

The Political Representation of Israel's Arab Minority: The Challenge of Marginality and the Dilemma of Influence versus Protest

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Abstract

The Arab minority in Israel has traditionally suffered from political under-representation. Despite constituting about 20% of the population, the share of Arab representatives in the main political arenas was much lower until the late 1990s. This trend has changed in the last decade: Arab parties considerably increased their parliamentary representation, and for the first time ever, two Arabs were appointed Ministers. However, despite the electoral success, the ability of Arab politicians to influence the legislative process and to increase their accessibility to political power remains insignificant. This paper applies a comparative approach to investigate the factors that shape the accessibility of national minorities in general and of Israeli Arabs in particular, to political power. It claims that in order to avoid political marginality, a national minority party must overcome two tests: relevancy and legitimacy. Israeli Arabs find it difficult to withstand these two tests, mainly due the intensity of the national cleavage and the hyper-centralized structure of the Israeli government.

Key Words: Israeli Arabs, National Minorities, Political Representation, Party Systems, Protest Parties

1. Introduction

The Arab minority in Israel has traditionally suffered from under-representation. Despite constituting about 20% of the population, the share of Arabs in the main political arenas was always lower. Since the 1990s, the Arabs considerably increased their parliamentary representation, and for the first time ever, two Arabs were appointed Ministers. However, this improvement has not been translated into an increase of political power. Despite the electoral success, the ability of Arab politicians to influence the legislative process and to increase their accessibility to political power bases remains insignificant.

In this study I use a comparative approach to investigate the factors that shape the accessibility of national minorities in general and of Israeli Arabs in particular, to political power. The basic assumption is that in order to gain influence and avoid political marginality, a party must overcome two obstacles: *relevancy* and *legitimacy*.

The first section deals with the importance of political representation in modern multi-national democracies. The following section delineates the set of factors that affect the political representation of national minorities. I then turn to a description of the political development of Israeli Arabs in light of the factors that were detailed in the previous section. In the fourth section, Israel's Arab parties are compared with four other national minority parties in Europe: The Basque National Party (PNV) in Spain, The Scottish National Party (SNP) in the United Kingdom, The Swedish Folk Party (SFP) in Finland and the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) in Slovakia.

2. National Minorities' Representation in Pluralistic Democracies

Political representation is amongst the most important means for people to feel belonging to a community and a key stone in the perception of citizenship in modern democracies. Without proper representation, citizens' interests and beliefs do not find their way to the public sphere and as a result these citizens might feel they are unable to affect different aspects of the polity they are part of. This inaccessibility to the political process might culminate in developing resentful sentiments towards the democratic order and destabilize the regime. Therefore, political representation is vital for the healthy and viable functioning of democracies.

This is especially true in pluralistic, multi-national or in multi-cultural democracies. These countries are composed of at least one, and often of several minority groups.¹ Although members of these minorities - be they national, ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural - are citizens for all intents and purposes, they often feel deprived and threatened. In many cases they have to distinguish themselves in the political process in order to look after their interests vis-à-vis the majority group. As a result, we may find in modern democracies political parties that emerged as a vehicle for representing these minorities.

In the relevant literature we can find several terms for political parties that stand to represent minority group within a nation-state: minority parties², ethnoregionalist parties³, ethnoterritorial parties⁴ and minority nationalist parties. The first term is too general and the next two have a preposition that the ethnic or nationalist minority is geographically concentrated – which does not apply for Arabs in Israel and for several other minorities. Therefore I'll use here the term *national minority parties*. This term includes both cases of geographically concentrated minorities and other cases as well.

3. Determinants for Political Impact of National Minorities

We can point upon quite a few factors that determine and shape the political representation of national minority parties. It is useful to gather these various factors in two distinct clusters: relevancy and legitimacy.

Relevancy

The term “relevant party” was first used by Sartori as a devise for determining the nature of a party system. Sartori named two conditions for labeling a party as relevant: if it is in a position that enables it to form a coalition or to be part of a coalition; or (in case of an anti-establishment protest party) if it affects the nature and tactics of the party competition, that is - it has blackmail potential.⁵

Size

The first factor of relevancy is the size of the national minority. Very small minorities will not gain political impact and relevancy simply because of their small size. Therefore, studying national minorities' access to political power is better addressed by focusing on cases of substantial minorities (more than 5% of the population).

