

THE PALESTINIANS IN ISRAEL AND THE 2006 KNESSET ELECTIONS: POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ELECTION BOYCOTT

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ABSTRACT

The percentage of those boycotting in the last Israeli elections forms, from our perspective, the most important general development in Israeli politics, and specifically in the political behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel. This article is an in depth analysis of the meaning of this development and its meanings for the Palestinians in Israel and their future. We believe it is important to present this study as an introduction to the situation of the indigenous Palestinian community in Israel, and their tendency to rethink their present and future political options. Our conclusions may contradict the claim which has been and is being presented by Israeli and Palestinian researchers that the Palestinians in Israel have decided their future as Israeli citizens a long time ago.

Theoretical Background

Political participation increases whenever civil opinions convince the individual of the necessity of citizens' participation in politics, and that this participation will be effective (Nie et al 1974). The latter described this as a feeling of political influence, which means that individual political activity may affect the political process. Other researches assert that a person's political

affiliation motivates them to vote or to participate in the electoral campaigns to show their support for a party. Contrariwise people of weak or no political affiliation are less interested in the results of elections, so they have a lower inclination towards participation. Therefore, the strength of political affiliation affects the forms of participation (Dalton 1988).

Research indicates that an indigenous community which is being pushed to the margin, which succeeds in organising itself politically, looks for ways to get rid of its marginal situation (Gurr 1993). However, in the case of the Palestinians in Israel, political affiliation creates political conflicts regarding the political techniques that can be followed to get rid of their marginal situation (Kaufman and Yisraeli 1999). This feeling of conflict disappears for the Palestinian community in the case of local elections. The case of participation of Palestinians in Israel in local elections is higher than their participation in the Knesset elections and is also higher than general participation rates in the society (Al-Haj 1993; Al-Haj and Rosenfeld 1990; Ghanem 1996). Nevertheless, we cannot depend on this analysis to understand the issue of the increased boycott among the Palestinians in Israel. Mil (1958) makes a connection between participation in the elections and the issue of legitimacy. Whenever participation is higher, the legitimacy of those elected will be enhanced and vice versa. The candidates then care about passing the threshold not only for electoral goals, but also to gain the highest degree of political and popular legitimacy for their success.

Previous research, studying the forms of political behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) elections, was distinguished by its concentration on the voters and on their political affiliation (Neuberger 1998, 1995; Ghanem 1995, 1996; Kaufman and Yisraeli 1999; Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar 2001). In recent years, we note that research has started to study the increased rates of boycott, especially after the extreme boycott of the prime ministerial elections in 2001 (Jamal 2002; Rouhana, Saleh and Sultany 2004; Mustafa 2004). The general electoral behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel witnesses an increase in the percentage of boycotters in the Israeli parliamentary elections. The last Israeli elections in March 2006 emphasised this trend: the percentage was increased to exceed the boycott rate which had reached its peak in the year 2003 (38%). In 2006 this percentage has reached 44%.

Israel has been presented by Israeli and Western academic works as a 'natural state' which was established on the basis of the Jewish (Zionist) national demand for self-determination. This vision finds world political support through the United Nation resolutions, especially the 1947 Partition Resolution, and through strong international support. Moreover, this vision is supported by public opinion and the political elite in Israel, and even by some Palestinian elites in Israel, especially the Communist Party and its activists.

Furthermore, the Israeli system is usually presented as a strong 'Democratic System' which obtains the basic characteristics of the Western democratic system. Israeli sociology and political science has made great efforts to show Israel – state and society – as a liberal and democratic system that depends on absorbing the minorities of the native Palestinian citizens or the Jewish immigrants in ways similar to the open systems in Europe, the United States and Canada. According to this concept, Israel belongs to the club of 'enlightened' states (for more details refer to: Shafir and Peled 2002; Ram 1995).

According to Shafir and Peled (2002), Israeli society and politics were analysed until the late eighties of the last century on the basis of three theoretical frameworks: the functional approach of Eisenstadt (1967); Horowitz and Lissak (1978; 1989), the elite approach of Shapiro (1977; 1996), and the plurality and conflict approach of Smooha (1978). Recently, more critical sociological approaches emerged in Israel in regard to state and society. However, these approaches did not overstep the boundary which considers Israel a democratic system in spite of the admission of those researchers that this system suffers from basic deficiencies compared to normal democratic systems. Since the 1980s several scholars (including Baruch Kimmerling, Majid Al-Haj, Nadim Rouhana, 'Azmi Bishara, Amal Jamal, Shlomo Swirsky, Dan Rabinowitz, Lev Greenberg, Uri Ram, Michael Shalev, Uri Bin-Eliezer, Sammy Smooha) have been publishing works noticeably critical. As a result of that some Palestinian researchers (including Elia Zureik (1979), Khalil Nakhleh (1976; 1978) and Ghazi Falah) emerged, who described Israel as one form of settler colonialism, and Israel's internal structure as the outcome of the conflicts accompany this settler colonialism. Ghanem has presented the system in Israel, in an article published in 1998, as one characterised by the 'Tyranny of the Majority' (Ghanem 1998). Later, he joined Oren Yiftachel in the presentation of an alternative theoretical framework for understanding Israel (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004, 2005).

