VOTING FOR APARTHEID: THE 2009 ISRAELI ELECTIONS

OREN YIFTACHEL

Focusing primarily on Israeli voter attitudes with respect to the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, this paper argues that the results of the 2009 elections highlight the structural entanglement of Israeli politics within a colonialist process of "creeping apartheid" not only in the West Bank but in Israel proper. The elections also demonstrated the continuing relevance of identity and class politics among Israeli voters and the trend among culturally and economically marginalized groups to support the colonialist agendas set mainly by the settlers, the military, and parts of the globalizing economic elites. In parallel, election results among Palestinians in Israel reflect their growing alienation from a political system that structurally excludes them from political influence.

THREE DAYS AFTER Israel’s Knesset elections on 10 February 2009, Avigdor Lieberman, leader of Yisrael Beiteinu (the “Israel Is Our Home” party), articulated a short list of demands for joining a future coalition government. His hard-line rightist party emerged as one of the big winners of the elections, increasing its representation in the Knesset from 11 to 15 (out of 120), and was now poised to play a determining role in Israeli politics. Lieberman, a West Bank settler and Russian immigrant, declared that his party would join a future coalition

Only if practical steps are taken for Israel to "finish the job" of annihilating Hamas. . . . I mean putting a total end to the Hamas regime in Gaza. . . . In addition, we demand a new citizenship law which will ensure what we repeatedly said throughout the campaign: "No loyalty, no citizenship."¹

These demands point to the main trend of these elections: the return of openly declared Jewish colonialist goals and the intensification of apartheid-like measures as popular political agendas. In posing his conditions, Lieberman uses internal political negotiations to advocate political change outside the state’s borders even while deepening the exclusion of the national Palestinian minority inside. It is a measure of the shift in Israel’s public mood that these colonialist, racist, and probably illegal demands were accepted as part of fair

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negotiations for the formation of a future government, and were met with only scant public outcry. Indeed, immediately following the near electoral deadlock between Israel’s two major parties—center-rightist Kadima, which received twenty-eight Knesset seats, and the rightist Likud, which won twenty-seven seats—the wooing of Yisrael Beitainu by both parties to join their potential coalition began. Even the Labor party (traditionally considered “center-left”) turned back on its campaign pledges “never to sit with Yisrael Beitainu in the same government.” This weakening party, which sunk to an all-time low of thirteen Knesset seats, ended up joining the governing coalition formed by Benjamin Netanyahu’s rightist Likud and Lieberman’s protofascist Yisrael Beitainu as a minor partner following six weeks of post-election negotiations. Thus, despite the controversy generated by Lieberman and his party, their rhetoric was but the tip of the iceberg of a general trend: Yisrael Beitainu’s acceptance by all major parties amounts to an indirect yet loud endorsement of its dual colonialist agenda.

DEMOCRATIC DISTORTIONS

Looking at the results of the 2009 Israeli elections within their broad historical, geographical, and political settings, it is difficult not to see them as highlighting the structural entrapment of Israeli politics within a colonial process of “creeping apartheid” taking place in the entire area under Israeli control between the (Jordan) River and the (Mediterranean) Sea. To be sure, colonialist agendas have been advanced “on the ground” by all Israeli governments, including those of the so-called Left. But in 2009 such goals have become more explicit, with the escalation of anti-Arab discourses relating both to the ongoing violence between Israel and Hamas and to the intensifying demands among the Palestinian minority for equality and autonomy inside Israel. As the colonialist agendas are being increasingly legitimized, institutionalized, semi-legalized, and constructed “on the ground,” and as Palestinian resistance continues in various violent and nonviolent guises, the Israeli/Palestinian space increasingly resembles the South African apartheid state—one group, identified by its ethnic/racial origins, controls multi-group territories. Under such regimes, civil status is stratified, with security and geography forming the main tools to prevent the resisting “races” from achieving equal access to resources and power.