Territorial Compactness and Degree of Political Devolution

These two inter-related factors are perhaps the most important in this cluster. A national minority that is concentrated in a specific region has higher potential relevancy for the political system in comparison with a geographically scattered minority. Territorial compactness gives the minority better bargaining position vis-à-vis the state.⁶ It also increases the chance that this minority will be given some degree of autonomy through the establishing of representative political institutions. The prospect of political devolution improves the relevancy of the national minority because it enables the minority to act and perform in additional political arenas, other than at the national level. Institutions as regional assemblies or parliaments provide minority parties with the chance to cooperate with other parties and even more importantly – to preserve its vitality and keep it in the public agenda.⁷

Electoral system and Form of Government

Theoretically, proportional electoral systems (PR) are more favorable with smaller parties because they translate the votes into seats in a proportional way. Plurality systems, like those in use in the UK, Canada and India make it harder on smaller parties to gain representation. The only exception to this rule concerns parties that represent compact national minorities. In these cases (the French-speaking community in Canada for instance) the minority can gain considerable representation in its region. However, even in these cases, its political relevance in the national level is probably not high, because plurality systems tend to produce single-party majority governments. In these governments the ruling parties do not need coalition partners and therefore minority parties are less relevant. PR systems, on the other hand, tend to produce multi-party systems in which coalition governments are the norm. Coalition governments increase the relevancy of small parties in the political system.

Legitimacy

Some national minority parties succeed in being relevant to a political system and therefore have a potential access to the political process. On the other hand, there are parties that despite being relevant to a political system, still not to enjoy accessibility to political power. This is true in case other actors in the political system do not take it as legitimate partners. There are two major factors that dictate to what extent these parties will be regarded as legitimate: the intensity of the national cleavage and the party's ideological goals.

Intensity of the national cleavage

The existence of national minorities in a nation state does not always manifest itself into a political cleavage. There are many minorities that have good relations with the majority. On the other hand, there are cases in which the national cleavage is very intense. Naturally, the more intense the cleavage is, the national minority party will find it harder to be recognized as a legitimate partner by other actors in the political system.

Goals and ideology

It is useful to present the different goals of national minority parties on a continuum in which one pole represents the most radical goal and the other pole represents the most moderate one. The most radical goal is separatism or profound change in the character of the nation state. One step towards the moderate pole we find parties that vie for more power to run their internal affairs. This is done by demand towards the political centre for further devolution and self government within the nation state. Further ahead there are parties that fight for equality and anti-discrimination. The most moderate parties only stand as a channel of representation, and act to preserve the cultural attributes of the minority community. Parties that promote separatism will find it almost impossible to be regarded as legitimate partners by mainstream parties, which regard them as a potential threat to the integrity of the state. The more moderate the party is - the easier it is for other parties to cooperate with it.