In this article we argue that Israel is a result of two historical operations that still form the basic elements of system:

- A. Israel is the outcome of a replacing colonisation which seeks to separate the native people from their homeland and country and to replace them by others, Jews.
- B. Israel was constructed, and remains based on a system of ethnic superiority, maintaining an ethnocracy of the Jews in Israel. We disagree with the assessment that the Israeli system depends on the Jewish-democratic contradiction and on the balance between its two wings. It depends on the clear preference of ethnic Jewish construction in its form and content.

In accordance with our understanding, we suggest that Israel is not qualified and does not tend to give a 'real citizenship' to the Palestinians in the

country. It is also not willing to accept the political benefits of its Palestinian citizens' political participation as equal to that of the Jewish citizens. The deepening of this understanding among the Palestinians in Israel is the main factor pushing them to revise the nature of their political participation in the Knesset elections.

Kaufman and Yesraeli (1999) divide the political strategies adopted by the Palestinians in Israel into three: the instrumental strategy, joining one of the establishment parties, as individuals or groups, in order to advance specific interests; the abstention strategy; the independent organisation of the Palestinians in Israel, and the decrease, as much as possible, of their contact with the state and with the Jewish majority as much as possible. Finally, there is the ethno-national strategy, obtaining equality by maintaining the national identity of the minority as an alternative to the first two strategies.

The awareness the 'Israeli Palestinians' began developing is about the reality of the Jewish state, the ethnic nature of this state and its role in blocking the horizon of political work. In the years following the al-Aqsa Intifada (in 2000 clashes between the Israeli police and the Palestinian citizens resulted in 13 Palestinian citizens being shot by the police), this developing awareness greatly affected Palestinian attitudes towards parliamentary work. The Palestinian community status in the Jewish state constitutes a basic element in their political behaviour (Ghanem and Rouhana 1998; Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar 2001). Some researchers, who posit an interrelation between the form and the content of the democratic system and the extent of civil political participation, confirm this trend (Almond and Verba 1963). The individual desire to participate in voting increases as long as the feeling of capacity to affect increases. This desire declines if these feelings diminish (Dahl 2003, 1991).

Furthermore, it is clear that there is a reassessment of the Palestinian struggle in Israel in terms of citizenship, or at least there is a serious attempt to evaluate the usefulness of the continued adherence to the traditional discourse about their citizenship. This discourse was adopted by the Israeli regime and its parties as a control instrument over the Palestinians in Israel and their brothers and sisters under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Israeli regime did not intend real and equal citizenship on any occasion and this remained as it was in the past. However, the Palestinian lists and parties which run in the Knesset elections have adopted a 'serious citizenship' mode of trying to achieve equality, even to the extent of hoping to change the nature of the state and to turn it into 'the state of its citizens'. The Communist Party and the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE) have initiated this discourse and they were followed by all Palestinian parties and political forces. This renewed assessment was the result of the failure to make any changes in the policy of the state that discriminates against its Palestinian 'citizens'. This refers to principal elements in the Israeli attitude

which was maintaining and still maintains a colonial face, even against 'the citizens' of the state.

The Outcome of Elections: Crisis Resulting from Negligence

The results of the seventeenth Knesset elections showed the depth of the polarisation between the Jewish majority and the indigenous Palestinian community in Israel. Moreover, it revealed the extent of the feeling of alienation towards the state, its institutions and its symbols. The elections, for the Israeli Palestinians, came after events and developments that contributed to deepening this feeling of alienation.

First: the political persecution of the political leaders of the Palestinians in Israel reached its peak with the detention of the Islamic Movement leadership and the chairman of Abnaa al-Balad and the investigation of the political stances of Palestinians members of the Knesset (Ghanem 2005; Sultany 2004, 2005).

Second: the rise of the 'transfer'/ethnic cleansing discourse in the Israeli political and public spheres, represented by the threat of the removal of the citizenship of part of the Palestinian citizens in order to maintain a majority of Jews in the state. It was loudly broadcast in the Israeli media that there would be an 'exchange of population' and annexation of lands in the 'Triangle' area with the Palestinian Authority (Arieli and others 2006). So it proved to the Palestinians in Israel that their citizenship was subject to exchange by Israeli politicians. The Yisrael Beteinu Party, headed by Avigdore Lieberman, has included this demand in its electoral platform.

Third: the publication of the recommendations of the 'Orr Commission' in September 2003. Though Commission recommendations included a mention of discrimination against the indigenous Palestinian community, they tried to find a kind of balance in terms of responsibility for the events between the police and the Palestinian citizens (Orr Commission Report, 2003, 2nd volume). After the publication of the Commission recommendations, the section which investigated the policemen has published a report in September 2005. The report did not recommend presenting any bill of indictment against any policeman in the case of the killing of 13 Palestinian citizens. This issue has demonstrated the indifference of the political body towards the lives of Palestinians in Israel. Moreover, it increased the sense of alienation towards state institutions and decreased the rates of trust in the different formal institutions.

