

# **The Fourth Phase of Palestinian Arab Politics in Israel: The Centripetal Turn**

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## **Abstract**

This article argues that the politics of the Arab minority in Israel entered a new phase since the mid-2010s: centripetalism. Whereas the preceding two decades or so (the third phase) were characterized by claims in the name of Palestinian nationalism, the centripetal phase is characterized by (1) a decline in the salience of minority nationalism and a shift in focus to social and civic issues; (2) aspiration to move away from the margins of politics towards its center; and (3) greater organizational convergence, eclipsing intra-communal ideological divisions in the service of achieving shared objectives. The advent of this phase is attributed to unintended consequences of changes in the electoral rules (specifically the 2015 rise in the election threshold) in combination with pressure from the electorate, empowered by the raised electoral threshold.

**Key Words:** Palestinians in Israel; Arab minority in Israel; minority nationalism; centripetalism; ethnic politics; national minorities; ethnopolitical organizations; minority mobilization.

The politics of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel (PAI) has transformed along different periods since Israel's establishment in 1948.<sup>1</sup> These periods can be characterized according to two key dimensions: (1) the predominant political demands made by the minority's political organizations, and (2) patterns of ethno-political organization and mobilization. The first phase, lasting from 1948 until the late 1960s, was a period of compliance with little independent mobilization.<sup>2</sup> The second period, loosely lasting from the late 1960s/early 1970s to the late 1980s/early 1990s, saw a transition to independent political activism, channeled primarily through the Communist Party, which demanded an ethnically neutral state with distribution of resources based on social needs rather than ethnic or national affiliation.<sup>3</sup> The third phase, taking off during the 1990s, was characterized by political organizational fragmentation coupled with the rise in claims in the name of Palestinian Arab nationalism in Israel.<sup>4</sup> Arab elites from multiple parties and civil society organizations raised demands for recognition of the PAI as an indigenous national minority with a right to self-government in a wide range of realms.<sup>5</sup>

Characterizing Arab politics in terms of organization and mobilization as well as demands, we observe a departure from the trajectory of the third phase since the mid-2010s. First, organizational fragmentation declined. The Arab political parties previously represented in the Knesset coalesced into a single electoral list in 2015, namely, the Joint List (JL), a feat they

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Nadim Rouhana, "The Political Transformation of the Palestinians in Israel: From Acquiescence to Challenge," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18.3 (1989): 38-59; Eli Rekhes, "The Evolvement of an Arab Palestinian Minority in Israel," *Israel Studies* 12.3 (2007): 1-28; Oded Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism in Israel* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Ian S. Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Austin, TX, 1980); Rouhana, "The Political Transformation".

<sup>3</sup> Ilana Kaufman, *Arab National Communism in the Jewish State* (Gainesville, FL, 1997); Amal Jamal, "The Counter-Hegemonic Role of Civil Society: Palestinian Arab NGOs in Israel," *Citizenship Studies* 12. 3 (2008): 287; Sammy Smooha, *Arabs and Jews in Israel: Change and Continuity in Mutual Intolerance* (Boulder, CO, 1992), 3-17.

<sup>4</sup> Rekhes, "The Evolvement of an Arab Palestinian Minority," 11-21; Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 112-145.

<sup>5</sup> Amal Jamal, *Arab Minority Nationalism in Israel: The Politics of Indigeneity* (London, 2011); Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians: The Conflict Within* (Cambridge, 2011).

repeated in the elections of September 2019 and March 2020. The JL won the overwhelming majority of the Arab vote, achieving the most successful electoral outcomes for an Arab party or parties. Second, political demands have been recalibrated, placing greater emphasis on civic issues, including integrative demands, and abating the political salience of Palestinian nationalism in Israel.

Thus, using ethnopolitical organizational patterns and political demands as indicators, we argue that the period beginning in the middle of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century can be characterized as the fourth phase of Palestinian Arab politics in Israel. We label this phase *centripetalist*, due to its attempted push toward the center of politics. We further argue that institutional configurations, specifically changes in the electoral rules, combined with social forces, primarily voter demands, to pull the Arab political organizations towards greater convergence. As electoral incentives changed, PAI voters were empowered relative to their elected representatives, facilitating a shift in political demands in the name of minority nationalism to greater focus on social and civic issues in accordance with the electorate's preferences.

The latter argument has broader theoretical implications. Extant scholarship on minority nationalism has not paid much attention to the kind of decline in the political salience of minority nationalism illustrated by the case of the PAI. For the most part, the literature on minority political mobilization has tended to focus on the reasons for the rise of minority nationalism rather than its decline.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that the scholarship has dealt with a decline in minority

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Erin Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Henry E. Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Siobhan Harty, "The Institutional Foundations of Substate National Movements," *Comparative Politics* 33: 2 (2001), 191-210; Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, "Why do Ethnic-Nationalist Groups Rebel: New Data and Analysis," *World Politics* 62: 1 (2010), 87-119; Jacques Bertrand and Oded Haklai, *Democratization and Ethnic Minorities: Conflict*

nationalism, it has mostly focused on the impact of either purposeful management of diversity through accommodating institutional arrangements, such as federal arrangements and other forms of decentralization, or taming through repression.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in the case of the PAI, no institutional accommodation has been introduced, and neither has there been suppression of minority ethnopolitical mobilization. In fact, PAI voter turnout has increased considerably in some elections during this period, and PAI political parties achieved the most successful electoral outcomes for an Arab party or parties since Israel's creation in 1948. Thus, investigating the sources of subsiding demands in the name of PAI minority nationalism can help generate theoretical insight into a decline in political mobilization of minority nationalism that is not a result of suppression or institutional accommodation by design.

The article is organized as follows. The next section presents the analytical framework of minority politics in ethnic states and provides clarification of our key concept. The subsequent section provides a brief survey of the main streams of Arab politics in Israel as well as the diachronic transformation of the minority's patterns of mobilization over the three phases that have characterized PAI politics from 1948 to the mid 2010s. The third section demonstrates that the period beginning in the middle of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be

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or *Accommodation* (London: Routledge, 2013); Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Ian S. Lustick, "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism vs. Control," *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (April, 1979) pp. 325-344; Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 15: 2 (2004), 96-109 & *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Karlo Basta, *The Symbolic State: Minority Recognition, Majority Backlash, and Secession in Multinational Countries*. McGill-Queen's University Press, forthcoming; Elisabeth King and Cyrus Samii, *Diversity, Violence and Recognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflict* (London: Routledge: 1993).

characterized as a phase of centripetalism. The article concludes with a few general comments on the implications of our observations.

### **Minority Politics in Ethnic States**

Israel is widely recognized as belonging to the category of states in which ethnic hierarchy between Jews and Palestinian Arabs is deeply institutionalized. Although there is disagreement about the appropriate label for Israel's regime type - some have used the term "ethnocracy", others "ethnic constitutional order", and others still "ethnic democracy" - there is little dispute that minorities in ethnically hierarchical states are disadvantaged and politically marginalized.<sup>8</sup>

Although much of the scholarship on minority groups tends to portray such groups in uniform terms, minorities are in fact seldom monoliths.<sup>9</sup> More often than not, diverse subcommunities with diverging worldviews form multiple political organizations that mobilize to advance their preference.<sup>10</sup> In some instances, these sub-groups operate separately, and in other cases, they might collaborate for strategic or tactical reasons. Thus, organizational and mobilization patterns of minorities vary.

Speaking in broad strokes, members of minority groups can try to integrate into, and advance minority claims through, large parties with a broad electoral appeal, or they can operate

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<sup>8</sup> Sammy Smooha, "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype," *Israel Studies* 2.2 (1998): 198-241; As'ad Ghanem, Nadim Rouhana and Oren Yiftachel, "Questioning 'Ethnic Democracy': A Response to Sammy Smooha," *Israel Studies* 3.2 (1998): 253-267; Ilan Peleg, *Democratizing the Hegemonic State* (Cambridge, 2007), 2-19.