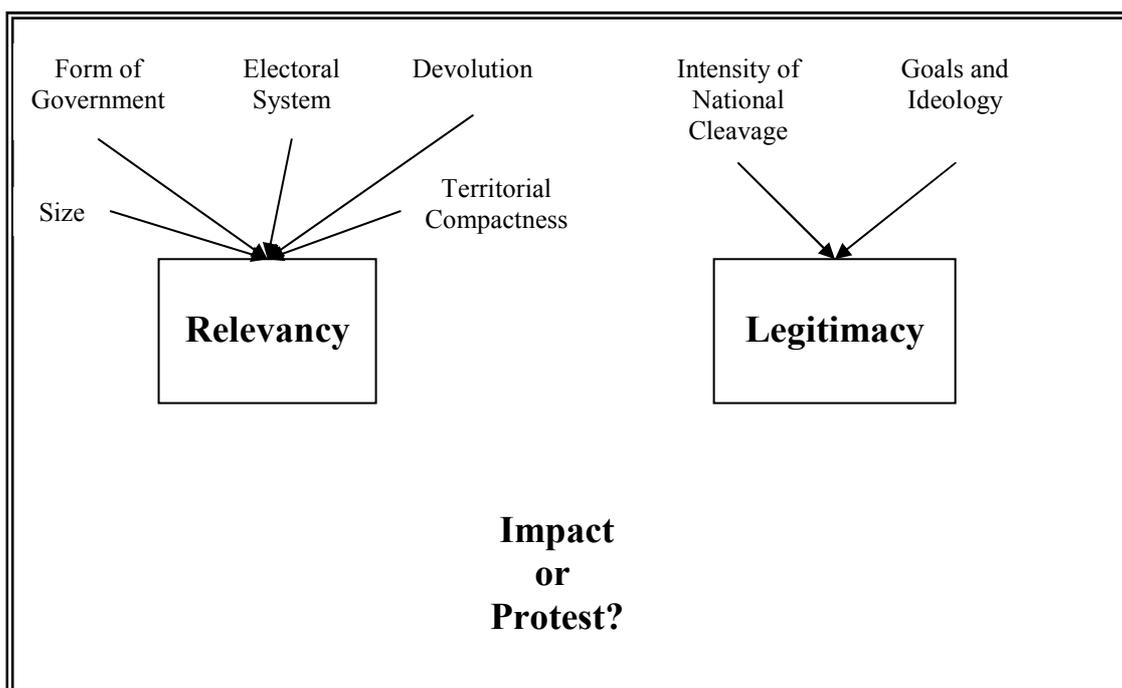


Figure 1: Determinants of Political Impact for Minority Parties

4. The Political Development of Arab Political Parties in Israel

As Dowty states, Israel is one of the major examples of democracy in a deeply-divided society.⁸ There are several intended cleavages in Israel, but there is no doubt that the most intense is the Jewish-Arab cleavage. The intensity of the cleavage makes the Arabs in Israel not only a demographic minority but Arabs are underrepresented in the country's political and economic elites. This inevitably leads to feelings of discrimination in relation to the dominant Jewish majority.⁹

I 1948 to 1977: acute marginal position

Until 1965, Arab citizens were represented in two main channels. First, through "satellite" lists to the ruling *Mapai* Party. These lists were meant to grant the Arab population representation within the dominant party of the political system.¹⁰ The second channel was representation through the Israeli Communist Party (ICP). This openly anti-Zionist party had become during the 1950s the champion of the rights of the Arab population.¹¹ The ICP, and its successor the New Communist List (NCL) received until 1977 between three and five parliamentary seats, but did not gain any political impact. Two reasons were responsible for that: First, the governing party was in a dominant and pivotal position and could easily build several centre-based coalitions. Thus, the NCL was not relevant to the coalition game. Second, the NCL's ideological stance put it in a double extreme position - its Marxist rhetoric and its anti-Zionist messages prevented it from effectively participating in the political process. This illegitimacy was further enhanced by the fact that Israel was involved in two wars during this period.¹²

II 1977 to 1992: still in the political desert

1977 saw the NCL merging with the Jewish Black Panthers to form *Hadash*. This party retained its place as one of the largest parties among Arab voters, receiving 50% of the 1977 vote in the Arab electorate.¹³ 1977 was also the year of the "historical upheaval" that marked an important development in the Israeli political system. The realignment of the party system created a new situation - The ILP lost its dominant position and a system of two blocs was formed. Since 1977, the leftist bloc (headed by the ILP) could not obtain parliamentary majority without the support of the *Hadash* and later - of other Arab parties. These developments should have potentially put NCL in a more relevant position, but in fact this never occurred because of its radical positions. The appearance of a new party in 1988 pointed to a deeper and more profound change in the Arab electorate. In this the Arab Democracy Party (ADP) was established.