Fourth: the marginality of the Palestinian community in Israel has increased on the national level. Previous researches indicated that Palestinians in Israel are marginalised on the level of their civil standing in the state (Al-Haj 1997,

2005, Sulaiman 1999, Ghanem 1996). The feeling of non-influence on the national level increased after the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank. This feeling has deepened the marginal situation of the Palestinians in Israel and their inability to affect general political issues.

The Boycott of the 2006 Elections: The Most Important of Recent Israeli Parliamentary Elections

The massive boycott of the parliamentary elections expressed the political attitudes of the Palestinians in Israel generally, and attitudes towards the parliamentary work specifically. The voting of Israeli Palestinians in the last years was protest voting, a protest against the internal situation of the Palestinians in Israeli society and against governmental policies towards the Palestinians in Israel. It is not possible to discuss the boycott of the Israeli parliamentary elections with concepts like indifference. However, there is a feeling of non-influence on one hand, and an existence of a political crisis on the other. The feeling of non-influence resulted from the structural obstacles that the ethnic Israeli system erects against the demands of the Palestinian citizens. It is not only on the collective level, but also on the level of everyday rights (Ghanem 2001; Ghanem and Rouhana 2001). The political crisis results from the inability of the parties of the Palestinians in Israel to achieve their basic demands or to participate in the process of political decision making through parliamentary work (Ben-Eliezer 1997; Ghanem 1998).

It is difficult to argue that the boycott is ideological, but at the same time the political considerations producing the boycott should not be simplified. Some research has indicated that the ideological boycott is marginal among the Palestinians in Israel (Rouhana, Saleh and Sultany 2004). This claim arises from the assertion that electoral participation is one of the outcomes of the Israelisation and modernisation of Palestinian society, and that political participation was an expression of those two processes (Rekheh 1989; Landau 1993; Cohen 1990, 1992; Smootha 1989). Perhaps the claim of the relation between voting rates and modernisation process is true in general, but it is not accurate in the case of Palestinian society which has developed in an unnatural way, leading to a malformed modernisation (Ghanem 1996; Sa'di 1997). Otherwise it is impossible to explain the highest voting rates in the history of the Palestinians in Israel were in the fifties and sixties when the process of modernisation and Israelisation was in its first stages.

During the Al-Aqsa Intifada events of October 2000 and the massive Palestinian boycott during the prime ministerial elections in 2001 (Jamal 2002), the boycott appeared as a form of protest. The boycott had been converted, by this time, from a silent protest into a loud protest. Some parties appeared and called for a boycott as a kind of political work and as an introduction to

organising the Palestinian community in Israel.¹ The Intifada and the police suppression of the Palestinian protesters demonstrated that the Israeli political system treats the Palestinians in Israel citizens as enemies (Orr Commission between the Palestinians in Israel and the police (Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar 2001), a new political track in the political thought and behaviour of the indigenous Palestinians in Israel was formulated. The most important thing was the first appearance of serious thinking about rebuilding, organising and institutionalising the Palestinian community.

The Palestinian boycott of the 2006 elections in Israel was considered as a political protest against political work, and against the Israeli political system in terms of Palestinian inability to have any real influence. Furthermore, it promoted the public awareness towards the construction of the Israeli system. The consistent and continuous decline in the rates of political participation, which was contrary to the expectations of opinion polls prior to the elections,² proves the stage has been reached when distrust of parliamentary engagement by Palestinians in Israel was intense. The Palestinian boycott should not be considered similar to the boycott by the Jewish society. The reasons and motivations of the two different camps are different. The Jewish public does not have the feeling of non-influence, and the boycott of the Jewish group arises from technical reasons (Arian and Shamir 2002). New research after the year 2001 shows that the Jewish election boycott resulted from disappointment and difficulty in changing the existing situation (Arian and Shamir 2004). The boycott by the Palestinian public refers to the inability to influence the position of the Palestinians in Israel through parliamentary work.

The formal results of the 2006 Knesset elections showed an increased number of Palestinians in Israel boycotted the elections. The boycott percentage reached 44% which is the highest percentage of abstention among the Palestinians in Israel since the first election of 1949. It was also greater than the boycott rates in the previous elections of 2003 where it reached 38%.

We notice through the table and diagram that there is a consistent voting rate decline among the Palestinians in Israel, and this is greater than among the Jews, and that the general tendency is a continuous decline (if we put the elections of 2001 aside because they were only for the prime minister) especially in the last decade which witnessed six electoral rounds of the Israeli

1 The Public Committee for Elections Boycott appeared in the sixteenth and seventeenth elections, and in the prime ministerial elections in 2001, in addition to political movements calling for boycott either directly, such as the Abnaa al-Balad Movement, or indirectly, such as the Islamic Movement headed by Shaykh Raid Salah.

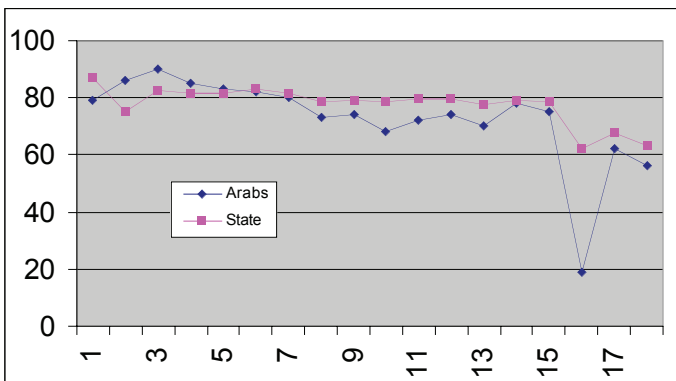
2 For instance, the research conducted by Sammy Smootha of Haifa University indicated that 67% of the Arabs assured their participation in the elections, and, the poll of Mada al-Carmel indicated that 64% believed that the boycott would have a negative effect on the Arab position in Israel.

