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THE ARABS IN ISRAEL AND THE ELECTION FOR PRIME MINISTER

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In recent years, Israeli Arabs have played an increasingly active role in Israeli politics. The voting rate since the mid-1980s has been between 70 and 77% -- in 1999, 75% of eligible voters cast a ballot – and only small, marginal groups like “Sons of the Village” advocated a boycott of Knesset elections. In fact, the trend toward greater involvement intensified in 1996, when the southern wing of the Islamic Movement endorsed participation in Knesset elections. Parliamentary representation also peaked in the 15th Knesset, when 13 Arab and Druze members were elected. The Arab political system in Israel was marked by a commitment to democratic struggle, with the goal of greater involvement in the decision-making process and inclusion in governing coalitions.

Nevertheless, exclusionary processes were also in evidence. All Israeli governments rejected the Arab parties as potential coalition partners. And no Arab minister was ever appointed (though some Labor Party members did become deputy ministers). This state of marginality diminished somewhat after the 1992 elections, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had to rely on Arab parties for a “blocking majority” of 61 that could defeat any motion of no-confidence. Even then, however, the Arab parties were not fully incorporated into mainstream politics. Although

the Jewish left showed some willingness to promote integration, elements on the right, especially after the beginning of the Oslo process, warned that the loyalty of Arab MK's would automatically lie with Palestinian interests and argued that their votes should therefore be discounted or disqualified on critical issues.

The sense of delegitimation in the Arab public grew even stronger after Ehud Barak was elected Prime Minister. Barak received about 95% of the Arab vote but refused to invite a single Arab party to join his coalition. He also failed to give much backing to the Ministerial Committee on Arab Affairs, to pay serious attention to the needs of the Arab public, to meet with its leaders or to visit Arab towns and villages. The process of alienation reached a peak in the events of October 2000, when 13 Arab citizens were killed by the security forces during demonstrations of solidarity with the *Aqsa intifada*. The rift that followed these events produced a significant setback in Jewish-Arab relations and an unprecedented crisis of confidence between the Arab public and the government.

Barak's indifference, coupled with the rage and pain over the casualties/martyrs, intensified the hostility to the government, and Arab politicians began to sense growing pressure from the Arab



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street. The result, in the form of calls to boycott the prime ministerial election, resembled a political extension of the violent uprising in October.

Even so, up to a month before the election, some Arab parties did not rule out the possibility of voting for Barak. Potential supporters included the Democratic Arab Party (DAP), the Arab Movement for Change (AMC), and some members of the southern wing of the Islamic Movement. These elements tried to keep open their options by hinting that they would endorse participation if one of three conditions materialized: if Barak secured a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians, if Shimon Peres replaced Barak as Labor's candidate, or if the gap between Barak and Ariel Sharon narrowed to the point where the Arab vote would make a critical difference.

Alongside the "wait-and-see" camp, another group emerged, made up of public figures whose call to vote for Barak was based on several arguments: despite Barak's failures, Arab interests were still better served by the left; Barak had gone a long way toward accommodating Palestinian demands in the negotiations; Barak worked with a good group of leftist politicians; reason had to prevail over passion; rejectionism always led to Arab defeats; and the Arabs would be blamed if Barak lost.

Notwithstanding these arguments, however, the calls to boycott or abstain grew stronger as election day approached. The leaders of this campaign were drawn from nationalist circles, like "Sons of the Village," who had traditionally opposed participation in elections for the "Zionist" parliament. They were joined by the Democratic National Alliance (Balad) and then, when it became clear that none of the three specified conditions would come to pass, by the DAP, the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash), and both wings of the Islamic Movement.

Advocates of a boycott cited a number of justifications. Some were emotional, especially the need to punish Barak and to express outrage at the events of October. Others were more rational, such as the assessment that there was nothing to choose between two former generals who had both spilled Palestinian blood. But the weightiest claim of the boycott advocates was that the Arabs had been given a chance to exploit their electoral power and that this tool should be used to bring about a basic shift in the voting patterns of Israeli Arabs. In their view, the aim should be to break the old pattern of almost automatic Arab support for the candidate of the left and to stake out a role for Israeli Arabs as a separate, independent bloc, a kind of "Third Way" between left and right. According to this school of thought, the tool to realize this potential was the threat to punish any candidate who ignored the Arab public by denying him power: "By not voting, we also influence."

One other approach represented a variation on this theme. Some public figures, including AMC and Hadash leaders, warned that a sweeping boycott would be interpreted as a separatist gesture by a national minority, which would further delegitimize the Arabs in the eyes of the Jewish majority. They therefore urged Arab voters to go to the polls but to cast a blank ballot, in the belief that this would achieve the same effect without "burning bridges" to the Israeli political system.

Arab MK's estimated that the voting participation rate in 2001 would fall to about 40%; the actual turnout was closer to 25%. This represents a dramatic change in Israeli Arab voting behavior. Nevertheless, it is too soon to assess the full significance of this change. Since the election was only for Prime Minister and not for the Knesset, it cannot yet be determined whether the withdrawal from electoral politics was a one-time protest or the beginning of a fundamental transformation in the character of Israeli Arab politics.