The party filled a need in the Arab electorate: there were many who wanted to express their nationality by voting for an Arab party but refrained from voting for NCL because of its radical socio-economic stance. The ADP's platform was moderate, calling for influence and not only for protest.¹⁴ The party gained a single seat in the 1988 elections, but this was a significant seat - it was the first won by a "pure" Arab party. In the next election, the ADP continued its moderate line and its desire to be included in the political game. Electoral slogans as "vote for impact, not for protest!" reflected this strategy and party activists stated they would like to see their party part of a future ILP-led coalition.

III 1992 to 1995: A short-lived golden period

The 1992 election results put the Arab parties in the most powerful position they have ever had.¹⁵ Their five seats (3 to *Hadash* and 2 to ADP) enabled the ILP to form a left-leaning coalition. The Arab parties were even invited by the designated Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin for coalition talks. However, Rabin announced that he did not consider the parties an integral part of the future coalition, but rather rely on their external support. Still, despite remaining outside the coalition, the two parties provided the fragile coalition parliamentary support that was vital in the dramatic peace talks that led to the signing of the Oslo accords. This period also saw allocation of massive resources, unprecedented in their volume, towards the Arab population. This positive development was halted following Rabin's assassination in November 1995. The following year, a right-wing government took power, and the peace process with the Palestinians was severely damaged.

IV 1996 to present: radicalization, fragmentation and increased representation

The last decade saw three important developments of the Arab parties. The first and the most important is the ideological radicalization of the parties. There are several possible explanations for this. The shattered peace process with the Palestinian Authority, the October 2000 events and the break of the Second Intifada may be one reason.¹⁶ The disillusion from the short-lived golden age during Rabin's government and the continuing discrimination may be another. The ideological radicalization was reflected in the decreasing support for the mainstream Zionists parties and in the emerging of new political parties. Since 1999, there are three major Arab parties, each of a different ideological shade, but all present a harsh radical stance towards the main Israeli narrative. *Hadash* showed in the last 40 years a remarkable ability of survival. It survived decades in the political wilderness and the collapse of the communist countries and still constitutes a main electoral alternative for the Israeli Arabs. Still a secular

party, dedicated to social causes and to Arab-Jewish coexistence, it has also gone through a radicalization often stands against the state and for the Palestinians. The moderate ADP was absorbed into the traditional-Islamic *United Arab List (UAL)*. The third power is *Balad*, a secular, radical-nationalist party that presents the fiercest stance against the Jewish majority. As a pan-Arabic nationalist party, it is devoted to fighting Israelization and seeks to change the Jewish symbols of the state.¹⁷