Participation the Palestinians in Israel in the elections, 1949–2006

<i>The Knesset</i>	<i>Who has the right to vote</i>	<i>Actual votes</i>	<i>Percentage of Palestinians in Israel voting</i>	<i>General percentage</i>	<i>Boycott percentage</i>
1949		26.332	79	86.9	21
1951		58.984	86	75.1	14
1955		77.979	90	82.8	10
1959		81.764	85	81.6	15
1961		86.843	83	81.6	17
1965		106.342	82	83.0	18
1969		117.190	80	81.7	20
1973		133.058	73	78.6	28
1977		145.925	74	79.2	26
1981		164.862	68	78.5	32
1984		199.968	72	79.8	28
1988	295.554	241.601	74	79.7	26
1992	351.646	273.920	70	77.4	30
1996*	407.229	307.497	78	79.3	22
1999*	437.110	321.444	75	78.7	25
2001**		71.891	19	62.3	81
2003	559.000		62	67.8	38
2006			56	63.2	44

* The result of the Knesset elections only, without the prime ministerial elections.

** The results of the prime ministerial elections only.



The solid line shows the percentage of Israeli Palestinians participating: from the 1st. elections in 1949 to the 17th elections in 2006.

The shaded line shows the general participation in elections between 1949 and 2006.

Knesset. The decline percentage in the last decade has reached 22% (from 78% in 1996 to 56% in 2006).

An opinion poll conducted by Haifa University in 2006 highlighted the demographic characteristics of the boycotters. The report demonstrated that religious and very religious groups, in addition to those who identified

themselves as Palestinians and not Israelis, are the biggest sectors who boycott the elections (33.3–38.5% of the boycotters respectively).

This harmonises with our analysis of the ideological boycott represented by the Islamic and the Abnaa al-Balad movements. These two groups are supported by the young generation between the ages 18–24 years old and the rate of boycott here was 29.3%. The Haifa University's poll has also demonstrated that 53.8% of those who feel that they are close to the Islamic movement, headed by Shaykh Raid Salah, boycott the elections compared to 6.3% of those who are close to the Tajammu' party (headed by Dr 'Azmi Bishara), 21.2% the DFPE and 13.8% to the United list. This confirms the existence an ideological dimension to the boycott.

Three main trends calling for boycott appeared in the Palestinian political discourse, but they disagreed in terms of their attitudes towards the state, and the goals and content of the boycott:

1. *The ideological boycott*: research indicates that there are two political movements among the Palestinians in Israel who boycott the elections on an ideological basis. These movements are Abnaa al-Balad and the Islamic movement.³ The ideological boycott during the last decade accounts for, according to the opinion polls, about 10% of the total Palestinian boycotters. The ideological trend believes that participation in the elections gives legitimacy to the state's democracy and it cannot change the situation of the Palestinians in Israel (Rouhana, Saleh and Sultany 2004).
2. *The political boycott*: this is the style of abstention of which appeared widely after the massive boycott of the prime ministerial elections in 2001, and after the killing of 13 Palestinian citizens by the shooting of the army and police forces in October 2000 (Jamal 2002). This boycott expresses a political protest against the situation of the Palestinians in Israel on one hand, and the inability of the parliamentary arrangement to make the desired change in this situation on the other. Moreover, this boycott expresses a protest against the Palestinian issue, at the absence of an appropriate party among the Palestinians in Israel, and asserts the necessity of reforming the representative institutions of the Palestinians in Israel, and considering the existing parliamentary political work as an obstacle preventing social reorganisation of the Palestinians in Israel. This form of boycott is considered the highest among the boycotters. It ranges between 35–38% of the total Palestinian boycotters. This type of boycott has increased in recent years (Neuberger 1998; Rouhana and others 2003).
3. *The technical boycott*: this is the boycott that stems from the lack of interest in political work and political participation. It does not arise

3 The Islamic Movement has been led by Shaykh Raid Salah since 1996 (Rekhess 1993; Landau, 1993; Ghanem 2004).

The reasons for the boycott in the last decade*

	1996	1999	2003	2006
Ideological reasons	10.8	11.4	9	2.9
Political reasons	36.0	38.0	35	51.3
Carelessness	18.0	23.3	20	14.6
Other	35.2	27.3	36	31.2

* The resource: the data of 1996 taken from Kaufman and Yesraeli (1999), the data of 1999 taken from Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar (2001), the data of 2003 taken from Rouhana and others (2004), the data of 2006 taken from Samuha (2006).

from ideological or political reasons, but from personal reasons related to apathy. This boycott considers Election Day as a day of rest and enjoyment; the other reasons discussed by political literature relating to Europe and the United States of America (Dalton 1988). This percentage does not exceed 20% of the boycotters.