Within this system, all Jews living within the areas under Israeli control, whether Israel itself or the occupied territories, enjoy the same juridical status with an undifferentiated right to vote. Palestinians living in these same areas, by contrast, are divided into two main groups: (a) those residing within the Green Line (Israel’s internationally recognized border), who, as Israeli citizens, have the right to vote; and (b) residents of the colonized (occupied) Palestinian territories who are denied that right. Palestinian citizenship/residency status is further stratified into six different subcategories that determine “from above” their mobility, rights, and material status in a setting resembling apartheid South Africa.
The dominance of an open colonialist agenda is not surprising given the colonial geography that has developed since 1967. Nearly half a million Jewish settlers now form a “seamless” extension of the Israeli state into all parts of the West Bank, while the Palestinians living there are denied access to political powers from the state that controls them and indeed access to the material resources of the territory where they reside. In addition, the 1.2 million Palestinians in Israel who can vote are extremely limited in their political power due to a range of legal and informal constraints. Hence, despite the differing legal status of “Israel proper” and the occupied territories, Jewish Israel effectively controls the lives not only of its Palestinian citizens but also of the Palestinians in the territories who have negligible political influence on the policies directly affecting them.6

These conditions notwithstanding, most analysts treat Israel as a “normal” state wherein political parties simply jostle for popular support among the voters. This view is misleading, as it misses the fundamental flaw outlined above—the disconnect between sovereign and voting powers. Sovereign power, as noted, is vested in the Jewish public, which continuously debates the future of the Palestinian territories, while Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line have virtually no influence on this political process.7 This is a typical colonial setting, in which political parties, immune to any electoral backlash from the (mainly disenfranchised) subject populations, can escalate their racist rhetoric with impunity.

In addition to this glaring democratic distortion, the very presence of Jewish settlers has concrete electoral implications. For example, as in 1988 and 1996, the colonialist bloc in these last elections won a majority only due to the vote of West Bank settlers. In the new Knesset, ten seats will be held by settlers, tipping the balance of power and ensuring the prevalence of their agendas for the next few years.8 While this situation is clearly undemocratic, it enjoys full legitimacy in Israel and around the world.

In the recent past, particularly since the Oslo years, Israeli leaders were more careful to couch their agendas in terms of “continuing the peace process,” supporting at least nominal equality of all state citizens. Admittedly, these statements mainly functioned as lip service, and were rarely backed by actual policies, but they allowed political leaders to maintain a certain façade of respectability. This façade is no longer.

THE CAMPAIGN

Yisrael Beitainu’s aggressive anti-Palestinian campaign triggered a race of ethnic out-bidding that dragged all Jewish parties, anxious to capture the nationalist vote, toward more hard-line positions.
The short campaign began immediately after Israel’s massive attack on Gaza, during which the Jewish public and media closed ranks behind the military. The massive destruction and death inflicted on Gaza were considered by most a “proper response” to Hamas’s continuous rocket attacks on Israeli civilians following Israel’s 2005 withdrawal from the Strip, as well as to the anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish Islamic discourses that accompanied the shelling. The subsequent siege imposed on the Strip and the ongoing Israeli violence against Gaza (where hundreds had been killed even before Operation Cast Lead began) were excluded from public debate, where the main sentiment was revenge against a demonized Hamas.

Driven by widespread militarism, most parties emphasized their nationalist resolve and toughness at the expense of debating burning issues concerning Israeli society, such as the widespread corruption that had toppled outgoing Prime Minster Ehud Olmert; the rapid neoliberalization of the economy and the resultant growing socioeconomic gaps; a pending economic recession; an acute water crisis; and persistent structural problems within the state’s land and education systems.

“Security,” then, became a euphemism for the most anti-Arab (phrased as “anti-enemy”) measures, which—as is typical in ethnocratic societies—trumped all other issues. “Security” could now justify nearly any measure impinging on the Arab populations—road blocks, marriage laws, budget allocations, land policies, even military intervention in civil policy-making. It exposed the working of the “creeping apartheid” system on both sides of the Green Line, where such measures were tailored to fit the differing legal status of the Palestinians, while serving the same purpose of ethnic control. Apartheid has not been declared or legislated by Israel; rather, it constitutes a series of thickening practices, regulations, laws, and acts of violence used for separating Jews from Arabs and for preserving Jewish superiority. The (mainly liberal) Jewish opposition to these processes appears unable to change substantially this course of events.

Under such circumstances, security became the only substantive issue to be “debated” in a particularly unidimensional campaign. This played right into the hands of colonialists and nationalists, at the expense of liberals and socialists. Here are a few telling examples from the campaign:

- Ehud Barak, leading the centrist Labor party (putatively a leading force for continuing the peace process), repeatedly flagged his militaristic background as a major electoral asset. At one point, Barak, who since his failure at the Camp David talks of 2000 has led an aggressively hard-line position vis-à-vis the Palestinians, accused Lieberman of “never having shot an Arab” and promised his voters to “annihilate terrorists on their toilet seats.”