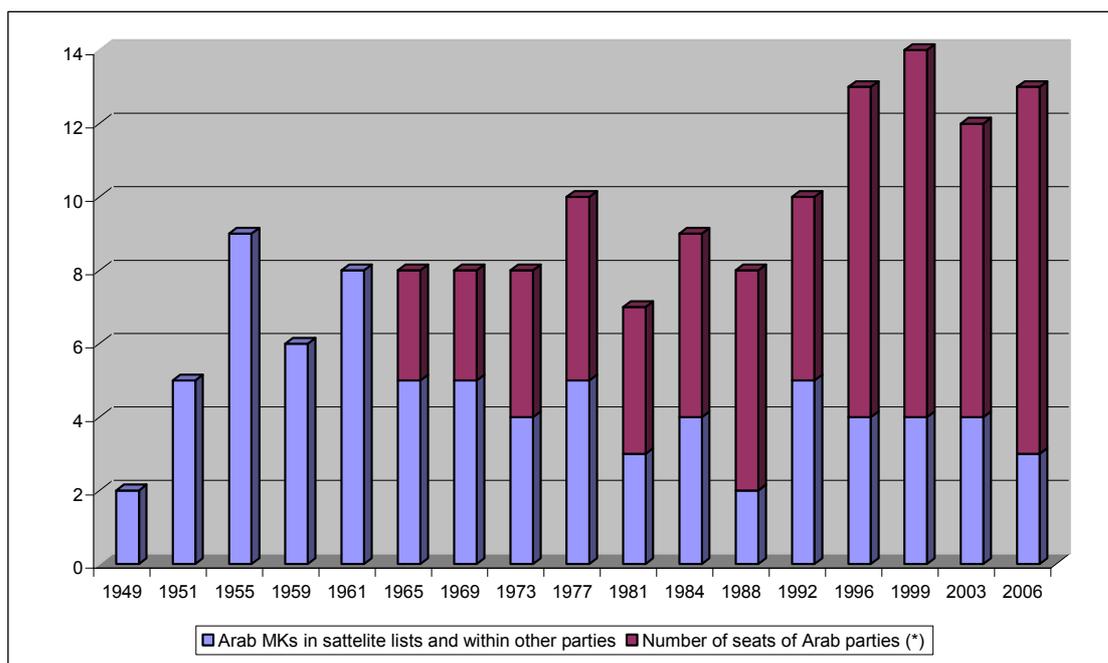


Figure 2: Israeli Arabs Representation in the Knesset

The radicalization and fragmentation of the Arab electorate resulted in increased parliamentary representation. In the last three general elections the three Arab parties gained between eight and ten seats. In addition to the few Arab parliamentarians who act in the mainstream parties, the Arab representation has considerably increased in the last decade (See Figure 2). Furthermore, for the first time in Israel's history, two Arab politicians were nominated as ministers: Saleh Tarif (in 2001) and Raleb Majadele (in 2007), both from the Israeli Labour Party.¹⁸ Despite these developments, the Arab parties have not improved their accessibility to power, especially due to the radicalization.

5. Arab Israelis in Comparative Perspective

Based on the model presented in Figure 1 we may now turn to compare the Arab parties in Israel to other national minority parties. In addition to the Israeli Arabs, four additional national minorities were chosen, all of which consist between 5% and 10% of the population.

In the previous section we have seen that Arab parties in Israel suffer from double distress. Until 1977 they were irrelevant and were not regarded as legitimate partners. Since 1977 their potential relevancy grew at occasions, due to changes in the party system and due to increasing electoral success. However, their ideological radicalization has made them illegitimate. Furthermore, their political marginality is further enhanced by the centralized nature of the political power in Israel. Other than at the municipality level, the Arab minority does not have any sub-national or regional political institutions.

Compared to Israeli Arabs, the Basque minority in Spain has greater impact on the political system. True, the national cleavage was intense for a long period, but there are factors that make the Basque parties, especially the moderate one (PNV), more relevant.¹⁹ First, most Basques are concentrated in an autonomous community with an elected parliament and functioning self-government. The PNV has been the ruling party in the Basque autonomous community since its establishment. In times, it has cooperated with nationwide Spanish parties to form a coalition of the regional government. Second, there were even times when the PNV representatives in the national parliament in Madrid were relevant. In the 1990s, the PNV (together with the moderate Catalan party CiU) found themselves twice in a pivotal position and supplied external parliamentary support to the minority governments of the left (1993 to 1995) and the right (1996 to 1999).²⁰ The cooperation at the national level reflected the fact that these parties were perceived as legitimate partners to power sharing. In this period, the PNV improved considerably its impact on policy. Since 2000 the PNV's relevancy in the national level has slightly decreased, due to the fact that the main parties secured an absolute majority in parliament and no longer needed support from the national minority parties. However, the experience of the 1990s and the PNV's control in the Basque parliament provide the Basque minority with a significant impact and position.

In the case of the Scottish minority in the United Kingdom, the intensity of the national cleavage is rather moderate. There are calls for Scottish independence, but these demands have never taken the form of

violent nature. The Scots, like the Basques, are also concentrated in a compact political unit. However, until 1999 this unit had no political institutions of its own, a fact that prevented the Scottish National Party (SNP) to be a significant actor in British politics. True, the plurality electoral system enabled the Scots to be represented in the House of Commons, but most MPs came from the main parties and not from the SNP. Their best results came in 1974, when 11 SNP MPs were elected to parliament. The devolution and the establishment of Scottish parliament have improved the SNP position and the Scots control of their affairs. The proportional election system that was adopted for elections to the Scottish parliament makes it possible for the SNP to gain representation proportional to its public support. The May 2007 elections to the Scottish parliament established the SNP as the largest party and for the first time it succeeded in taking power, although only in the form of a minority government.