The Direct Factors Leading to the Increase in the Percentage of Boycott

In addition to the general context of the boycott which, in our perspective, consists of a serious re-evaluation of the political choices of the Palestinians in Israel adopted after the 1948 Nakba and the establishment of Israel, there were a set of political reasons which contributed towards pushing the Palestinian community adopting the boycott option in unprecedented numbers. The most important reasons are the following:

The Lack of One Unified Palestinian Election List in Israel

The forming of one Palestinian list in the 2006 Knesset elections raised a strong discussion among the Palestinians, partly because the threshold for a successful list was raised from 1.5% to 2%, and partly because of the continuing decline in the percentage of Palestinians participation in the elections. The demand for a unified list was affected deeply by this discussion. Opinion polls conducted prior to the elections, in regard to the formation of this list and its popularity among the Palestinians in Israel, demonstrated its high public support. The poll conducted by the Moshe Dayan Center demonstrated that 60% of the Palestinian voters would vote for the joint list. According to Mada al-Carmel's second annual poll, 60% of the Palestinians would vote for a joint list. However, running the elections on separate lists would decrease the voting percentage to 63.3%, whereas 12.8 % would boycott the elections. According to the poll also one joint list would increase the percentage of voting participation to more than 20%.

All the parties expressed their consent to forming one united Palestinian

list, but they did not take serious steps to achieve it. Their agreement continued to be just a slogan to hide partisan concerns and political disputes and personal interests. Every party justified its stance towards unity from a different perspective. Al-Tajammu' accepted the idea of unity between the parties during the pre-election period, but it did not adopt the idea that the joint list would raise the representation of Palestinians in the Israeli Knesset. Chairman of al-Tajammu', 'Azmi Bishara, who is also a Knesset member, explained:

When there was one party of the Palestinians in Israel to be represented in the Knesset, it won five seats in the best times in 1977. When we were two parties, we were represented in nine parliamentarians, and when three serious lists ran in the elections, we won ten seats ... The condition is that the list is able to pass the threshold, but not to spoil the votes. When three lists were able to pass the threshold and ran the elections, they gathered the Palestinians in Israel and shared the votes between them. They marginalised the Zionist parties and won ten seats. So the matter is that the parties running for the elections should be able to succeed, whether they run as united or separate.⁴

The DFPE considered the formation of one list as not a 'holy principle', and that joint work between the lists deserves more discussion, but not just a unified list. The DFPE tried to maintain a coalition with the 'List for Change', but internal pressure from the Communist Party was in favour of supporting the candidacy of a Jewish candidate for the third position and giving the Palestinian list of candidates the fourth position. However the DFPE later rejected this proposal. Muhammad Barakeh comments: 'it was clear from the beginning that it was possible to agree on one political programme, and there would be no problems if the Front [DFPE] headed the list'.⁵ Nevertheless, the problem of listing the first six seats and the disagreement over this issue undermined this coalition.⁶

The absence of political differences between the parties

Powell demonstrates (Powell 1982) that real political competition is an effective factor in the participation rate in elections. Moreover the political differences between parties led to an increase in rates of participation in the elections. Some research indicates that some groups cast their ballots out of a feeling of civic duty (Conway 1985).

The political equation that called for not voting for the Zionist parties and voting only for the Palestinian lists has played a role in the absence of political and ideological differences between the Palestinian parties in Israel. The competition was converted so that it took place between the Palestinian lists on one hand and the Zionist parties on the other. This situation led to

4 *Fasl Al-Maqal*, December 2005.

5 *Al-Ittihad*, 10 February 2006.

6 *As-Sinnarah*, 10 February 2006.

the quietness of the electoral competition on the Palestinian street because of the common external 'enemy'. The quietness of the electoral battle contributed to the absence of political differences and political discussion among the Palestinian lists which led to the absence of the electoral battle until the last minute. This equation did not affect the voting percentage of the Zionist parties (see below) which maintained their electoral strength among the Palestinian society in Israel because the voters for these parties were not motivated by political or ideological reasons, but by personal instrumental interest (Kaufman and Yisraeli 1999; Kaufman 1997). However, the equation had a negative effect in regard to voting rates for the Palestinian parties on one hand, and political participation in general on the other. The absence of political discussion between the Palestinian parties changed the electoral competition in 2006 into the quietest election competition the Palestinians in Israel have witnessed. It was not only the political discussion that disappeared, but also the personal discussion between the candidates.

The appearance of the boycott trend

The 'Public Committee for Elections Boycott' appeared for the first time during the prime ministerial elections of 2001 to promote a consensus among Israeli Palestinians in favour of boycotting the elections. It was a protest step against the killing of 13 Palestinian citizen by the bullets of Israeli security forces. The committee had worked in the elections of 2003, but it was better organised in the elections of 2006. The popular committee included political bodies which boycotted the elections such as the Abnaa al-Balad movement and other academic, public and media personalities in the Palestinian society in Israel. In February 2006, the committee issued a pamphlet in which it asked Palestinians in Israel to boycott the parliamentary elections. The committee justified this step by different factors of both an ideological and a political nature. In one of the statements, the elections boycott committee announced: 'the boycott committee advocates the principle of boycotting the next Knesset elections on a political basis'. The committee advocated the development an alternative platform based on the following principles:

- *First*: the central national principle which means not taking an effective political role in supporting the highest Israeli institution, the Knesset, by voting for it and supporting its legitimacy. This institution represents the state which was built over the rubble of our people and still practices the daily suppression and persecution of its children.
- *Second*: the inability of the Palestinian representatives to be effective through parliamentary work. They become a consistent opposition after the elections. They neither have any worthy option nor do they have any possibility to participate in decision-making. Today, on the eve of the Knesset elections that will be conducted next March, the meanings

and indications of participation in the parliamentary policy should be rechecked in the light of the inability to have an affect.