- Benjamin Netanyahu, now Israel’s prime minister, and his Likud party repeatedly delegitimized their main rival—Kadima’s leader Tzipi...
Livni—by bombarding the public with messages that “she is weak on security” and “the job is too big for her,” alluding also to the “natural” weakness of women in facing security challenges.10

- One of Netanyahu’s main campaign calling cards was “reminding” the public of his accurate warning about the missile launching capabilities of Hamas following Israel’s 2005 withdrawal from Gaza. Only Likud can prevent the repetition of such an outcome, he promised, neglecting to mention that he voted for the Gaza “disengagement” while serving as a senior minister in Ariel Sharon’s government.

- Even small leftist parties adopted nationalistic advertising: the liberal Meretz party took the slogan “we shall not compromise,” while the Green Movement claimed “Only we can guard the homeland.”

- The four main religious parties competed in their claims to best serve the Judaization agenda in its religious, settlement, and military guises. Particularly aggressive was Eli Yishai, leader of the Mizrahi (Eastern Jewish) party, who declared during the Gaza invasion: “We had a great opportunity in Gaza to smash and flatten them... to destroy thousand of houses, tunnels and industries, and kill as many terrorists as possible.”11

- All the main religious parties during the campaign supported further measures of control over the Arabs in Israel, regarding them (routinely) as part of Israel’s “enemies within.”12 Much attention was focused on Umm al-Fahm, a large Arab town whose mayors have long come from the ranks of the Islamic movements, which became a target for religious anti-Arab campaigning, nationalist marching, and ongoing provocation.13

Ironically, the militaristic mood caused by the Gaza invasion backfired against its architects—the ruling Kadima and particularly the Labor party, which at least in rhetoric supports the peace process. The Jewish public adopted Barak’s hard line against Hamas, but then (logically) decided to strengthen the “real” militaristic alternative—the colonialist Right. Another irony was that in the name of “democracy” the Israeli elections, which were neither general nor free, put in power a colonialist bloc bent on deepening the “creeping apartheid” process even while vowing to remove the democratically elected Hamas government.

**The Results**

Thirty-four parties ran in the 2009 elections, but only twelve managed to clear the 1.5-percent threshold needed to put members in the Knesset. None of the twenty-four parties that failed to enter parliament crossed the 1-percent mark. The overall turnout was 3.4 million, or 65.2 percent of eligible voters—higher by 2 percentage points than the 2006 elections.
Table 1: Parties and Blocs in Israeli Elections, 1999–2009 (in Knesset Seats)

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<th>Major Blocs</th>
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<td>Shas</td>
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<td>United Torah Judaism</td>
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<td>Joined National Union</td>
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<td>Yisrael Ba’aliyah (Israel in Ascent)</td>
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<td>Likud</td>
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<td>Kadima</td>
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<td>Gil (Pensioners)</td>
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<td>‘Am Echad (One People)</td>
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<td>United Arab List (al-Muwahtidah)</td>
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<td>National Democratic Alliance (al-Tajamu/Balad)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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*The Jewish Home party split from National Union during the 2009 campaign.

**As became clear in 2005, when the Likud split into two equal parts, Likud voters in the 2003 elections straddled the colonialist-ethnographic divide, with half the Likud MKs elected that year favoring Sharon’s line officially supporting a two-state solution and the other half sticking to traditional Likud positions.

Table 1 shows the results of the last four Knesset elections. It was between the 2003 and 2006 elections that the Kadima party was formed, following a split within the Likud. The split had its roots in the 2003 elections, when then prime minister and Likud party chairman Ariel Sharon ran on a platform supporting the American “road map,” which officially (if not practically) advocated the establishment of a Palestinian state. This position, which contradicted the Likud’s platform and charter, later caused the party’s rupture into two equal parts (nineteen MKs each).14 Later, in November 2005, the splitting Likud members were joined by three Labor MKs (including Shimon Peres) and several independent personalities to form the Kadima party.

