palestinian territories (and the parallel ethnocratic politics within the Green Line) and the (neo) liberalization of economy and society. Significant changes may occur in the relations between Jewish groups, particularly with regard to curtailing the privileges enjoyed by Haredi groups and changes in budget allocations to various sectors. The backing of the settlement and Judaization projects will most likely increase in light of the control the new government's Jewish Home ministers (representing the settlers) will have over key portfolios, including land and economic development. Given the nature of the new coalition, the dual goals of colonization-liberalization are likely to continue and even accelerate. On a broader scale, this means the continuation of creeping apartheid, where

patterns of separate and unequal relations between Jews and Palestinians (and among ethno-classes within each), are gradually normalized and institutionalized.

The election results again demonstrate the power of Israel's ethnocratic "bubble," in which most political moves, maneuvers, and struggles are conducted between Jewish groups, with little regard to the Palestinians. The ethnocratic bubble is premised on mental and political distance from Israel's neighbors and suspicion concerning the role of the international community. This approach has led to the frequent unilateralism characterizing Israeli policies since Rabin's assassination in 1995. In this election campaign, the "Jewish bubble" became even more pronounced in reaction to the instability in the Arab world, the rise of political Islam, and the hostile dialectics with Iran. Needless to say, this does not mean that the Palestinian issue, objectively speaking, has become less important, but rather that in the absence of a vision, and given the weakness and fragmentation of the Palestinians, denial has become the best short-term tactic.

Internally, the elections also showed the power of identity politics so typical in ethnocratic societies. The identity card was used to trump socioeconomic needs, as evident from the fact that most low-income Jews voted for rightist, religious, and colonialist neoliberal parties. These parties (Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu, Jewish Home, United Torah Judaism, etc.) are likely to continue the dual colonization-liberalization agenda at the expense of social services and economic disparities. Typically in ethnocratic states, as noted years ago by the scholar of nationalism Walker Connor, "blood runs thicker than money."¹⁹ This is also evident among Ashkenazi groups that traditionally vote for the more socialist Labor, Meretz, and Hadash—all against their overt class interest.

Returning to the official victor of these elections, Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly promoted the twin goals of a "free," privatizing economy on the one hand and the ongoing settlement of the Palestinian territories and Judaization of Israel's demography and territory on the other. More than anyone, Netanyahu symbolizes Israel's current regime, with the attempt to create an unsustainable mix of (neo) liberalism and colonialism. This is the contradictory "liberal colonialism" which contains the Israeli claim for democracy, alongside the harsh reality of a military occupation it has created for the disenfranchised Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories, and marginalization of "the Zoabies" in Israel proper. Clearly, the prominence of both secular, national liberalism and religious colonialism in these elections harbors increasing tensions which threaten to burst the ethnocratic bubble.

Hence, for those looking for change in these elections, some signs appeared—the rise of 4 percent in the vote for the geopolitical center-left, the rise of a social-justice discourse following the 2011 social protest, and the tantalizing proximity of the center-left to creating an anti-Netanyahu bloc against all predictions—showing that cracks do exist in the

ethnocratic system. But in order to exploit the cracks, the elections have also shown, external pressure must be applied. Internal forces are trapped within a web of identity, material, militaristic, and ideological considerations which prevent a major anti-colonial breakthrough. Only the combination of “cracks” from within, and anti-colonial pressure from outside, may create a breakthrough that will allow the Palestinians to fulfill the right of self-determination and independence they so clearly deserve.

ENDNOTES

1. The National Democratic Assembly or National Democratic Alliance, in Hebrew *Brit Le'umit Demokratit* (“Balad”), in Arabic *al-Tajammu' al-Watani al-Dimuqrati* (“Tajammu’”).

2. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/yair-lapid-i-will-not-block-a-neta-nyahu-led-coalition.premium-1.495966#>

3. Sharon also won the 2001 prime ministerial election (no Knesset election). In November 2005 Sharon formed Kadima, which became the ruling party; Olmert became acting prime minister after Sharon's stroke in January 2006, so the incumbent party and premier won the 2006 election.

4. Besides former Kadima leader Tzipi Livni and assorted Kadima colleagues, the new party also included, among others, erstwhile Labor leader Amir Peretz.

5. Shinui split in 2005–06 and neither of the two resulting factions attained the vote threshold in the 2006 elections for inclusion in the Knesset. It did not compete in the 2009 elections.

6. Son of longtime Shinui leader Tommy Lapid.

7. Oren Yiftachel, “Voting for Apartheid: The 2009 Israeli Elections,” *JPS* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2009), pp. 72–85.

8. Yiftachel, “Voting for Apartheid.”

9. These laws and other antidemocratic and discriminatory laws, amendments, and Knesset bills are summarized in Adalah, “New Discriminatory Laws and Bills in Israel, 2009–2012,” Haifa, October 2012, excerpted as Doc. C2., *JPS* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2013), pp. 177–80.

10. Channel 1, “Yoman,” 11 January 2013.

11. Several smaller parties, Mafdal (the National Religious Party) and Ichud Leumi (National Union), had earlier merged into Jewish Home.

12. On Bennett, see David Remnick, “The Party Faithful,” *The New Yorker*, 21 January 2013.

13. Many of the immigrants from the collapsing Soviet Union during the late 1980s and 1990s, collectively called “Russians,” do not meet the Orthodox rabbinate's stringent definitions of Jewishness.

14. Including the “Israel Force” radical right and pro-transfer party (Otzma LeYisrael, “Strength to Israel” or “Strong Israel”), which did not cross the electoral threshold to enter the Knesset. The same applies to several other parties on the political left, such as “Green Leaf” and “New Country” (Eretz Hadasha, or “New Land”). Another notable center-right party, “Am Shalem,” which represents Mizrahi Jews, also failed to achieve the minimal vote to enter the Knesset. Overall, some 268,000 votes, around 9 percent, were given to parties that failed to cross the threshold.

15. Based on surveys showing that Russian support for Yisrael Beitenu has remained similar to 2009, thereby attributing most of the Likud-Yisrael Beiteinu decline in the development towns to a shift among Mizrahim; see *intra alia* <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42888.pdf>.

16. Available at www.arabs48.com.

17. The Northern Islamic Movement was a prominent voice for the one-state solution but it did not participate in the elections, calling instead for a boycott.

18. See “Special Document File: The Status and Future of Israel's Palestinian Minority,” *JPS* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2007), pp. 73–103.

19. Walker Conner, “Beyond Reason: the Nature of the Ethnonational Bond,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16: 3 (1993), p. 385.