- *Third:* the situation of Palestinian parties: the revision of the situation of Palestinian parties which participate in the Knesset game indicates that these parties were converted into hostages, ‘the need to stay in the playground’, through the Knesset for its concessions in the appropriate and equal struggle escalation against the colonial, racial Zionist attacks against our people in their formal description as citizens, and against our Palestinian people who struggles for return, freedom and independence.
- *Fourth:* in the light of the failure of the influence experiment to achieve our daily and national-political rights through the Knesset, and the role of this institution as a source of racial legislation for the ‘Jewish State’ against Palestinian citizens ... we suggest the implementation of a programme of reforming and rebuilding all our Palestinian institutions in Israel by electing higher national bodies to represent our public (The Public Committee for Elections Boycott, 14 February 2006).

The Analysis of the Palestinian Voters for the 16th Knesset

The Palestinians who participated in the elections are divided into voters for the Jewish parties and voters for the Palestinian parties, including the DFPE and the Communist Party which formed a joint Jewish-Palestinian party on ideological grounds and the grounds of the joint interests of Palestinian and Jewish members. This is due to the fact that this structure, in the last years, has become identified with the interests of the Palestinians in Israel.

Voting for the Jewish parties:

The Jewish parties took 25% of the Palestinian votes in the 2006 Knesset elections which meant a decline in the percentage of support that these parties got for the previous rounds of elections (29.4% in the years 1999 and 2003). The Palestinian votes were divided between the Jewish parties as follows: Labour-12.5 %, Kadima- 6.5%, Shas, 2.8%, Meretz, 2.7%, Yisrael Beteinu, 1% and others 2%. Half of the Palestinians in Israel votes to the Zionist parties went

The rates of Palestinian voting for the Zionist parties between the years 1992–2006

2006	2003	1999	1996	1992	
12.5	7.5	7.4	16.6	20.3	Labour
12.5	21.9	22.0	17.0	33.0	Other Jewish parties
25	29.4	29.4	33.6	53.3	Total

Voting for the Jewish parties in the last decade according to the population groups

	1996	1999	2003	2006
Druze	80.6	85.4	77.7	74.4
Bedouin	33.4	35.0	33.1	26.1
Urban	28.3	15.1	20.0	19.7

to the Labour Party which became stronger among the Palestinians in Israel in these elections compared to the previous ones.

Comparing the results of the last three elections, we notice stability in support for the Jewish parties and an increase in the voting rate for the Labour Party in the last election. This might be because of its concentration on the social-economic agenda on one hand, and for having two Palestinian candidates in guaranteed positions on the other. We can say that the general trend since early eighties towards voting for Palestinian parties and the decline in voting for Jewish parties (except in 1992) has ceased since 1996 and there is a stable situation regarding their support.

The voting rate for Jewish parties has become stable since the Knesset elections in 1999. This is the end of a decline stage of voting for Jewish parties which reached its peak during the military government and in the 1992 elections. However, if we look deeper into the results, we find that Zionist parties were already retreating in terms of the votes they got from the Palestinians in Israel. In general, Zionist parties achieved the lowest Palestinian support in the 2006 elections. This represents the greatest deterioration of the Jewish parties. There are many reasons for this deterioration. Some are related to changes in Palestinian society and some are related to the development of identity politics, namely the development of the national factor as an effective factor in Knesset voting (Rouhana 1993). Moreover, the use of a direct election law for a period of time (1996–2001) has increased voting for the parties who represent a plural identity (Bishara 2005). Other reasons are related to the campaign by Palestinian parties in which they called for ‘fighting the voting for Jewish parties’. The Palestinian parties have concentrated, in their slogans, on this issue especially when the opinion polls expected a strong return for the Jewish parties by the Palestinian society. Voting for the Jewish parties has declined even at the level of the different classes of Palestinian society, especially in the Druze areas, although it still very high here in comparison to other Palestinian groups.

Voting for the Palestinians in Israel parties

Palestinians in Israel form 13% of those who have the right to vote in Israel. It is less than their general population percentage in the state which reaches 16% (Haider 2005). The Palestinian parties (both those who passed the threshold,

and those who did not) got 75% of the Palestinian vote (256,721 votes) which means that all Palestinian parties received fewer votes than the number of Palestinian abstentions which reached about 365 thousand. It is the first time in the history of the political behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel that the party of the abstained got more votes than the number of voters generally and more than the number of the voters to the Palestinian parties specifically. Three Palestinian lists passed the threshold. The United Arab list got 3.1% of the votes and four seats in the Knesset whereas the DFPE got 2.8% of the votes and three seats, and the 'National Alliance' got 2.4% and three seats too.