Israeli election results can be mapped in many ways, but the most prominent perspective reflects public attitudes on the Zionist-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts. From that perspective, the Israeli body politic can be divided into three main blocs—colonialist, ethnocratic, and democratic (see below).15
The parties listed in Table 1 are arranged according to these three categories, while Figure 1 shows graphically how the three blocs have fared since 1988. A brief description of each bloc follows.

- The colonialist bloc includes the Likud as well as all the major Jewish religious and settler parties. These parties oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state, support the ongoing colonization of the West Bank, reject any division of Jerusalem or the return to Israel of any Palestinian refugees, and promote the deepening of Israel’s Jewish character. In the 2009 election this bloc rose dramatically from 50 to 65 seats (of 120 Knesset seats)—a surge of 30 percent. In a dialectical manner, the rise of the colonialist bloc was propelled by the recent prominence of Hamas in Palestinian politics and its violent takeover of Gaza. It was also augmented by the pervasive self-serving argument among Israeli political and military elites that “there is no Palestinian partner for peace,” and by the parallel lack of progress in the futile “peace process,” led by the Bush administration.

- The ethnocratic bloc includes mainly “centrist” parties, notably Labor and Kadima, which split from Likud in 2005, officially on grounds of the need to reach a two-state solution. Ethnocratic parties (nominally) support a two-state solution but are ambivalent about West Bank settlements; they recognize “the need” to evacuate settlements, but attempt to preserve most within future adjusted Israeli borders; parties in the ethnocratic bloc maintain that Israel remains a Jewish and Judaizing state; support programs of deepening internal Jewish control; they wish to maintain the marginalized status of the Arab citizens, while declaring their commitment to democracy. This bloc declined sharply
from 52 to 41 seats—a drop of 22 percent—after winning a historic majority in the 2006 elections, the first where a majority in the Israeli parliament supported the establishment of a Palestinian state.16

- The democratic bloc includes mainly the small leftist-liberal Zionist party Meretz, the mixed Arab-Jewish socialist party al-Jabba al-Dimuqratiyya lil-Salam wal-Musawa (the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality; Hadash), and the Arab parties al-Tajammu' al-Watani al-Dimuqrati (the National Democratic Assembly; Balad) and al-Muwahida (Ra'am-Ta'al). These parties support a fully independent Palestinian state alongside Israel on all the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem; oppose any Jewish settlements beyond the state borders; oppose the siege on Gaza; advocate a “state of all citizens” (instead of a Jewish state); and promote collective rights for the Palestinian citizens.

The dramatic rise of the colonialist bloc, which has reached its highest level in two decades, is readily discernible in Figure 1.

The 2009 results highlight two further points—the persisting power of the politics of identity (or ethnicity) and class, and the nationalization trend within the Palestinian minority. First, the Israeli public is deeply divided along ethnic lines, with the politics of identity playing a crucial role in electoral preferences. This is typical of ethnocratic societies, where ethnicity becomes a major source of power and resources and is preserved as a major public issue through unceasing political entrepreneurship. In this election, the “Russian vote” (that is, the preferences of the 1.2 million Russian speakers now living in Israel) has had the most notable impact with the rise of Yisrael Beitainu, where nine of its fifteen MKs are Russian immigrants. All religious parties have strong ethnic character, and while their representation fell by 8 percent, they remain a major power bloc of twenty-five Knesset members committed to strong, state-centered identity politics. This bloc includes the explicitly Mizrahi (Eastern Jewish) party (Shas), and Ashkenazi (European Jewish) parties such as the ultra-Orthodox Yahadut Hatora (Tora Judaism) and Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), and to a great extent also Hal’chud Hale’umi (National Unity). Israel’s three “main” parties (Likud, Kadima, and Labor) refrain from flagging an explicit ethnic identity, although Likud has traditionally been supported by the massive Mizrahi group, while Labor and Kadima are associated with the strong Ashkenazi support.

But ethnicity must be coupled with class and geography to explain the voting. In general, the lower the income of the group and the more peripheral its geographic location, the more “ethnic” its vote. A good illustration exists in the twenty-seven peripheral “development” towns and cities, which accommodate nearly a million residents, the majority of whom are low-income Mizrahim and Russians. As shown in Figure 2, the two main ethnic parties—Shas and Yisrael Beitainu—received twice the level of support from the development towns that they did statewide. Conversely, Labor and Kadima, which represent
mainly the Ashkenazi middle classes and which generally support a “Western agenda” of secular liberalization and globalization, did very poorly in the development towns, receiving about half the level of their statewide support. The Likud, which traditionally represents lower-to-middle-income Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, and (to some extent) Russian groups, polled strongly in these towns.