<sup>9</sup> Kanchan Chandra, "What is an Ethnic Party," *Party Politics* 17.2 (2011): 152.

<sup>10</sup> Kanchan Chandra, "Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability," *Perspectives on Politics* 3.2 (2005), 235-252; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Divide and Conquer or Divide and Concede: How do States Respond to Internally Divided Separatists?" *American Political Science Review* 105.2 (2011), 275-297; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, Kristin M. Bakke, and Lee J.M. Seymour, "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56.1 (2012), 67-93; Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 2-3.

through separate ethnic parties. To some extent, the choice might be ideology-driven, yet there is also a utilitarian aspect as different electoral systems and party systems yield different opportunities for effective participation.<sup>11</sup> What constitutes an ethnic party is not always conceptually clear.<sup>12</sup> However, at the most fundamental level, scholars widely agree that an ethnic party is one that claims to represent a particular ethnic or national group and advance its particularistic interests in a multiethnic society.<sup>13</sup> Such parties make claims in the name of the ethnic or national community and appeal to it for support. Hence, according to Horowitz, one primary identifier of an ethnic party is its support base.<sup>14</sup> If party support comes almost exclusively from a single ethnic group and the party's main claims are in the name of the group, it is an ethnic party.

Because ethnic minorities are a differentiated category, different streams with different preferences and different estimations of the most appropriate path are likely when political space is available. Fragmentation occurs when multiple political parties advancing different worldviews emerge and compete against each other for the limited pool of electoral support amongst the minority. Conversely, when otherwise rival ethnopolitical organizations compromise on their claims, find a common ground on which to coalesce, and converge on their demands, the resulting situation can be what we term *centripetalism*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Johanna K. Birnir, *Ethnicity and Electoral Politics*, (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Chandra, "What is an Ethnic Party," 155-57.

<sup>13</sup> John Ishiyama and Marijke Breuning, *Ethnopolitics in the New Europe*, (Boulder, CO, 1998); Matthijs Bogaards, Sebastian Elischer, and Anika Becher, "Ethnic Party Bans in Africa," in Jacques Bertrand and Oded Haklai eds., *Democratization and Ethnic Minorities: Conflict or Accommodation?* (London, 2013), 43-46.

<sup>14</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Berkeley, CA, 2000), 293.

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## Centripetalism

Centripetalism is a term conceptualized differently in different bodies of scholarship. In the context of systems of governance theory, Gerring, Thacker, and Moreno identify centralized authority as centripetalism's main pillar.<sup>16</sup> As such, centripetalism entails aggregative and inclusive political organization whereby the differentiating worldviews amongst the subcommunities lose their political salience. In conflict management theory, on the other hand, centripetalism has been associated with prescribing incentives, typically electoral ones, for representatives of different ethnic groups in deeply divided societies to moderate, reach out to members of other groups, and build cross-cutting coalitions.<sup>17</sup>

Adapting these tenets to the context of minority ethnic politics, centripetalism has a number of characteristics in the realms of both ethnopolitical organization and demands. First, the characteristic of inclusive political organization translates into a reduced number of ethnic parties as rivals are willing to become subordinate to an overarching political organization, or at least fewer political bodies than otherwise would be.

Second, centripetalism involves moving (or trying to move) away from the fringes of the political community towards its center. In the context of societies deeply divided along ethnonational lines, centripetal politics entails reaching out across the ethnonational divide and seeking ways to work together, before and after elections. Such a shift entails refocusing political claims away from uncompromising minority nationalism toward civic and social issues, which

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<sup>16</sup> John Gerring, Storm C Thacker, and Carola Moreno, "Centripetal Democratic Governance: A Theory and Global Inquiry," *American Political Science Review* 99.4 (2005), 567-581.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Donald L. Horowitz, "Ethnic Power Sharing: Three Big Problems," *Journal of Democracy* 25.2 (2014): 5-20; Benjamin Reilly, "Institutional Designs for Diverse Democracies: Consociationalism, Centripetalism, and Communalism Compared," *European Political Science: EPS* 11.2 (2012): 259-270; Benjamin Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies* (Cambridge, 2001); Donald L. Horowitz, "The Alternative Vote and Interethnic Moderation: A Reply to Fraenkel and Grofman," *Public Choice* 121 (2004), 507-516.

may be more tangible in the everyday life of members of the minority group and over which it will be easier for majorities to cooperate. Thus, when pursued by a minority, centripetalist politics involves a decline in the political salience of minority nationalism.

Since converging over an agreed upon centripetal agenda is not typically easy to come by for actors with significantly different worldviews, incentives are needed to act as a force that pulls the actors to an equilibrium. Incentives acting as centripetal (or centrifugal) forces on ethnic political parties might include institutional factors, like electoral systems and arenas for bargaining (such as coalition-building in multi-party legislatures), rewards from international allies, distribution of resources available to political elites, societal structures, and demands from voters.<sup>18</sup> More often than not, the scholarship on minority nationalism has attributed centripetal outcomes to intentional policies of diversity management. However, as we demonstrate, centripetalism can also come about as an unintended consequence.

### **Streams and Phases in PAI Politics**

The PAI are internally differentiated along political and ideological lines. As'ad Ghanem has identified four political-ideological streams within this community, which he labels the "Israeli-Arab stream", "Communist stream", "national stream", and "Islamic Stream."<sup>19</sup> These streams have traditionally differed in their worldview, political claims, and modes of political organization.

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<sup>18</sup> Reilly, "Institutional Designs for Diverse Democracies," 263; Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism in Israel*, 158; Chandra "Ethnic Parties and Democratic Stability"; Robert G. Moser, "Electoral Systems and the Representation of Ethnic Minorities: Evidence from Russia," *Comparative Politics* 40.3 (2008): 273-92; Sherrill Stroschein, "Demography in Ethnic Party Fragmentation: Hungarian Local Voting in Romania," *Party Politics* 17.2 (2011):189-2004 ; Birnir, *Ethnicity and Electoral Politics*; John Ishiyama, "Explaining Ethnic Bloc Voting in Africa," *Democratization* 1.4 (2012): 761-88.

<sup>19</sup> As'ad Ghanem, *The Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel: 1948-2000* (Albany, NY, 2001).



The Israeli-Arab stream advocates integration into Jewish parties and does not place changing the Jewish identity of the state or demanding formal recognition of the PAI as a national minority at the forefront of its demands.<sup>20</sup> Historically, the main representatives of this stream have been found in Jewish parties as well as in “satellite” lists, affiliated with the Labor Party in the 1950s and 1960s.

By contrast, the Communists have typically had a more ambiguous relationship between Palestinian national identity, Israeli identity, and socialist ideals.<sup>21</sup> Socialist-Marxist principles had historically generated demands for ethnically-blind distribution policies, guided primarily by social need, as opposing to allocation of public resources on the basis of ethnicity, a historically typical practice of Israeli governments that favored the Jewish majority.<sup>22</sup> Concomitantly, the second half of the 1960s saw Arabs coming to the forefront of the otherwise bi-national Communist political mobilization. Ultimately, the institutional demand of this stream had historically been to reconfigure the state as secular-democratic with an accent on an overarching, encompassing civic identity.

Whereas both the Israeli-Arab and Communist streams can be labelled integrationist in that they advocate variable joint Arab-Jewish political organizational frameworks,<sup>23</sup> the national and Islamic streams have historically stressed ethnic and national differentiation (albeit without ruling “out joint Jewish-Arab organization as a tactical maneuver”<sup>24</sup>). In a nutshell, the Islamists have traditionally sought to organize on a religious basis and advance an exclusivist and autonomous Islamist sphere; the view of the national stream has been that the Arabs in Israel are

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>21</sup> Kaufman, *Arab National Communism*.