There is a retreat in support for the Palestinian parties compared to the total number of those who have the right to vote. This situation began in the 1999 Knesset elections when the Palestinian parties got (those who passed the threshold, and those who did not) 61.7% of the total number of those who had the right to vote. In the 2003 Knesset elections, the Palestinian parties got 45.5%. In the 2006 elections the support continued to decline, so all the Palestinian parties got 41.9% of the total number of the Palestinians who had the right to vote. In the last elections, three Palestinian political blocs were competing in the elections as follows:

1. **The United Arab List and its Alliances:** The electoral strength of the United List increased as it got 26.6% of the total number of those who have a right to vote in the fifteenth Knesset elections, but it greatly declined in the sixteenth elections to 11.7%. It increased again in the 2006 elections when it got 15.4% of the total number of Palestinians who had the right to vote (from 65 thousand votes in 2003 to 94 thousand votes in 2006). The United List won four seats. This electoral support was related to the fact that the United List included three parties: the parliamentary Islamic movement, the Arab Democratic Party and the Arab Movement for Change. The success of the United List was related to the impression it made after unity with the Arab Movement for Change. This impression was reinforced by the candidates' geographic distribution. The candidate from the Negev was guaranteed a position on the list contrary to other lists. It was the same in regard to the 'triangle', Galilee and the cities on the coast. The Islamic Movement has used its organisational strength on the Election Day, and could call the people to vote for it. The United List also included new faces such as Shaykh Ibrahim Sarsur and 'Abbas Zakur.
2. **The National Democratic Alliance (al-Tajammu') and its 'Partners':** the Tajammu' and its partners, mainly the 'Arab National Party' headed by Muhammad Kana'an and the National Work Front headed by Hashem Mahamid, got three seats in the Knesset in these elections maintaining its parliamentary representation of 2003; however, despite maintaining its parliamentary representation it retreated in terms of public support

in spite of the fact that two political movements provided the Tajammu' with electoral support. The Tajammu' got 11.7% of the total of Palestinians who had the right to vote in the 2006 elections. It decreased compared to the sixteenth elections when the Tajammu' got 12.7% of those who had the right to vote (71 thousand votes in 2003 out of 550 thousand votes and 72 thousand in 2006 out of 620 thousand).

There are many reasons for the retreat in Tajammu's electoral strength since the fifteenth Knesset elections (then Tajammu' got 15.1% of those who had the right to vote):

First, Tajammu' did not concentrate, in its election campaign, on the political and ideological differences between it and the other Palestinian parties as it had done in the previous election rounds. The Tajammu' concentrated on the slogans 'vote for Palestinians lists' or 'if your vote is for a Zionist, what you will be?' which covered the political differences between the parties and put them in one camp against the Zionist parties. The absence of differences between the Tajammu' and the DFPE and the concentration of the al-Tajammu' on daily issues offered the DFPE some success because the DFPE was distinguished for presenting the daily issues of the people.

Second, The al-Tajammu' did not change the construction of its list to meet the urgent demand for a women candidate in one of the guaranteed locations; the woman who ran for the internal elections for the third location failed and the composition of the three guaranteed locations was still the same as in the previous elections.

Third, it is very clear that the Knesset Member 'Azmi Bishara has become a burden to the al-Tajammu' especially after the publicity around the episode when he sent letters and was a mediator between Israel and Syria.⁷ This was in addition to his relations with the Syrian regime which is known for its hostility to the Palestinian leadership which insisted on an 'independent Palestinian decision' and refused to be annexed to the Asad regime in Syria. And finally, its slogan in the recent elections, 'citizenship is a right, voting is a duty' was, in the Israeli context, a call for full Israelisation. This slogan and its meanings were rejected in general and in its details by the majority of the Palestinians in Israel.

The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality

The DFPE retreated in terms of the number of Palestinian voters and on the level of electoral support (85.823 thousand in the 2006 elections, 93.819 thousand in 2003). Despite the decline in the voting rates for the DFPE, it

⁷ See, e.g., As-Sinnara, 17 and 24 March 2006.

The voting average for the Palestinians in Israel parties among the Palestinians in Israel who have the right to vote

	2006	2003	1999	1996
DFPE	14	16.7 (coalition between united list and the Arab Movement for Change)	19.9	31.7 (coalition with the al-Tajammu')
The united list	15.4 (coalition with the Arab Movement for Change)	11.7	26.2	21.9
The National Alliance	11.7	12.7	15.1 (coalition between united list and the Arab Movement for Change)	-
The total (both who passed and who did not pass the threshold)	41.9	45.6	61.7	58

maintained its parliamentary representation through having three seats alone while it won three seats in coalition with the Arab Movement for Change in the sixteenth elections. It has proved that giving a guaranteed place to a Jewish candidate even at the expense of a Palestinian candidate and did not distance the Palestinian voters from the DFPE because the strong organisational core of the Communist Party was still protecting the DFPE.