THE ARAB VOTE

The vote among Israel’s 1.2 million Palestinian citizens caused considerable interest, not only because of rightist demands to link “loyalty” and citizenship rights (Figure 3), but also because of two parallel campaigns: the first attempted to disqualify Arab parties, while the second (coming from an opposite political end) lobbied to boycott the elections. Both initiatives appear to have failed, although they are likely to have some long-term effects. Two of the three main parties among the Palestinian voters—Balad and al-Muwahida—were disqualified by the Central Electoral Committee for allegedly breaching the law prohibiting any electoral campaign against Israel’s “Jewish and democratic” nature and/or supporting an “armed struggle” against the state. The parties were reinstated following an appeal to the High Court of Justice.

Attempts to disqualify the Arab parties are not new. These attempts have become a ritual in the lead-up to recent Israeli elections and have the obvious intention of weakening Arab parties and possibly forcing them out of the Knesset. However, the openly racist campaign by Yisrael Beitenu and other parties such as Hal’chud HaLe’umi and Likud caused a strong reaction from minority leaders. The main rallying call among all Palestinian citizens was “vote
to stop Lieberman!” The following advertisement of the largest Arab party, al-Muwahida, which incorporates part of the (“southern”) Islamic Movement, was posted in most Palestinian localities. It illustrates clearly the common message of jointly fighting against al-fashiyya (fascism).

Hence, the Lieberman campaign, ironically, caused a surge in Arab interest in the elections. This momentum thwarted the campaign by the more radical (“northern”) branch of the Islamic Movement to boycott the ballot box. The main arguments used by the boycotters were that Arab participation in the vote gave the Zionist state a measure of legitimacy and that Arab MKs are denied any real influence. While most Arab voters probably agree with both arguments, they apparently felt that a minority cannot afford to give up its parliamentary representation, which gives them a public and even international voice. Most Palestinians in Israel attempt to use and protect their citizenship, and they see the Knesset elections as one possible way to advance both goals. Still, Figure 3 shows a steady, if slow, decline in participation, signaling a process of disillusion and disengagement.17

Figure 3 shows that the main response to the setting described above was the nationalization of Arab vote, with some 85 percent choosing non-Zionist (pro-Palestinian) parties. This intensifies the trend evident since the 1970s of greater electoral polarization between Jews and Arabs, which in turn reflects a parallel process of growing political assertiveness as well as disappointment and disengagement from the ethnocratic and discriminatory Jewish state. The vast majority of Arab voters for Zionist parties came from the Druze community, which has traditionally been aligned with Zionism, serves in the army, and declares repeatedly its support for the Israeli state. The last elections showed that this affiliation continues unabated. Palestinian support for other Jewish parties,
such as Kadima, Labor, and Meretz, which traditionally polled reasonably well within the community, has virtually disappeared.

These trends were most evident among the Bedouin Arabs of the southern Beersheba region. This community numbers around 180,000 citizens, half of whom reside in unrecognized villages and towns (mainly on their ancestral lands). The Bedouins have staged a long and bitter land struggle against the Israeli state, which has officially confiscated most of their lands and attempted to forcibly urbanize them. The Bedouins were once considered relatively close to the Israeli state and even had relatively high rates of conscription to the Israeli army. This has radically changed in the last decade, with processes of Islamization and Palestinianization rapidly advancing, and with a growing sense of disengagement from the Jewish state. The 2009 elections confirmed these trends, with only 36 percent of eligible Bedouin casting votes—the lowest rate in the entire country. Further, the Islamic-affiliated Muwahida party received a massive majority of 73 percent among those who voted, illustrating the weight of its influence and the growing gap between this dispossessed community and the Jewish state.18

Competition among Palestinian parties became less important under the polarizing circumstances of this election but is nonetheless noteworthy. The general balance of power between traditional/Islamic elements represented by al-Muwahida (32 percent), the socialist line advocated by the Hadash party (27.3 percent), and the nationalist emphasis of Balad (22.3 percent) was maintained. Hadash, which is also noted for stressing socialist Arab-Jewish cooperation, received about 16,000 Jewish votes, its highest record ever. Hence, a small rise was registered in the support for a socialist orientation, and a similarly small decline in support for the national agenda of Balad, possibly due to the absence of its charismatic founder, Dr. ‘Azmi Bishara.19 Geographically, the voting highlighted once again the strong association between the traditional Muwahida party and rural and Bedouin areas, mainly in the “Triangle” and Negev regions. At the same time, socialist and nationalist streams polled better in urban and traditionally communist and socialist towns and among the middle classes and intellectual elites.