Table 1: Five National Minorities – A Comparison

Minority	Basques (Spain)	Scottish (UK)	Swedish (Finland)	Hungarians (Slovakia)	Arabs (Israel)
Size	5%	9%	6%	10%	19%
Territorial compactness	yes	yes	partial	yes	partial
Devolution	Autonomous Community	Constituent Country	none*	Autonomous Regions	none
Self-Government Institutions	Basque parliament and government	Scottish parliament and government	none*		only on municipality level
Electoral system (national level)	PR	Plurality	PR	PR	PR
Common form of government	Single party majority or single party minority	Single party majority	Multi-party coalition	Multi-party coalition	Multi-party coalition
Intensity of national cleavage	moderate to intense	moderate	none	moderate	intense

* with the exception of Åland autonomous administrative province.

The Swedish-speaking minority in Finland is rather scattered and does not have self-governing institutions. However, three reasons make this minority and its party (The Swedish Folk Party, SFP) an active and integral part of the political powering in Finland. The first reason can be found in the fact that the national cleavage is virtually absent. The minority does not feel discriminated against in any field. Its

socio-economic state is similar to that of the majority, while its linguistic status is regulated in a satisfying way by the state. Secondly, the SFP has a very moderate goal of simple representation. It is located in the centre of the Finnish party system and regarded as a regular party. Thirdly, the proportional electoral system and the multi-party system means that the government is always composed of several parties. The constant existence of a coalition government plus the central position of the SFP on the political spectrum make it an almost constant partner in the government. It has served in all types of coalitions: left-leaning, right-leaning or grand coalition.

Finally, The Hungarian minority in Slovakia is also enjoying a relatively fine access to political power due to the low intensity of the national cleavage. This minority is concentrated mainly in the southern border of Slovakia, but does not reside in a defined sub-national administrative region.²¹ The main political party that represents the minority is the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK). This moderate party's main objective is to represent the interests of the Hungarian community and ensure its equal position in the society. Like in Finland, Slovakia's proportional electoral system and multi party system creates coalition governments. The SMK central and moderate position enables it to be part of certain coalitions. Indeed, between 1998 and 2006 it was part of the ruling coalition.

Conclusion

We have seen that the most important factors that shape national minority's representation and access to power are the intensity of the national cleavage and the existence of devolved institutions. Israeli Arabs' failure to translate their recent electoral success to political achievements is to be found in the circumstances of Israel's political arena - the high-intense national cleavage and the hyper-centralized structure of the political power. These two factors prevent the Arab parties to gain influence and overcome their acute marginal position.

But even if they could overcome this marginality and became more relevant and legitimate, it is doubtful if the Arab parties will choose to be actively involved in the national-level politics and embrace the empowerment. It is interesting to assess how these parties will behave if at some point in the future, they will be invited to share power. Will a party opt for impact and, therefore, risk being labeled as a cooperator with the Jewish majority or will it remain in a protest, anti-establishment position?

Notes

¹ It is almost impossible to find a 'pure' nation-state. Iceland and Portugal are perhaps the closest examples for a homogenous ethnic nation. Most states consist of more than one national group, and therefore we will find at least one national minority within them. Notable examples include Catalans in Spain, Scots in the UK, Hungarians in Romania, Turks in Bulgaria and Chinese in Malaysia.

² Y Meny, *Government and Politics in Western Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 38.

³ L De Winter & M Cachafeiro, 'European Integration and Ethnoregionalist Parties'. *Party Politics*, vol. 8 (4), 2002, pp. 483-503; S Newman, 'Ethnoregional Parties: A Comparative Perspective'. *Regional Politics and Policy*, vol. 4 (2), 1994, pp. 28-66; J P Gordin, 'The Electoral fate of Ethnoregionalist Parties in Western Europe: A Boolean Test of Extant Explanations'. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 24 (2), 2001, pp 149-170.

⁴ J R Rudolph & R J Thompson, 'Ethnoterritorial Movements and the Policy Process'. *Comparative Politics*, vol. 17 (3), 1985, pp. 291-311.