The support of the DFPE retreated in the seventeenth elections when it got 14% of those who had the right to vote whereas it got 16.7% of the Palestinian votes in the sixteenth elections. There are many reasons for the retreat of support for the DFPE: first, the internal conflict between its components, especially its core represented by the Communist Party. Second, the increase of sharp discussion before and after the internal and parliamentary elections in order to reform the DFPE and to clarify independently its organisational and political identity, from the influence of the Communist Party. This discussion appeared in the last years and it became sharper after the failure of 'Isam Makhul (the secretary of the Communist Party) in the internal elections. However, the elections show that the DFPE has consistent support in Palestinian society that forms its electoral safety valve.

Conclusion

There was an unprecedented and historic change in the 2006 Knesset elections, but it was not separated from the past in terms of Palestinian participation in the parliamentary elections in Israel. The participation in the real balloting retreated to less than 50% of the voters. This change can be considered as historic in regard to the form of action towards voting. It, basically, concerns the real content of this political behaviour which represents a political tendency among most of the boycotters that contradicts their previous options. It is a challenge to Israeli institutions and also to Palestinian parliamentary activities in Israel.

The last elections made changes in the equations that used to guide the political behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel.

In the past it was believed, firstly, that voting for the Palestinian parties and participation in the elections were an expression of political protest against the Israeli system. Second, was that participation and voting in general and voting for the Palestinian parties specifically was part of the awareness of the 'force of citizenship' while abstention was a consequent exhaustion of this force. Third, that parliamentary work was useful and that parliamentary politics was able to make a change in the Palestinian position even on the level of the demand for rights.

The electoral behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel has revealed a change in these equations, replacing them by alternatives since the prime ministerial elections in 2001, through the Knesset elections 2003 up to the 2006 elections:

First: the protest against the position of the Palestinians in Israel, either on the level of political ability to effect or on the level of civil issues, is no longer expressed by participation, but by abstaining and boycott. The boycott is no longer spontaneous, but there are political trends and organisational movements leading this abstaining or boycotting trend. The promotion of the boycott discourse takes place through political concepts that enhance its theoretical existence and explain the basis upon which the previous equation was built.

Second, boycott, abstention and quitting parliamentary work was converted into a means of identifying the citizenship and negotiating again about its content.

Third, the increased percentage of the boycott proves that there is a retreat in the Palestinian trust in parliamentary political work as an instrument for changing the position of the Palestinians in Israel. The boycott is not only a protest against the position of the Palestinian community, but it is also a protest against parliamentary politics.

Understanding this form of political behaviour involves looking at basic principles of the political institutions. So, if Israel is a 'natural state' built on the basis of the Jewish (Zionist) nationality, demanding in self-determination though the establishment of an independent state, as is claimed by the political elites in Israel and even some Palestinian elites in Israel, the wide participation of all the citizens, also including the indigenous community, will be natural. However, Israel is a product of a 'colonial settlement process' created by the Jewish elites in Europe and the West. The Palestinians generally and the citizens of Israel specifically believe that certain imperial states such as Britain, France and Russia contributed to carrying out that process. Israel was continued after its independence in 1948 in its policies drawn from its perspective as a foreign body in the region that fights its neighbours continuously on many levels. It was also continued in carrying out internal colonial policies against its Palestinian citizens including the exclusion of the Palestinian representatives in Israel from serious participation in decision making. Israel has also restricted the governmental coalition to Jewish parties only. This trend has recently been expressed in a direct and clear way by Ehud Olmert (the current prime minister). In this regard we say it is not natural that the Palestinians in Israel voluntarily participate in the Knesset elections, but rather the contrary.

There has been a massive retreat in voting since the high participation in the elections in the fifties. This retreat to less than 50% of the voters in the last elections proves that the Palestinians in Israel are reviewing their political choices and are not ready to continue to play a political role on the margin of the colonial project and to perform a secondary role which gives legitimacy to the Jewish state through elections. The percentage of abstention was increased in the last six years from 22% (who boycotted the elections in 1999) to more than 50% (who boycotted the last elections). Some aspects of this increase are related to the protest process against the political performance of some leaders of the Palestinians in Israel. It is also related to a rejection of the form of institutional treatment of our representatives in the Knesset in addition to the procedures and laws that the Knesset approved in the last years against those representatives.

The form of political protest changed from participation in the elections into protest by the boycott not only against the construction of an ethnic political system that put structural obstacles in the way of any civil and political accomplishment by the Palestinians in Israel, but it was also a protest against the total of parliamentary political work. This historic change would not have been possible without the following important factors: the stance of the Islamic movement under the leadership of Shaykh Raid Salah, the stance of the Public Committee for Elections' Boycott, the absence of influence of the representatives of the Palestinians in Israel in the Knesset not only on the political resolutions of a national nature, but also regarding civil issues, the

retreat in the political and organisational work of the Palestinian parties and their leadership, who give up playing a real political role in public life during the last years and the absence of political representation especially women.

The parties, or at least part of their supporters and leaders, realise the importance of analysing and understanding the situation, and they should be interested in more than passing the threshold percentage in the next elections. They should enter the process of organising Palestinian society in Israel on a national basis outside parliament in order to have an effective political position which could send its representatives to the Knesset, but it should not allow the Knesset and the Palestinian members in it, who are subjected to its laws, to be the main political leaders of the Palestinians in Israel.

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