Consequences

What are the likely consequences of these elections on the Zionist-Palestinian conflict and the broader Middle East? Predictions, difficult in the best of times, are even more so now with the prospects of a changed tenor of Middle Eastern politics under an Obama presidency. On the Israeli scene, Netanyahu’s colonialist government, with the legitimizing addition of the ethnocratic Labor party, is likely to move cautiously in the near future while maintaining military and economic pressure on Hamas and possibly reaching for an agreement with Syria. Palestinian politics will also play a role, particularly the attempts to bridge the Hamas-Fatah rift and the upcoming elections for a new PA president.
Beyond short-term political patterns, the 2009 elections clarified some structural processes. First and foremost, they revealed that there are no barriers to the Jewish electorate’s re-adoption of a colonialist strategy. Of course, this is not new: the Likud, after all, led Israeli politics with an openly colonialist agenda during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, the current shift follows two major attempts to move in the opposite direction: the Labor-led Oslo process of the 1990s, and the Labor and Kadima vision of unilateral retreats (first Lebanon, then Gaza and Olmert’s aborted plan to “consolidate” in the West Bank), as part of the road map and the Annapolis process. These agendas appear to have failed, and the Israeli voter has returned to the option of violent control over the Palestinians, with increased Jewish settlement of the West Bank and an added emphasis on imposing tighter control over the Palestinians within the Green Line.

Nonetheless, opinion polls still show continuous support among most Israelis for peace, and even a two-to-one majority for handing over most territories to a peaceful Palestinian government. At the same time, however, a majority continues to believe that Israel has “no partner” for peace, and that under these conditions, Israeli control over these territories should be maintained. But history does not stand still awaiting the “right” Palestinian leadership, and the momentum of colonization, with its growing infrastructure of settlements, walls, ethnic roads, and ghettoization of Palestinians, continues unabated. By the end of 2008, 467,000 Jews resided in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem); their municipal areas spread over 44 percent of this area.

Vitally, under these demographic and geographic circumstances, the return to openly colonialist and apartheid agendas may signal the end of the two-state solution. This vision, in any case, may no longer be possible to implement, given the power of the Jewish settlers (not only in terms of transforming the geography of the West Bank but also in terms of their hold on Israeli politics) and the growing Israeli polarization with regard to Palestinians, who would continue to violently and politically resist this order. In addition, the deepening of anti-Palestinian sentiments within “Israel proper” has further polarized Arab and Jewish parties inside the Green Line to an extent that no political cooperation between them appears likely in the near future. Arab parties have sharpened their messages of resistance and received a record share of the Arab vote, differentiating themselves sharply from all current Zionist politics except for the diminutive liberal left. The absence of a joint Arab-Jewish anticolonialist bloc will further diminish the chances of the two-state solution.

It is clear, therefore, that, as is expected in colonial situations, a fundamental change cannot be generated from the internal politics of the ruling state. Israeli-Jewish politics are trapped in a web of ethnic, materialist, property, militarist, religious, and class interests that preserve the current distorted “creeping apartheid” process. Given this paralysis, Israel will probably attempt to shift the focus of Middle Eastern politics to the Iranian nuclear program or even to negotiations with Syria.
Given the ongoing suffering of the Palestinians, a serious external effort is needed to reshape the future of Israel/Palestine. This includes the mobilization of the international arena, both among governments and civil societies, to take stronger measures against Israel’s unlawful colonial control over the Palestinians. In this regard, another and perhaps more fundamental change is needed within the democratic camp. The rise of Hamas represents a new/old anti-colonial vision, but its call for the imposition Islamic rule over Israel/Palestine, possibly by violent means, may simply represent a reverse type of colonialism. This agenda has also caused immense suffering among the Palestinians, as it has legitimized in the eyes of many Israelis their violent control of the territories. Other groups and interests have begun to develop different alternatives, based on nonviolent struggle for democracy in Israel/Palestine. Such efforts should now constitute the most urgent matter for those working for the genuine welfare and security of all residents between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, in order to seriously challenge the “creeping apartheid” process made explicit during the 2009 Israeli elections.