<sup>22</sup> Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 74; Ghanem, *The Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Ghanem, *The Palestinian Arab Minority*, 112.

<sup>24</sup> Ghanem, *The Palestinian Arab Minority*, 37.

members of the Palestinian national community, separated from their people by the force of historical events. The demands of this stream have tended to include a bundle of collective rights associated with formal recognition of the Palestinians in Israel as an indigenous and national minority, including a degree of autonomy to manage communal affairs.<sup>25</sup>

The different streams have seen their political significance rise and decline during different time periods. Some analysts have identified three distinct periods characterized by the predominance of identifiable streams.<sup>26</sup> The first phase (1948-late 1960s) is defined as subdued, in which the Israeli-Arab stream was the most visible.<sup>27</sup> There were no independent political parties and no organized parliamentary force advanced collective demands on behalf of Palestinian nationalism. Quiescence has been attributed to a system of control by the Israeli regime, involving a military government in Arab-inhabited areas that restricted the physical movement of the Arab population, isolation of the Arab minority from the Jewish majority, internal segmentation, and dependence on the state for access to economic resources.<sup>28</sup> Arab leaders were co-opted by an extensive patron-client network with the governing Labor party (called *Mapa'i* at the time), which politically was manifested in clientelist parliamentary factions, or lists.<sup>29</sup> These lists had no political party infrastructure of their own and were funded and controlled by *Mapa'i*. In the 1950s, they were the most popular choice amongst the Arab electorate, typically gaining more than 50 percent of the Arab vote.

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<sup>25</sup> Jamal, *Arab Minority Nationalism*, 167-184.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Rekhes, "The Evolution of an Arab Palestinian Minority," 2; Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 32-35; Peleg and Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians*, 48-77.

<sup>27</sup> Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *The Palestinian People: A History* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 170; Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli intelligence and the Israeli Arabs* (Berkeley, CA, 2010); Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State*.

<sup>28</sup> Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 91-95.

The second phase, beginning in the second half of the 1960s and lasting throughout the 1970s and 1980s, was characterized by independent Arab political mobilization. At the forefront was the New Communist List (NCL). The NCL presented a joint Jewish-Arab political framework with shared leadership between Jews and Arabs. In 1977, the party joined forces with other left-wing forces to form the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, DFPE Arab members of Knesset enjoyed at least numerical parity with their Jewish counterparts, and usually a majority. The NCL, and later the DFPE, became the most popular choice among PAI voters in Knesset elections, winning as much as half of Arab voter support in 1977.

The third phase, covering most of the 1990s and 2000s, was characterized by (1) organizational fragmentation and (2) demands in the name of Palestinian nationalism inside Israel. In terms of political organizations, this phase saw the fading away of DFPE supremacy as multiple political parties emerged and competed with each other for the support of the PAI electorate. These organized political forces represented three of the streams surveyed earlier, including the Communists, the nationalists, and the Islamists. Concomitantly, the Arab-Israeli stream continued its downward turn as the PAI electorate increasingly shifted toward Arab ethnic parties. In terms of political demands, the third phase saw appeals to Palestinian national sentiments grow, leading to its characterization by Haklai as the “turn of Palestinian ethnonationalism” in Israel, a period of “politics of indigeneity” by Jamal, or simply the “consolidation of Israel’s Arab Community as a national minority” by Rekhes.<sup>30</sup>

More specifically, independent exclusive Arab parliamentary organization started already in 1988 with the formation of the Arab Democratic Party (ADP) by Abdul Wahab Darawshe,

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<sup>30</sup> Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 112; Jamal, *Arab Minority Nationalism*; Rekhes, “The Evolvement of an Arab Palestinian Minority,” 1.

previously in the Labor Party. Although positing that the interests of the Arab minority are best advanced in an Arab-exclusive organizational framework, his demands at the time remained integrationist.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, appealing to voters in parochial terms suggests that the formation of the ADP constituted a transitional juncture toward the PAI national particularism that characterized the third phase. During the 1990s, the ADP's national demands became more salient, and prior to the 1996 elections, the party teamed up with the Islamists to form the United Arab List (UAL). Their demands focused on expanding a religiously exclusive sphere for the Muslim Arab community in which it had authority to administer its own cultural, religious, and education affairs without state intervention.<sup>32</sup> From 1999 to 2013, the UAL won the plurality of the votes of Arab electorate almost regularly.

At the forefront of the national stream, the National Democratic Assembly (NDA), sometimes referred to as *Balad*, emerged in the electoral scene in 1996. Framing minority demands in terms of indigenous national minority rights, the party defined the struggle of the Palestinian minority in Israel in terms of national liberation.<sup>33</sup> Its institutional demands on the state can be summarized as two-pronged: de-Zionizing the state and redefining it as bi-national, on the one hand, coupled with extensive decentralization of authority with autonomy for the minority to administer its affairs and proportional distribution of resources based on group size, on the other hand.<sup>34</sup> The NDA's claims differed from those of the Communists in several ways. First, the NDA rejected the idea of "Israelization" of the PAI, thus eschewing the integrationist

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<sup>31</sup> Ghanem, *The Palestinian Arab Minority*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Nadim Rouhana, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict* (New Haven, CT, 1997), 212; Ghanem and Mustafa, *Palestinians in Israel*, 109-116.

<sup>33</sup> Ilam Amouyal, "We are at a Crossroads: Interview with Azmi Bishara," Revised 1998 by Azmi Bishara, in Carol Diamant, ed., *Zionism: The Sequel* (New York, NY, 1998), 279-286; Jamal, *Arab Minority Nationalism*.

<sup>34</sup> Azmi Bishara, "Interview: A Double-Responsibility: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the *Intifada*," *Middle East report* 217 (2000), 26-29.

position taken by the communist stream in the second phase.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, whereas the Communists had traditionally demanded a civic, ethnically-blind resource allocation, the NDA demanded the entrenchment of ethnonational identities, albeit with equitable distribution of resources. Despite their differences, the NDA formed a joint list with the DFPE in the lead-up to the 1996 elections. Competing independently throughout the 2000s, the NDA would go on to win slightly over 20% of the Arab vote in subsequent Knesset elections.

The DFPE's alliance with the NDA was not an aberration for the Communists. Facing stiff competition for the limited pool of Arab voters during the third phase, the main actor in the communist stream gradually moved away from its habitual practice of projecting an image of a non-ethnic party. Instead, the party increasingly appealed to minority nationalism sentiments. One of the most conspicuous manifestations took place in the run-up to the 2003 elections, when the party teamed up with Ahmad Tibi, a former advisor to Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat. With Tibi's high public profile, the DFPE aimed to strengthen its own Palestinian national credentials.

As the competition over a limited pool of voters intensified, the Islamists, too, and the UAL more generally, also heightened the Palestinian national facet of their politics. Thus, the intense rivalry over the Arab electorate resulted in a process of ethnic outbidding, whereby the rival political parties aimed to demonstrate commitment to the electorate by making appeals in increasingly ethnonational terms.<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, the increasing organizational fragmentation was accompanied by convergence over many of the ideas and demands put forth by the national stream.

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<sup>35</sup> Amouyal, "We are at a crossroads," 281-283.

<sup>36</sup> Haklai, *Palestinian Ethnonationalism*, 158.

