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**Political Opportunity and Organizational Fragmentation: Palestinian Mobilization Within Israel**

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Rida Abu Rass

PhD Candidate, Department of Political Studies, Queens University, Kingston, ON, Canada

[rida.aburass@queensu.ca](mailto:rida.aburass@queensu.ca)

*Note:*

This article is based on my dissertation’s empirical chapter. Its fourth section relies on interview data. While I completed all interviews, I am still processing some of them. For this reason, the fourth section includes some placeholders.

**Introduction**

Since 2015, the Palestinian leadership in Israel underwent a series of political-organizational transformations, fluctuating rapidly between cohesion and fragmentation. These transformations are puzzling, for two reasons. First, it is unclear why the leadership fragmented despite both structural (a-priori) and electoral pressures to unify. Second, the rapid nature of these unifications and breakups are puzzling, since some elements of the political environment – namely, the refusal of the hegemonic Jewish majority to legitimize Palestinian political representatives – are stable. My goal in this article is to ascertain the deep causes of these organizational transformations. I posit that worsening environmental conditions, including repression, de-legitimization and exclusion elicited strategic reorientations which ultimately led to these organizational transformations. Both unity and disunity were caused by steadily declining perceptions of opportunity (and increasing hostility), among both the Palestinian public and its leaders. I will show that while the leadership first responded to this perception with unity, steadily worsening environmental conditions – including continued exclusion, despite organizational unity and ideological flexibility – amplified internal strategic differences, causing a schism. I conclude by discussing the generalizability of this case’s main theoretical findings, and by suggesting future research directions.

This article has four sections. In the first, I situate the question within the theoretical literature on cohesion, fragmentation, and political opportunity. I then establish values for the dependent variable, describing changes in organizational cohesion among the Palestinian political leadership in Israel since 2015. In the third section, I describe changes in the political environment over the last two decades, establishing values for the dependent variable; the availability of political opportunities (both real and perceived). I show that, since the Second Intifada, the Israeli political environment has been characterized by greatly diminishing opportunity structures, by the explosive rise of the Israeli far-right and its acceptance within Israel’s mainstream discourse, and by a correspondingly unprecedented level of delegitimization of Palestinian (and other, left-wing and counter-hegemonic) voices. In the fourth section, I trace the causes of these rapid organizational transformations. The second and third sections rely extensively on archival, secondary and survey data, using discourse, media and hegemonic analysis. The fourth section relies on 33 de-identified, semi-structured interviews with Palestinian elites, which were conducted in two stages. The first 10 interviews were conducted in person, in Israel-Palestine, between July and August of 2017, as part of my MA research. 11 additional interviews were conducted remotely, via Zoom (due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel), between October 2021 and November 2022. The remaining 12 interviews were conducted in person, in situ, in January 2023.

**1. Theoretical Background**

This study relies on theoretical insights from different traditions in political science and sociology. Scholars of nationalism have repeatedly shown that nation-building, and nationalism, more broadly, necessarily entail the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others (Marx 2002; Wimmer 2008). Furthermore, scholars have shown that while the criteria for national inclusion vary between states (Kohn 1944; Koning 2011), all, including the supposedly “civic” states, systemically privilege a core group at the expense of others (Brubaker 1999; Clark 2019; Kuzio 2002). Scholars have explored and classified the various goals, policies and conflict dynamics that result from the interaction between titular, hegemonic majorities and national minorities (Brubaker 1996; Jenne 2004; Aktürk 2012), but the relationship between the degree of exclusion faced by national minorities, and dominant forms of mobilization they employ, remains unclear. Scholars also disagree over the appropriate classification for Israel’s regime. Among other classifications, the Israeli regime has been described as an ethnic democracy, an ethnocracy, or as an apartheid regime, and Zionism as a national-liberatory, colonial, and settler-colonial ideology (Barghouti 2021; Degani 2017; Khalidi 2021; Smooha 2002; Yiftachel 2006). These differences notwithstanding, scholars agree that Israel has deeply institutionalized ethnic hierarchies, whereby non-Jewish minorities are systemically disadvantaged compared to the titular Jewish majority (Ghanem, Rouhana, and Yiftachel 1998; Haklai 2011; Rouhani and Ghanem 1998). As such, Israel is best classified, broadly, as a polity which is dominated by a single ethnonational group; a “hegemonic ethnic state” employing a system of control to maintain an exclusivist, ethnic hierarchical order (Cohen 2010; Lustick 1979, 1980; Peleg 2007; Peleg and Waxman 2011, 131-145).