NOTES


3. When offered the foreign ministry post, Lieberman attempted to soften his colonialist image by declaring that he is willing to accept a Palestinian state and even to leave his home in the settlement of Nokdim if this would help peace. Yet his conditions for a fragmented, dependent Palestinian state, which includes parts of Israel proper through a notorious “land swap,” while annexing most illegal settlements to Israel, is in itself a colonial agenda for Israel/Palestine. See Aluf Benn, “Trading Places,” Washington Post, 14 August 2005.

4. As elaborated elsewhere, Arabs under Israeli control possess six main differentiated “packages” of rights and capabilities, all inferior to Jewish citizenship. These are determined by a combination of their ethnicity and place of resident and include (a) Druze, (b) “typical” Palestinian citizenship, (c) southern Bedouins, (d) Jerusalem residents, (e) West Bank residents, and (f) Gaza residents. See Oren Yiftachel, Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2006).

6. The status of the Gaza Strip is somewhat different, following the dismantling of Israeli settlements and retreat of the occupying forces in the 2005 “disengagement.” However, as Israel has imposed a tight siege over Gaza, controlling entry, exit, population registration, and key economic factors, the territory remains under indirect occupation.

7. Although the Palestinians in Israel formally have the vote, Arab parties were never part of any ruling coalition and hence could not exert influence on the policy-making process. Even the Zionist Left (Meretz and pre-1995 Labor) always preferred joining the religious and right-wing parties in forming coalitions to forming a bloc with the Arab parties (barring one exception: Rabin’s second term). This exclusion has worsened during the last decade, as any identification with the Palestinian struggle to end Israeli colonial control was used to brand Arab politicians as a “fifth column” inside the Israeli parliament, thus further reducing their already negligible influence.

8. Without these settler MKs, the colonialist bloc would not have a majority, the number of its seats being reduced from 65 to 55.


12. One exception is the small progressive Meimad religious party led by Rabbi Michael Malkior, an ex-minister in previous centrist governments. Meimad ran jointly with the Green Movement, but failed to enter the Knesset.

13. The I’chud Le’umi party, mainly representing hard-line West Bank settlers, conducted a provocative march through the town, causing massive demonstrations and rioting. It also sent one of Hebron’s most notorious settlers to be an “inspector” in Umm al-Fahm on election day, again causing demonstrations and riots.

14. The two camps emerged during 2004 and 2005. Though both remained officially within the Likud, they did not function as one party on many issues. When the split finally occurred, the group challenging Sharon’s “leftist break,” called “the rebels,” remained in the Likud, while most of Sharon’s supporters formed Kadima later that year.

15. The 2003 Likud vote, which elected 38 MKs who (as already noted) later split down the middle along colonialist vs. ethnocratic lines, is a good example of these blurred distinctions. Moreover, Israel’s ethnocratic parties have supported for decades (implicitly or explicitly) colonialist policies in the occupied territories, and have implemented internal colonialist policies with respect to Israel’s Arab minority. The main difference is in their rhetoric and official platforms regarding the necessity of eventually partitioning Israel/Palestine into two sovereign states. Ehud Olmert, the leader of Kadima and Israel’s outgoing prime minister was most explicit in this, advocating (in rhetoric at least) a near total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories (see, for one of many examples, Ethan Bronner, “Olmert Says Israel Should Pull Out of West Bank,” New York Times, 29 September 2008).

16. Importantly, the conditions under which such a “state” would be established differed considerably from what is prescribed by international law or what would be acceptable to the PLO or most Palestinians. Even so, and although never translated into concrete political action, the existence of such a majority was a historic moment in Israeli politics.

17. The sharp drop in 2001 participation was due to a one-time boycott declared against the special elections for Israeli prime minister following the “October events” of 2000 where 13 unarmed Arabs were killed by the police; no Arab parties ran in 2001, and hence were unaffected by the boycott.

19. Bishara served in the Knesset from 1996 to 2007, when he left Israel and resigned his post while under investigation by Israeli authorities for treason and corruption, charges he denies.