Burgeoning mobilization in the civil society sphere accompanied changes in the parliamentary sphere with the emergence of a new generation of an educated and assertive cohort of leaders, who made demands in the name of Palestinian nationalism in Israel the centerpiece of their activism.<sup>37</sup> Possibly the most visible illustration of this trend was in the publication of four documents in late 2006 and 2007, which collectively became known as “the Future Vision documents.” Arguably the most significant one was “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel” because the magnitude of collaboration involved dozens of elites from a wide range of streams on the political spectrum.<sup>38</sup> In a nutshell, the documents as a whole demanded the state recognize the PAI as an indigenous national minority, entitled to a bundle of collective rights and self-government in several areas, including education, culture, and welfare. They further made a claim for distribution of resources in proportion to group size and control over these resources. Alongside autonomy, the documents demanded full citizenship equality with guaranteed effective representation in the centers of policy-making.<sup>39</sup> The worldview expressed was thus highly influenced by the position of the national stream.

Finally, alongside organizational transformations and the salience of Palestinian nationalism, the third phase also witnessed a shift in voter behavior. Speaking in broad strokes, the PAI electorate can be separated into three segments: one that regularly participates in general

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<sup>37</sup> Shani Payes, “Palestinian NGOs in Israel: A Campaign for Civic Equality in a Non-Civic State,” *Israel Studies* 8.1 (2003): 60-90; Oded Haklai, “Palestinian NGOs in Israel: A Campaign for Civic Equality or ‘Ethnic Civil Society?’” *Israel Studies* 9.3 (2004): 157-168; Oded Haklai, “State Mutability and Ethnic Civil Society: The Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32.5 (2009): 864-82; Amal Jamal, “The Arab Leadership,” and “The Counter-Hegemonic Role”; Amal Jamal, *Reconstructing the Civic: Palestinian Civil Activism in Israel* (Albany, NY, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> National Committee for Heads of Arab Local Councils “The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel” (Nazareth, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, “The Democratic Constitution” (Shafa’amer, 2007); Yousef Jabareen, “An Equal Constitution for All? On a Constitution and Collective Rights for Arab Citizens in Israel.” (Haifa, 2007); Mada al-Carmel: The Center for Applied Social Research, “The Haifa Declaration,” (Haifa, 2007); The Future Vision 2007; The Haifa Declaration 2007; National Committee for Heads of Arab Local Councils “The Future Vision.”

elections, a second constituency that does not participate in national elections on ideological grounds, and a third segment that refrains from voting due to a lack of faith in the political process and the prospects that it would bring about positive change. The third phase saw a considerable growth of the third segment, manifested in an extensive decline in voter turnout in Knesset elections, particularly between 1999-2009 (see Figure 1). Sources for their skepticism have been attributed to the perennial exclusion of Arab political parties from coalition governments, general de-legitimation of Arab participation by governing Jewish parties, and disillusionment with the behavior of Palestinian Arab politicians.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Fourth Phase: Centripetalism and the Decline of Minority Nationalism**

If the third phase was characterized primarily by organizational fragmentation and demands in the name of Palestinian nationalism in Israel, recent years have seen the contours of Palestinian Arab politics in Israel shift toward a refocusing of political demands away from nationalism and toward civic issues coupled with greater organizational convergence. More specifically, the fourth phase of Arab politics in Israel has involved:

1. a shift in political demands whereby social and civic issues replaced the centrality of minority nationalism;
2. aspirations to move away from the margins of politics towards its center;

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<sup>40</sup> Amal Jamal, "Abstention as Participation: The Labyrinth of Arab Politics in Israel," in Asher Arian and Michal Shamir eds., *The Elections in Israel 2001* (Jerusalem, 2002), 105-134; Jamal, "The Counter-hegemonic Role," 289; Oded Haklai and Liora Norwich, "Bound by Tradition: The Exclusion of Minority Ethnonational Parties from Coalition Governments – A Comparison of Israel and Canada," *Ethnopolitics* 15.3 (2016): 265-284; Arik Rudnitzky, "Back to the Knesset: Israeli Arab Vote in the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset Elections," *Israel Affairs* 22.3-4 (2016): 684.

3. a degree of organizational convergence, eclipsing the intra-communal ideological worldviews that characterized the ethnonational period; and
4. The incentivization of elected politicians to move in a centripetalist direction by a combination of tightening of institutional constraints (specifically the 2015 rise in the election threshold) and voters' desire to increase their elected representatives' power over executive decision-making.

Thus, if PAI politics shifted from a predominantly quiescent Arab-Israeli stream in the first phase to Palestinian ethnonationalism in the third phase, the pendulum has swung back toward an equilibrium position, resulting in a decline in the political salience of Palestinian nationalism in Israel. Most conspicuous has been the silent retreat of the centerpiece of demands articulated in the previous decade, which were put forth most vividly in the "Future Vision" documents, including autonomy for the Palestinian minority, de-ethnicization of the Israeli state, and an affirmation of Palestinian nationalism and indigeneity in Israel. These have been replaced by claims for resolving rampant crime and violence and addressing concerns of housing and construction and other welfare issues.

The unfolding of the fourth phase began in the lead-up to the 2015 elections, as a result of institutional constraints, specifically the raise of the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25%. The new threshold placed PAI parties running separately at risk of being left out of the Knesset. In the 2013 elections, both the DFPE and the NDA received less than 3 percent of the total vote while the UAL was only slightly over the raised threshold with 3.65%.<sup>41</sup> Pre-election polls confirmed that had the organizational patterns of the third phase continued under the new rules, it

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<sup>41</sup> "Central Elections Committee for the 19th Knesset," 2013, <http://www.votes-19.gov.il/nationalresults> [Hebrew].



was probable that one or more of the Palestinian Arab political parties would have not made it.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the different parties representing the diverse ideological streams coalesced into one electoral list, the Joint List (JL) led by Ayman ‘Odeh, head of the DFPE. The JL website openly confirmed the impact of the “the rise of the election threshold” on its formation.<sup>43</sup>

The rise in the electoral threshold itself was brought about in the first place in an attempt to weaken niche constituency parties that cater to small clientele.<sup>44</sup> The Arab parties even interpreted it as specifically targeting them and petitioned the High Court of Justice on these grounds.<sup>45</sup> Notwithstanding their concerns, the low electoral threshold in Israel’s highly fragmented political system had traditionally provided space for multiple partisan veto players, empowering them to exert pressure on the central government to advance their particularistic interests.<sup>46</sup> The rationale given for the raise was that it would remedy the putative excessive veto power of niche clientele parties and thereby facilitate governance capacity.<sup>47</sup>

As often happens, the consequences of the policy were unintended. The establishment of JL resulted in relative electoral success. Winning 13 seats, the JL became the third largest party in the Knesset, constituting the best collective electoral performance for Palestinian Arab parties in Israel’s history to that point. Furthermore, Palestinian Arab voter turnout rate rose from about 56.5% in 2013 to about 63.5% in 2015, the highest voter turnout to that date in the 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rami Zeedan, *Arab Palestinian Society in the Israeli Political System: Integration versus Segregation in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD, 2019), 9.

<sup>43</sup> “About the Joint List,” The Joint List, accessed October 8, 2020, <http://www.moshtrka.com/about-it/> [Arabic].

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Yehonatan Lis, “Netanyahu and Liberman Agreed to Raise the Threshold to 3.25%,” *Haaretz* 26 December 2013 <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/.premium-1.2200192> [Hebrew].