The study of organizational cohesion and fragmentation is most active within the social movement theory (SMT) tradition. This research program can be divided along several lines. One salient differentiation can be found between intrinsic and environmental explanations. Scholars offered tactical differences, strictness of organizations’ membership criteria, and social differences between individual members as intrinsic explanations for political-organizational cohesion and/or fragmentation (Barkan 1979; Cable & Shriver 2010; Marx and Useem 1971; Zald & Ash 1966). Another, more recent strand of the literature emphasizes the impact of external strategic and structural variables – “opportunity structures” – including repression, availability of resources, conflict with out-groups and so forth to explain cohesion and fragmentation, but these studies’ findings are contradictory and mixed (McLauchlin & Pearlman 2012; Meyer & Corrigall-Brown 2005; Seymour et al. 2016; Shriver & Messer 2009). Indeed, this research program is open. This article seeks to weigh in by uncovering the impact of political-environmental variables – namely, perennial exclusion and repression – on movements’ organizational patterns.

Within SMT, political opportunity theorists emphasize structural environmental changes – “opportunity structures” – to explain the *emergence* of social movements (McAdam 1996, 23-40; Opp 2009, 161-203). Examples of political opportunity structures include “opening of access to political participation”, “appearance of influential allies”, and “decline in the state’s capacity or will to repress dissent” (Tarrow 1998, 76). Generally, political opportunity theorists point toward three main variables to explain social movement formation: the objective expansion of political opportunities, the collective perception of expanding political opportunities, and challengers’ organizational strength (McAdam 1982, 36-59). Some scholars propose a direct, positive, linear relationship between expanding opportunity structures and collective action while others – notably, Peter K. Eisinger – find a curvilinear relationship between the two (Eisinger, 1973). This study operates within this tradition. It borrows insights from the more recent, Dynamic Mobilization model, introduced by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001). This Model incorporates elements of the relatively recent, Identity and Framing approaches – which were developed following the culturalist turn in the social sciences – into Political Opportunity Theory. Most important for the study at hand is the Model’s insistence on incorporating actors’ *perceptions* of environmental opportunities and threats, rather than considering their objective, measured value alone (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 46-48).

The work of Antonio Gramsci can also reveal important aspects of minority mobilization in ethnic hegemonic settings. Three key Gramscian concepts will be used to analyze excluded minority mobilization in this study: hegemony, wars of position and wars of maneuver. Gramsci defines hegemony as “[t]he ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci 1971, 12). In other words, hegemony can be defined as the ‘normal’, ‘commonsensical’ or ‘socially acceptable’ values, practices, and beliefs that justify a political program, propagated by a dominant class of traditional intellectual and moral leaders (a “historic bloc”) who are associated with the state (Gramsci 1971, 3-6). As stated above, Israel’s state-driven, Zionist, “ethnic constitutional order” is well understood.

Gramsci makes the distinction between *wars of position* and *wars of maneuver*, both referring to struggles over hegemonic influence within a territorial state, albeit by different means: the former being a primarily cultural, nonviolent struggle and the latter a contentious, violent or non-legal one. One of Gramsci’s innovations is the assertion that revolutionary struggles are fought in the civic as well as the political spheres; that the symbolic struggle for consensus is as important as the struggle for political-coercive control. Successful elites use both to maintain hegemonic control. This dichotomy serves as an invaluable analytic foundation for the study of Israel’s Palestinian minority, primarily since its normal modus operandi has largely been characterized by a war of position fought in the political and civic spheres (Ghanem 2001; Haklai 2011; Pappé 2011; Sa’di 2016). As the literature predicts, wars of maneuver - instances of contentious politics, the emergence of mass protests and social movement organizations - are much rarer, arising around ‘acute crises’, as well as instances of perceived political opportunity (McAdam 1982, 36-59; Opp 2009, 161-203). Our task, then, is to trace both gradual and sudden changes in the structure of opportunities and constraints facing the Palestinian minority in Israel, to explain the observed tactical divergence among its leadership.

Changes in the dependent variable – organizational fragmentation – will be quantified simply by noting instances of unification and schism among the Palestinian leadership. While there is merit in using a more detailed measure of fragmentation – for example, by incorporating power distribution and institutionalized cooperation between movement organizations (Bakke, Cunningham, and reviewing changes in a variety of opportunity structures, in the legal, institutional, and Seymour 2012) – this goes beyond the article’s scope and will therefore be saved for a follow-up, detailed exploration of its theoretical implications. Changes in the independent variable – exclusion and repression – will be measured qualitatively by tracing legal, institutional, and discursive-hegemonic changes. Counter-hegemonic mobilization is defined as that which explicitly and openly challenges Israel’s ethnic constitutional order, including, most importantly, demands for greater ethnic and national equality, for ending Israel’s occupation over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. While the focus is on Palestinian mobilization, both Jewish and Palestinian organizations were examined as they are enmeshed within a counter-hegemonic network of organizations.