⁵ G Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering*, 2nd edition, New York University Press, 1997, pp. 33-4

⁶ E K Jenne, *Ethnic Bargaining: The Paradox of Minority Empowerment*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2006.

⁷ If the national parliament is the only representative institution, a national minority will have very few representatives there. Sub-national institutions increase the number of minority politicians and thus contribute to the vitality of the minority.

⁸ A Dowty, 'Consociationalism and Ethnic Democracy: Israeli Arabs in Comparative Perspective', in *Israel – The Dynamics of Change and Continuity*, D Levi-Faur, G Sheffer & D Vogel (eds), Frank Cass, London, p. 169.

⁹ B Hasisi and A Pedhazur, 'State, Policy and Political Violence: Arabs in the Jewish State'. *Civil Wars*, vol. 3 (4), 2000, pp. 64-84; Y Yonah, 'Israel as a Multicultural Democracy: Challenges and Obstacles'. *Israel Affairs*, vol 11 (1), January 2005, pp. 102-4.

¹⁰ M Al-Haj, 'The Political Behavior of the Arabs in Israel in the 1992 Elections: Integration versus Segregation', in *The Elections in Israel – 1992*, A. Arian & M. Shamir (eds), SUNY Press, Albany, 1995, p.143

¹¹ P Y Medding, *The Founding of Israeli Democracy, 1948-1967*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990, p. 54

¹² These two wars were against Arab nations. The Six-Day War (1967) saw Israel fighting against three Arab nations– Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Iraq and Saudi Arabia also sent troops to assist in the effort against Israel. The war ended in Israel seizing the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, an occupation that last to this day and stands in the root of the current Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The 1973 War saw Israel involved in fierce battles against Syria and Egypt.

¹³ A Ghanem, *The Palestinian-Arab Minority in Israel, 1948-2000*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2001, p. 201.

¹⁴ A Arian, *Politics in Israel – The Second Republic*, 2nd edition, CQ Press, Washington D.C., 2005, p. 162.

¹⁵ I Kaufman & R Israeli, 'The Arab-Palestinian Vote in the 1996 Elections', in *The Elections in Israel – 1996*, A. Arian & M. Shamir (eds), SUNY Press, Albany, 1999, pp.85-116.

¹⁶ In July 2000 peace talks in Camp David between Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Chairman Yasser Arafat failed, despite efforts from both sides and from host President Clinton. The failure created disappointment and feelings of despair among Palestinians who found that after years of hope for better

life, the peace process seemed to be stuck. The Palestinian unrest created similar feelings within the Israeli Arabs. Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in September 28th is considered as the spark that lit the fire. The Arab leadership generated a general strike and demonstrations across Israel on October 1. The strike continued for several days and often turned into violent demonstrations and clashes between Arab protestors and Israeli police. The clashes (later to be labeled as the October 2000 events) lasted several days. 12 Arab citizens were killed, creating the biggest crisis with the Arab minority since the establishing of the State of Israel.

¹⁷ H Frisch, 'Stability amidst Flux: The Arab Parties Come of Age in the 2006 General Elections'. *Israel Affairs*, vol 13 (2), April 2007, pp. 370-1.

¹⁸ It is only fair to say that there are many among the Arab population who regard their nominations as meaningless gestures. Some even despise them as cooperators with the Jewish government.

¹⁹ The main and moderate Basque party is the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)*. There are also several left-leaning Basque parties and the radical separatist Batasuna, that regarded by many as the political branch of ETA, the Basque separatist group.

²⁰ R Gillespie, 'The Hour of the Nationalists: Catalan and Basque Parties in the Spanish General Election of 6 June 1993'. *Regional Politics and Policy*, vol. 3 (3), pp. 171-191; *The Economist*, 'Basque Uplift', May 4th 1996, pp. 28-9.

²¹ In 2002 the eight administrative regions of Slovakia became autonomous entities, but their powers are not as strong as those held by the autonomous regions in Spain or the devolved units in the United Kingdom. The SMK currently holds power in one of the regions.