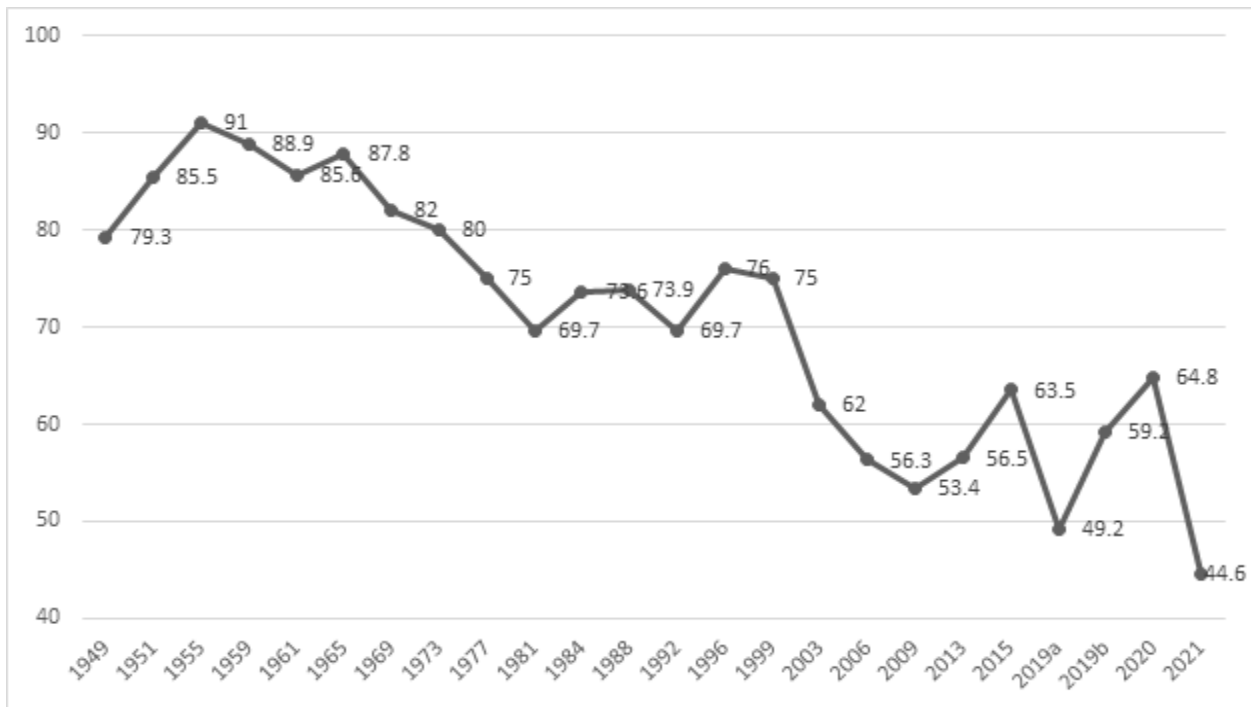
<sup>45</sup> High Court of Justice 3166/14 and 4857/14, [https://supremedecisions.court.gov.il/Home/Download?path=HebrewVerdicts%5C14%5C660%5C031%5Cs13&file.Name=14031660\\_s13.txt&type=2](https://supremedecisions.court.gov.il/Home/Download?path=HebrewVerdicts%5C14%5C660%5C031%5Cs13&file.Name=14031660_s13.txt&type=2) [Hebrew].

<sup>46</sup> Oded Haklai, “The Decisive Path of State Indecisiveness: Israeli Settlers in the West Bank in Comparative Perspective,” in Oded Haklai and Neophytos Loizides, *Settlers in Contested Lands: Territorial Disputes and Ethnic Conflicts* (Stanford 2015), p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Lilach Wiesman, “The Knesset Approved the Raising of the Threshold and the Limits on Ministers,” *Globes* 11 March 2014 <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000923376> [Hebrew]

century.<sup>48</sup> The JL also increased its share of votes within the PAI electorate. Thus, 82.4% of Arab voters cast a ballot for the JL in 2015 in comparison to 77.2% who voted for the Arab parties in 2013.<sup>49</sup> Taken together, these data indicate an approving response among the Palestinian Arab electorate to the joint endeavor.

**Figure 1: Arab voter turnout in Knesset elections, 1949-2021<sup>50</sup>**



In light of the changing trajectory, Navot, Rubin, and Ghanem characterized the election of 2015 as expressing the “emergence of the politics of faith” in the Arab sector in Israel,

<sup>48</sup> Arik Rudnitzky, “An Analysis of the 20th Knesset Election Results in the Arab Sector,” *Bayan: The Arabs in Israel*, 5 (June 22, 2015): 3-13, <https://dayan.org/content/bayan-arabs-israel-issue-5>.

<sup>49</sup> Rudnitzky, *An Analysis of the 20th Knesset Election Results in the Arab Sector*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Data for 1949-1988 taken from Ori Stendel, *The Arabs in Israel: Between Hammer and Anvil* (Jerusalem: Academon Press, 1992), 290; Data for 1992-1996, Ghanem, *The Palestinian Arab Minority*, 141; Data for 1999-2019b, Arik Rudnitzky, “An Analysis of the 20th Knesset Election Results in the Arab Sector,” *Bayan: The Arabs in Israel*, no. 5 (June 22, 2015): 3-13, <https://dayan.org/content/bayan-arabs-israel-issue-5>; Data for 2020-2021, Arik Rudnitzky, “Arab Citizens’ Vote in the Elections to the 24th Knesset, March 2021.”

whereby faith in politics and the possibilities for positive change it brings have increased amongst members of this minority.<sup>51</sup> The very fact that the leaders of all segments could put aside their ideological differences and internal personal rivalries “was a fundamental display of faith.”<sup>52</sup> It likely also helped that the composition of the JL, as identified by Zeedan, represented the religious, ethnic, and geographical diversity of Arab society.<sup>53</sup>

**Table 1: Representation of Arab Parties in the Knesset, 1992-2020**

Year of elections	Number of elected Arab lists in the Knesset	Total number of seats held by Arab Parties
1992	2	5
1996	2	9
1999	3	10
2003	3	8
2006	3	10
2009	3	11
2013	3	11
2015	1	13
2019a	2	10
2019b	1	13
2020	1	15
2021	2	10

<sup>51</sup> Doron Navot, Aviad Rubin, and As’ad Ghanem, “The 2015 Israeli General Election: The Triumph of Jewish Skepticism, the Emergence of Arab Faith,” *Middle East Journal* 71.2 (2017): 250; As’ad Ghanem and Mohanad Mustafa, *Palestinians in Israel: The Politics of Faith after Oslo* (Cambridge, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Navot, Rubin and Ghanem, “The 2015 Israeli General Election,” 265.

<sup>53</sup> Zeedan, *Arab Palestinian Society*, 14.

Despite the relative electoral success, internal frictions within the JL were common, particularly over questions of adequate representation for the constituent streams.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, after prolonged bickering in the lead-up to the April 2019 elections, the JL split. The Arab Movement for Renewal (AMR) and the DFPE ran together in one electoral list while the NDA and the UAL ran on another. ‘Odeh, head of the JL, acknowledged in an interview the personalistic, rather than substantive reasons, for the split, stating: “There is no real, satisfactory reason for the JL’s disbandment...Lack of humility and too much ego here and there caused its breakup.”<sup>55</sup>

The electorate responded negatively to the split. Voter turnout amongst the PAI declined to the lowest in the Knesset elections history to that point, 49.2%, in what some commentators dubbed as “punishment” for the politicians’ inability to overcome rivalries.<sup>56</sup> PAI parties were reduced to a cumulative total of 10 Knesset seats.<sup>57</sup> The share of PAI votes for predominantly Jewish parties increased from 16.8% to 28.4%, with the left-wing *Meretz* and Blue and White particularly gaining, suggesting an integrationist desire amongst a significant chunk of the electorate.<sup>58</sup>

In face of widespread public reproach, the PAI political leadership had a quick chance to reorganize after another round of elections was called for September 2019 as a result of failure to

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Jack Khoury, “Disagreement Between Parties Over Rotation Agreement Threatens to Dismantle the Joint List,” *Haaretz*, July 30, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.4302875> [Hebrew].

