

## To Vote or Not to Vote: The Electoral Calculus of Israeli Arabs

May 24, 1996



Brief Analysis

**W**ith just days to go before Israel's national elections, key Israeli Arab political leaders this week endorsed Shimon Peres for prime minister, lessening the worry within the Labor Party that had emerged in the wake of Operation Grapes of Wrath that parts of a core constituency might abstain in the vote for prime minister. Together with the withdrawal from the Knesset campaign of Yasser Arafat's Israeli Arab confidant, Ahmad Tibi, this development increases the likelihood that Peres can count on a tidal wave of support from the approximately 440,000 Arab citizens of Israel who are eligible to vote -- about 12 percent of the country's total electorate -- without alienating Jewish swing voters in the process. Whether enough of a backlash remains in the Arab community to deprive Peres of the margin he needs to win, however, remains to be seen.

Background: From the moment Peres opted for an early election, the Arab vote comprised a major element of his campaign prospects. Three months ago, public opinion polls showed an anticipated rise of 10 percent in Arab electoral participation (from 69 percent in 1992 to about 80 percent); favorable chances for Labor to increase its strength within the Arab population in the vote for party lists from 21 percent to 40 percent; and an unprecedented 95 percent rate of support for Shimon Peres in the direct ballot for prime minister. The optimistic forecasts for Labor's chances stemmed from Arab appreciation for the present (Labor) government's efforts to close the economic, social and political gap between the Arab and Jewish sectors of Israeli society. They also reflected the weakness of the Arab political system in Israel which is internally fragmented and factionalized. Indeed, in 1996, the two veteran Arab parties -- the Arab/Jewish Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash), and Abdul Wahhab Darawshe's Arab Democratic Party (ADP) -- were joined by no fewer than five new competitors: the Arab Alignment for Renewal, headed by gynecologist-turned-politician Dr. Ahmad Tibi; the Progressive Alliance, headed by Muhammad Zaidan; the National Democratic Alignment (NDA), headed by Bir Zeit professor Dr. Azmi Bishara; the Islamic Bloc, headed by Sheikh Atef Khatib; and the pragmatist faction of the Islamic Movement, under the spiritual leadership of Sheikh Abdallah Darwish. Later, the political scene coalesced into four blocs: Hadash-NDA, ADP-Islamic Bloc-Darwish Islamic faction, Arab Alignment for Renewal, and Progressive Alliance.

The advent of Grapes of Wrath in April, however, upset Labor's scenario. The Arab population in Israel reacted angrily to the attack on Lebanon and especially to the death of the civilians at Kafr Kana. Dozens of protests were mounted, and unbridled criticism was directed by the Arab politicians to the government's "aggression." Peres was attacked personally, branded by Israeli Arab leaders and media as "war criminal" and "child-murderer." Labor's status in the Arab public plummeted rapidly. Soon, candidates from the Arab national camp announced their intention to "punish" the prime minister by instructing their supporters to withhold their votes from him.

While the assertive protest by Israeli Arabs surely expressed authentic grief over the fate of their Lebanese brethren, it also reflected purely political considerations. The Israeli operation in Lebanon provided Arab politicians with an opportunity to bargain with Peres for their support from a position of strength and, along the way, to adopt an aggressive tone that could improve their nationalist image and enhance their particular appeal to their electorate in

the party vote. Expecting the Peres-Netanyahu race to tighten, Arab party leaders believed they held the balance between victory or defeat. And under Israel's new electoral system, they understood that they could negotiate with the various prime ministerial candidates before the election, not waiting for the haggling that historically accompanied coalition-formation after the election.

In negotiations between Labor and representatives of Hadash, ADP and the Islamic Movement, the Arab leaders presented a long list of demands: removal of the closure imposed on the territories; implementation of the planned transfer of control to the Palestinian Authority in Hebron; the release of Arab security prisoners; equalization of Arab municipal budgets in Israel to those in the Jewish sector; granting municipal status to heretofore unrecognized Arab villages; the return of the inhabitants of the villages of Ikrit and Biram to their land; the return of waqf (Islamic trust) property to the Muslim authorities; and the reopening of the Islamic Rescue Committee offices in Nazareth, which had been closed by the security forces on suspicion of aiding Hamas. While not stated publicly, the central demand apparently made by the Arab leaders was recognition of the Arab bloc as a potential partner in the coalition government to be formed should Peres win the election. This issue was stressed in light of the cumulative frustration of the Arab members of Knesset at the Labor Party's attitude toward them; although since 1992 the government had relied on their support in the Knesset as a "blocking bloc" in crucial votes, it had refused to make them full partners in the coalition or to appoint any one of them as a minister.

The negotiations between Labor and the Arab representatives were complex. At first, the Arabs brooked no compromise, hoping to instill some fear into the Laborites not to take the Arab vote for granted. Peres faced a difficult dilemma. In order to assure Arab support, he would clearly have to satisfy at least some of their demands. Yet too much receptiveness or significant concessions could brand him as beholden to the Arabs, thereby undercutting his position in the Jewish electorate. This could seriously damage the Labor Party, which in any case was attacked by the Right as lacking an absolute majority of Jewish support and therefore not entitled to adopt determinant decisions regarding the future of the Jewish State of Israel. In the end, the Labor negotiators offered only vague, general promises to the Arab politicians. The prime minister did hint that he would favorably consider appointing an Arab minister to the government should he be elected and Labor officials reiterated their commitment to the peace process and to the policy of equality regarding the Arab population in Israel.

An Arab Endorsement: The denouement of this political drama came on May 22, when two related developments occurred. First, the most prominent Israeli Arab leaders stopped bargaining with Peres and in effect endorsed him for prime minister. They did so, as Darwashe put it, simply in order "to prevent the right wing from reaching power," and apparently without any firm new commitments from Peres in return. This reinforces the expectation that the Arab vote will once again swing solidly behind Peres, without appreciably alienating Jewish swing voters in the process. Whether or not this will put Peres over the top remains to be seen, although published polls continue to suggest that it may be just barely sufficient. Second, Ahmad Tibi, the high-profile Israeli Arab adviser to Arafat with a reputation as a rising star until now, abruptly ended his electoral campaign, conceding that he had little prospect of obtaining even the required minimum threshold (a mere 1.5 percent of all valid ballots cast, projected this time at around 45,000 votes) for entry into the Knesset. This had been foreshadowed a few weeks ago, when some of the Islamists Tibi was courting unexpectedly allied with Darawshe instead. The immediate significance of Tibi's withdrawal is to reduce the potential for "wasted" Arab votes, and correspondingly increase the odds that Hadash and the ADP will boost their combined Knesset strength from five to seven or so seats. (Incidentally, it also deprives Likud of the catchy campaign slogan, "It's either Bibi or Tibi!") Even so, it appears almost certain that Labor, Meretz, and the Arab parties will not get the 61-seat "blocking majority" they did in the 1992 election, so that Peres will need to cobble together a more complex coalition even if he is elected prime minister.

The broader significance of this episode, however, lies in the dim light it sheds on Arafat's influence in Israeli Arab

politics. Arafat lost no time in praising Tibi's "brave" move; Tibi himself said that while the two regularly exchanged ideas, the decision had been his alone. In fact, it is likely that deals were done not only with Tibi but with others as well, possibly because Arafat actually wanted to take Tibi down a peg. And yet, on balance, Tibi's precipitous political fall supports a conclusion that internal factors outweigh whatever influence Arafat exerts on his Israeli Arab kinfolk. That conclusion will continue to be tested whether or not this increasingly sophisticated political community plays as pivotal a role in the next Israeli government as it has in the last one.

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