<sup>55</sup> Rami Younis, “Pragmatic? I Would Rather See Myself as a Revolutionary,” *Local Call*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.mekomit.co.il/ראיון-עם-איימן-עודה/> [Hebrew].

<sup>56</sup> Samah Salame, “The Reestablishment of the Joint List Is Sending Home the Boycotters,” *Local Call*, August 13, 2019, <https://mekomit.co.il/הקמתה-מחדש-של-הרשימה-המשותפת-מחזירה-את/> [Hebrew]; Hasan Sha’lan, “The Arabs Did Not Flock the Ballot Boxes: ‘They Punished the MKs’,” *Ynet (Yedioth Ahronoth)*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5492461,00.html> [Hebrew].

<sup>57</sup> “Central Elections Committee for the 21st Knesset,” 2019, <https://votes21.bechirot.gov.il/nationalresults>; Arik Rudnitzky, “The 2019 Elections from the Perspective of the Arab Population,” The Israel Democracy Institute, April 18, 2019, <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/26599> [Hebrew].

<sup>58</sup> Rudnitzky, *An Analysis of the 20th Knesset Election Results in the Arab Sector*; Rudnitzky, *The 2019 Elections from the Perspective of the Arab Population*.

form a government.<sup>59</sup> The JL's website acknowledged the role of "public and media pressure" on the decision to unify.<sup>60</sup> Thus, whereas the organizational unification in 2015 was driven by institutional constraints in the form of a high electoral threshold, reunification in subsequent elections was a response to popular demands. The electorate incentivized organizational cohesion.

Indeed, PAI voters responded positively to the reunification. First, as Figure 1 shows, voter turnout repeatedly rose from 49.2% in April 2019 to 59.2% in September 2019 and again to 64.8% in March 2020 following yet another failed negotiation to form a government. Second, 80.6% of PAI voters voted for the JL in September 2019 and 87.6% did so in March 2020, compared to 71.6% who voted for the Arab parties in April 2019.<sup>61</sup> Thus, voters rewarded the elected representatives for persisting with organizational convergence. As a result, the JL won 15 Knesset seats in the March 2020 elections, the highest total number of seats won by PAI parties to date (see Table 1).

The dynamic whereby the electorate forced the hand of its political leadership is a feature characterizing this phase. In the fourth phase, deviation from electorate preferences by political

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Maha a-Taji Dagsh, "Do Not Be Sad, Children, Mom and Dad Are Back Together Again!" *Haaretz*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/debate/1.7681098> [Arabic]; Shaker Fareed Hasan, "What Happens After the Efforts to Form the Joint List Fail?!", *Kul Al-Arab*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.alarab.com/Article/909260> [Arabic]; Ahmad Hazem, "Shame on You With Your Quotas and Numbers," *Kul Al-Arab*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.alarab.com/Article/908850> [Arabic]; Kamal Ibrahim, "Oh, Arab Party Leaders: If Only You Knew the Extent of Your Failure to Create Unity," *Kul Al-Arab*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.alarab.com/Article/909386> [Arabic]; Jack Khoury, "Without The NDA, The Joint List's Challenge Will Be Even Greater," *Haaretz*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/.premium-1.7579756> [Hebrew]; Samah Salame, "The Arab Parties Are Unable to Climb Out of the Hole They Have Dug for Themselves," *Local Call*, July 25, 2019, <https://mekomit.co.il/המפלגות-הערביות-לא-מצליחות-לצאת-מהבורר/> [Hebrew]; Ali Maghrebi, "Majed Sa'Abne After His Resignation from the Reconciliation Committee: Some of the Parties Only Cared About Seats, It Is Disrespectful," *Kul Al-Arab*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.alarab.com/Article/909392> [Arabic].

<sup>60</sup> "About the Joint List."

<sup>61</sup> Arik Rudnitzky, "An Analysis of the Arab Vote in the September 2019 Elections," The Israel Democracy Institute, September 18, 2019, <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/28635> [Hebrew]; Arik Rudnitzky, "Summary of Arab vote in the 23 Knesset Elections," March, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/42225098/Summary\\_of\\_Arab\\_vote\\_in\\_the\\_23\\_Knesset\\_Elections.](https://www.academia.edu/42225098/Summary_of_Arab_vote_in_the_23_Knesset_Elections.) [Hebrew]

leaders resulted in electoral repercussions, demonstrating that the political leadership found itself constrained by voter priorities. Indeed, the organizational fragmentation and decline in voter turnout of April 2019 to a record low turnout of 49% (and bounce-back during the following two election cycles) showed that Arab voter support for PAI political leadership was contingent rather than consolidated. Thus, the contours of this period were shaped by voters' constraints imposed on PAI political leaders, resulting in greater convergence along two axes: (1) between political parties, and (2) between political leadership and the masses, who have forced the first axis on the otherwise rival political parties.

Furthermore, the willingness of a considerable share of the PAI electorate to alternate between the JL and predominantly Jewish parties suggests that at least some of the PAI electorate was willing to engage in a strategic calculus, evaluating which parties will be better positioned to advance issues of interest to the community. Such a calculus would hint at two interrelated spokes. First, for at least the 28% who voted for Meretz and Blue and White in April 2019, influence on central government policy was more important than organization along ethnonational lines. Second, organizational unity was seen as related to greater political influence. Many voters perceived unity to be related to strength, and ultimately, increased chances of attaining political demands. When unity was broken, some voters responded with frustration (as suggested by the strict correlation between organizational disunity and low turnout rates) and others with pragmatism (as shown by voters' movement toward Jewish parties in the first round).

Survey data from this period lends credence to the emphasis placed by the electorate on integration into positions of governance, as well as the reorientation of demands toward the center. Public opinion polls consistently reveal widespread Arab voter desire to see PAI

politicians participate in governance.<sup>62</sup> For example, in a survey taken before the 2015 elections, 61% of the PAI responded that the JL ought to take part in a governing coalition.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, an April 2019 poll had 87% of Arab respondents state that “an Arab party in the Israeli government” would be either “very acceptable” or “fairly acceptable”.<sup>64</sup> A survey conducted shortly ahead of the September 2019 elections had 77.8% of Arab voters supporting “the incorporation of an Arab party or Arab Knesset members into a coalition government” either as formal members of the coalition or as supporters from the outside stood at 77.8%.<sup>65</sup>

The electorate’s demand from its elected politicians to overcome differences in worldview and make a greater effort to integrate into the decision-making apparatus had implications for broader political demands. By forcing political rivals to a common ground three times, the electorate also forced the parties to compromise and overcome the ideological distinctions that defined the different streams in the preceding three phases. Significantly, voter preferences diverged from the emphasis on ethnonationalism and the focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict advanced in the third phase. Having their status as a minority in Israel deteriorate, as evidenced by the enactment in 2018 of Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, as well as the intensification of anti-Arab discourse in the formal political sphere, the electorate began to demand from its elected politicians greater focus on tangible improvements, rather than the strict opposition to Zionism or the championing of Palestinian nationalism.

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<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Khoury, “Majority of the Arab Public is in Favor of Joining Government,”; Dahlia Scheindlin, “Poll: Jews, Arabs Much Less Divided than Israeli Politics Lets On,” *972 Magazine*, April 4, 2019; <https://www.972mag.com/poll-israelis-positive-view-jewish-arab-relations/140846/>; Arik Rudnitzky, “Public Opinion Poll among Arab Voters in Anticipation for the 22 Knesset Elections September 2019,” Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish Arab Cooperation, Tel Aviv University, September 11, 2019, 1

<sup>63</sup> Khoury, “Majority of the Arab Public is in Favor of Joining Government”.

<sup>64</sup> Scheindlin, “Poll: Jews, Arabs Much Less Divided than Israeli Politics Lets On”.

<sup>65</sup> Rudnitzky, *Public Opinion Poll among Arab Voters*, 7.

Evidence supporting this interpretation can be found in public opinion surveys. For example, in a 2015 poll, 70% of respondents stated that improving the Arabs' socio-economic condition was more important than solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, a survey published by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation ahead of the September 2019 elections found that over 59% of respondents identified "day-to-day problems of the Arab society" as their highest priority, followed by 27.5% who pointed to Jewish-Arab and state-Arab relations in Israel and only 13.3% who identified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the highest priority.<sup>67</sup> Amongst Arab voters who prioritized internal Arab concerns, crime and violence were deemed by 19.1% as the most important issues, followed by the economy and jobs (14.8%), poverty and welfare (13.1%), and planning and building (12.2%). Corresponding findings were reported in a February 2020 survey, where as many as 73.4% of respondents identified "day-to-day problems of the Arab society" as the most important issue on their agenda and only 10.2% pointed to "the Palestinian issue."<sup>68</sup> Thus, the Arab electorate in the fourth phase wanted PAI politicians to prioritize the community's social welfare concerns over both Palestinian national concerns and the ideological chasm that led to the organizational fragmentation of the third phase.

The PAI leadership, in turn, has shown signs of recalibrating its political demands to reflect voter priorities. First, the centerpiece of demands articulated in the third phase, which were made in the name of Palestinian nationalism and put forth most vividly in the "Future Vision" documents, were toned down. Furthermore, around the time of the September 2019

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<sup>66</sup> Jack Khoury, "Majority of the Arab Public is in Favor of Joining Government," *Haaretz*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/.premium-1.2570340> [Hebrew].

<sup>67</sup> Rudnitzky, *Public Opinion Poll among Arab Voters*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Arik Rudnitzky, "Few Days Ahead of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset Elections: A Poll in the Arab Public Expects 60% Voter Turnout," Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish Arab Cooperation, Tel Aviv University



elections, ‘Odeh reached out to potential partners outside the PAI community and publicly stated the JL’s conditions for supporting a governing coalition, including in an op-ed in the New York Times.<sup>69</sup> The piece constituted a signal of willingness to engage, and the conditions reflected the priorities of the electorate (only the point dealt with matters of Palestinian identity).

1. Planning and housing: ending home demolitions, canceling the so-called “Kaminitz Law” (which expanded administrative powers to demolish unlawful construction and increased the severity of penalties for building without permit), easing construction in privately owned land in the Arab sector, and constructing a new Arab city in Israel.
2. Violence in the Arab sector: collecting unlicensed firearms from the public and combating organized crime and gun violence.
3. Welfare: constructing a public hospital in an Arab city, raising old age social security payments, and increasing funding for women’s shelters.
4. National-political: renewal of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and cancellation of the Nation-State Law, which declared Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people only.

Furthermore, facing pressure from their own community to become more effective and involved in politics, as opposing to isolationist, the JL took additional steps to demonstrate its willingness to integrate into the decision-making processes. One conspicuous example was its deviation from a long-standing practice of refraining from recommending to the president a

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<sup>69</sup> Nahum Barnea, “Ayman Odeh’s Surprising Announcement,” *Ynet (Yedioth Ahronoth)*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.yediot.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5573332,00.html> [Hebrew]; Ayman Odeh, “Ayman Odeh: We Are Ending Netanyahu’s Grip on Israel,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/22/opinion/netanyahu-israel-gantz-ayman-odeh.html>

candidate for prime minister following the September 2019 and March 2020 elections. The JL recommended Blue and White leader, Benny Gantz, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's main rival.<sup>70</sup> Other attempts at integration included participation in center- and center-left-led demonstrations against the Netanyahu-led government. In 2019, for example, 'Odeh spoke at a Blue and White-organized mass rally against a proposed immunity law for Netanyahu, who was indicted on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, and in a demonstration against the Netanyahu administration's response to the COVID-19 crisis in April 2020.<sup>71</sup> Acknowledging the divide between himself and other politicians present in the demonstrations, while reaffirming his constituency's desire to set aside differences for civic causes, he stated: "It is not easy for me to stand with some of the speakers here, but we must see what is important, now - only a joint Jewish-Arab struggle can win".<sup>72</sup> Other members of the JL participated in similar demonstrations against Netanyahu in the summer of 2020.<sup>73</sup>

Alongside participation in inter-communal rallies, JL MKs participated in 2019 and 2020 in a series of well-attended demonstrations that focused on intra-communal concerns, characterized by their focus on civic, rather than Palestinian national, issues, including mass demonstrations against the police's "weak response to violence in the Arab sector" and a march from Haifa to the residence of the President of Israel in Jerusalem to protest rampant violence in

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<sup>70</sup> In September all of the constituent parties but the NDA recommended Blue and White leader, Benny Gantz. In March 2020, the recommendation was unanimous.

<sup>71</sup> Jack Khoury, "'Odeh spoke, but most Arab MKs did not participate in the demonstration: 'we are not mere guests,'" *Haaretz*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/premium-1.7286272> [Hebrew].

<sup>72</sup> Josh Breiner, "Around 2000 people demonstrated in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv against the erosion of democracy," *Haaretz*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/health/corona/1.8781809> [Hebrew].

<sup>73</sup> "Thousands Demonstrated in Balfour, 16 Arrested for 'Breach of Public Order,'" Ynet (Yedioth Ahronoth), August 30, 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/H1LtYsDQP>; Oren Ziv, "The Balfour protests: thousands attend the largest demonstration so far," *Local Call*, July 25, 2020, <https://www.mekomit.co.il/מהצאת-בלפור-אלפים-הכי-גדולה-עד-הי-בהפגנה-הכי-גדולה-עד-הי>.

the Arab sector.<sup>74</sup> To stress the point, the demands of these demonstrations focused on the minority's civil rights, shifting away from the accent on recognition of Palestinian national and indigenous rights, which characterized the third phase.

To be sure, the division between phases is not binary. Civic issues featured on PAI politicians' agenda in the third phase as well. For example, one study of Knesset speeches found that in 2010-2011, the most common topic raised in PAI MKs' speeches was "discrimination and racism against Arabs" (26.4%).<sup>75</sup> Likewise, a deemphasis on Palestinian nationalism in the fourth phase does not imply its disappearance. Members of the JL criticized the normalization agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, as well as the Peace to Prosperity plan proposed by US President Trump in the name of Palestinian rights.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, and notwithstanding these caveats, civic issues have been repositioned as the centerpiece of PAI political demands in alignment with mass public preference.

Against this backdrop, the run-up for the March 2021 elections saw another split when the UAL decided to run independently of the JL, reasoning that the latter was still not doing enough to position the Arab minority in the center of Israeli politics. In a series of interviews to the Israeli press, UAL parliamentary leader, Member of Knesset Mansur Abbas, argued that the Arab parties needed to reposition themselves in the center of the political spectrum and not to be

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<sup>74</sup> Yasser Okbi and Alon Hakmon, "Violence in the Arab Sector: Tens of Thousands Demonstrated in Majd al-Krum," *Maariv*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/Article-722294> [Hebrew]; Hassan Sha'lan, "Calls to Intensify Protests in the Arab Sector: 'A State of Emergency,'" *Ynet (Yedioth Ahronoth)*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5602923,00.html> [Hebrew]; Jack Khoury, "The Murder of her Son Drove Her to Organize a 'Mothers' March' Against Violence. Today She Will Arrive to Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.9075040> [Hebrew].

<sup>75</sup> Osnat Akirav, "Catch-22: Arab Members of the Israeli Parliament," *Representation* Vol. 50, No. 4 (October 2, 2014), 497.

<sup>76</sup> Khoury, "Thousands Protested in Baqa al-Gharbiyye Against The Deal of the Century: 'Public Apathy is a Sign of Deep Crisis'"; "Tel Aviv and Jerusalem Municipalities in Touching Display Following the Agreement; Arab MKs Mount Strong Criticism," *Maariv*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-790270> [Maariv].

affiliated with ‘either the Left or the Right.’<sup>77</sup> According to Abbas, by tying itself to the Israeli Left, the Arab elite had constrained itself, facilitating its own exclusion from the spheres of influence. Instead, they ought to be open to negotiation, and potentially even support a right-wing, Netanyahu-led coalition if it turned out that such a government was better able to address the issues of need for the Arab citizens. Approximately a week following the elections, Abbas made a statement, broadcasted live on Israeli television networks, in which he defined himself as a “proud Arab and Muslim, citizen of Israel”, omitting any reference to Palestinian identity, and declared he was reaching out to all segments of Israeli society to identify and build upon the commonalities.<sup>78</sup> He went on to repeat that he hoped “the entire political system, the Left and the Right, would accept our approach and understand that this is the right time for a civic partnership that would serve everyone.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, Abbas argued for an even more accentuated centripetal shift than the one offered by the JL at the turn of the decade.

The UAL calculus should be analyzed in a newly emerging context of Israeli politics. Opportunities for repositioning Arab parties emerged as a result of developments that were unrelated directly to the Arab minority, specifically the continuous stale-mate between steadfast supporters and opponents of Netanyahu. As the political spectrum bifurcated, particularly following Netanyahu’s indictment on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, the traditional Left - Right divide was superseded by new lines of division. With parties on both sides unable to reach the parliamentary majority necessary to form government, reaching out to

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<sup>77</sup> Sari Makover-Blikov, “I Don’t Rule Out sitting with Netanyahu’: MK Mansur Abbas Changes Approach,” Maariv online 19 December 2020 <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-809111> [Hebrew]; Atara German, “I am not Left and not Right. I am an Arab Citizen,” Makor Rishon 15 November 2020 <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/281975/> [Hebrew]

<sup>78</sup> Arik Bender and Matan Vaserman, “Mansur Abbas Delivers a Special Speech: ‘We Don’t Belong to Any Block: It’s Time for a Change,’” Maariv Online 1 April 2021, <https://www.maariv.co.il/elections-2021/Article-831138> [Hebrew]

<sup>79</sup> “Abbas: There are Contacts for building a Framework for a Future Coalition with the Change Block,” Maariv Online 20 April 2021, <https://www.maariv.co.il/elections-2021/Article-834898>

previously excluded PAI parties for the purpose of coalition building became expedient. These circumstances, in turn, provided further motivation for PAI leaders to deemphasize Palestinian nationalism in order to legitimate their more central position in politics. Previously unimaginable partnerships - for example, between PAI parties and Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Liberman, whose previous election campaigns included the Arab-targeting “no citizenship without loyalty” slogan - became not only conceivable, but also practical.<sup>80</sup> It was these new circumstances that facilitated the UAL’s decision to bolt the JL so as to allow serious negotiations with the “pro-Netanyahu bloc.” Whereas the JL was committed to replacing Netanyahu, UAL leader Mansur Abbas identified that the new circumstances enabled Arab parties to move to the center of politics if they did not a-priori commit to any camp on the new axis of politics, thus enabling them to gain more on their civic demands.

The electorate’s response to the second split was bifurcated. On the one hand, PAI voter turnout considerably declined to its lowest rate to date, at around 45 percent, indicating yet again the loss of faith identified by Ghanem and Mustafa.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, the UAL was not the main party to suffer from the lower turnout, managing to gain about 38% of the Arab vote, faring particularly well in Bedouin communities in the Negev.<sup>82</sup> The UAL’s electoral showing suggests consequential support for the extent of the repositioning of Arab politics, specifically the desire to move away from the margins to the center of politics, the increasing importance of access to executive positions of decision-making, and ultimately tangible improvements and improvements in the social and civic spheres for the Arab minority. Thus, in the fourth phase, issues like Palestinian collective rights inside Israel or in the West Bank and Gaza, changing the

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<sup>80</sup> Joseph Nasr, “Netanyahu Seeks Loyalty Oath to Jewish Nation-State,” Reuters, October 6, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-netanyahu-oath-idUSTRE6955MC20101006>.

<sup>81</sup> Ghanem and Mustafa, *Palestinians in Israel*.

<sup>82</sup> Arik Rudnizky, “The Arab Citizens Vote for the 24th Knesset (March 2021)” (Jerusalem 2021)

nature of the Israeli state, or the Israeli occupation have taken a back seat to demands that center economic and social development.

In sum, the fourth phase is characterized by a qualitative shift in the trajectory of PAI politics. A majority amongst the PAI electorate has demanded that their politicians overcome internal ideological differences and inter-personal rivalries, and converge around common denominators, primarily a civic agenda with tangible day-to-day benefits. The result has been a rise in what Navot, Rubin, and Ghanem fittingly describe as the “discourse of citizenship” instead of Palestinian nationalism in Israel or the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories, which stood at the center of political demands in the third phase.<sup>83</sup> Along with the high electoral threshold and new opportunities, the PAI electorate in Israel has constituted a centripetal force, pulling the political leadership toward a political equilibrium.

## **Conclusion**

Changes in (1) political organizational and mobilization patterns and (2) types of political demands indicate that Palestinian Arab politics in Israel has entered a fourth phase: centripetalism. This phase has seen social and civic issues take the place of minority nationalism as the main focus of minority demands. Most conspicuous has been the toning down of the centerpiece of demands articulated in the previous decade, which were made in the name of Palestinian nationalism and articulated in the “Future Vision” documents. Instead political demands have been recalibrated to civic issues, such as resolving the problem of high crime rates, gun violence, and other welfare concerns. To be able to better address these priorities, an

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<sup>83</sup> Navot, Rubin, and Ghanem, “The 2015 Israeli General Election,” 268.

increasing segment of Arab society has expressed desire to increase PAI leadership participation in governance. To this end, Arab voters have demanded that their elected representatives abandon the ideological differences that have characterized Arab politics, move toward greater organizational unity, and with that make a greater effort to move from the fringes of politics to its center.

One question that arises is why would the political elites agree to put aside their agenda of minority nationalism and follow the demands raised by PAI masses. Formulated in different terms: Why follow rather than lead? After all, research on ethnic politics in general has long shown the role played by political leaders and entrepreneurs as a driving force of nationalism rather than respondents to mass sentiments.<sup>84</sup> The answer, as this article has shown, lies in institutional constraints, specifically the rise of the electoral threshold. The seemingly minor procedural change of raising the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25% placed PAI parties running separately at risk of being left out of the Knesset, in turn empowering voters to force organizational realignment and incentivize the recalibration of political demands. When politicians diverged from mass preferences, they were penalized at the polls. Thus, the fourth phase has been characterized by the power of these institutional and societal centripetal forces.

The PAI case provides broader theoretical insights. One of the main general lessons from the case is that a decline in the salience of minority nationalism can occur not just as a result of purposeful institutional design, as extant literature on minority nationalism presumes. Rather, when the masses themselves do not prioritize minority nationalism and the electoral incentives are such that political leaders are incentivized to follow the electorate's preferences rather than

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<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Group and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Bergen, 1969); Paul R. Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (Newbury Park, CA, 1991).

lead an agenda of nationalism, conditions are in place for a decline in politicized minority nationalism.