**2. Palestinian Politics Since 2015: Rapid Organizational Changes**

Since 2015, the Palestinian leadership in Israel underwent a series of organizational transformations. The Palestinian leadership was fragmented during the third phase, roughly along ideological lines. In Israel’s 19th Knesset (2013-2015), three of the Palestinian community’s constituent political streams – the Communist, National and Islamic streams – were represented by three electoral lists: The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE), representing the Communist Stream, with four (out of 120) seats. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), representing the National stream, had three seats. A party list including both the United Arab List, representing the Islamist stream, and the Arab Movement for Renewal (AMR), an ideologically ambiguous list dominated by the popularity of its leader Ahmad Tibi, received four seats. Ahead of the 2015 elections, the electoral threshold was raised from 2% to 3.25%, placing Palestinian parties at risk of being left out of the Knesset (Haklai and Abu Rass 2022). In response, a union of all predominately-Palestinian parties – the Joint List (JL) – was established (Figure 1). The JL website confirms the impact of the “the rise of the election threshold” on its formation (“About the Joint List” n.d). Interview participants – including MKs from the JL – confirmed that the List was born of necessity, and not of a joint strategic initiative: “the only reason, in fact – not even the main one – the *only* reason for the JL’s establishment”, said an MK from the JL, “was the increase in the election threshold … everyone was afraid that they would not pass it alone” (Personal interview with MK, January 10, 2023).

The union was electorally successful. The JL won 13 seats in the Knesset (out of 120) that year, becoming the third largest party, and breaking the record for the number of seats won by Palestinian parties (collectively) to that point. Palestinian voter turnout rose from about to 56.5% in 2013 to about 63.5% in 2015, the highest voter turnout to that date in the 21st century (Rudnitzky 2015). The JL also increased its share of votes within the Palestinian electorate: 82.4% of Palestinian voters cast a ballot for the JL in 2015, in comparison to 77.2% who voted for either of the Palestinian parties in 2013 (Rudnitzky 2015). Indeed, the initial success of the JL’s formation cannot be overstated. The move created enthusiasm among voters, raising Palestinian turnout, and attracting voters from the Arab-Israeli stream, who would have otherwise cast a ballot for the Zionist Left (Navot, Rubin, and Ghanem 2017).

Shape

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

*Figure 1: Cohesion and Fragmentation Among Palestinian Parties in the Knesset[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Despite its success, the JL was plagued by internal bickering between constituent parties regarding the number and placement of candidates within the List (Khoury 2017; Personal interview with MK, August 7, 2017). Ahead of the April 2019 elections, the JL split into two lists: The AMR ran together with the DFPE, and the NDA with the UAL. In a media interview, Ayman Odeh acknowledged the split occurred due to personalistic rather than substantive reasons, stating: “There is no real, satisfactory reason for the JL’s disbandment … Lack of humility and too much ego here and there caused its breakup” (Younis 2019). The electorate responded negatively. Voter turnout fell to the lowest level to that point, 49.2% (Salaime 2019; Sha’lan 2019). Palestinian representation fell to 10 seats, and the share of Palestinians who voted for predominantly Jewish parties increased from 16.8% to 28.4% (Rudnitzky 2019). At this point, the Israeli political crisis of 2019-2022, surrounding the indictment of then-PM Benjamin Netanyahu, took shape, dividing the Israeli electorate into clear pro- and anti-Netanyahu camps. The successive elections called during this crisis – a total of five rounds between 2019-2022 – provided the Palestinian leadership with several opportunities to recalibrate organizationally in response to a variety of pressures, including voters’ calls for unity. Furthermore, the newly introduced political axis surrounding Netanyahu’s indictment, which superseded traditional left-right divides, empowered the JL by positioning it as a potential tiebreaker (Baram 2022). Indeed, it soon became clear that the establishment of an alternative coalition government would require defection from Netanyahu’s camp, the support of the JL, or both. The JL was included in unofficial coalitional negotiations on several occasions during the Crisis (Karni 2019; Segal and Liel 2020; Zaken and Schneider 2020).

Four additional elections were held after April 2019 (henceforth, 2019a) – in September 2019 (henceforth, 2019b), 2020, 2021 and 2022. The JL was reestablished ahead of 2019b, and was maintained through the following, 2020 election. Palestinian voters responded overwhelmingly positively to the reunification. Turnout rose from 49.2% in 2019a, to 59.2% in 2019b, and again, to 64.8% in 2020. The JL reestablishment increased the share of Palestinians who voted for non-Zionist parties: From 71.6% in 2019a, to 80.6% in 2019b and 87.6% in 2020 (Rudnitzky 2019). As a result, the JL won 15 seats in March 2020, the highest total number of seats won collectively by Palestinian parties to date. These results indicate a strong preference for unity among Palestinian voters. Additionally, survey data – including surveys commissioned by the JL itself – confirm that Palestinian voters demanded and rewarded unity in the Knesset, and would punish their representatives for fragmentating (Boxerman 2021; Khoury 2022; Uthman 2019).

During the 2019-2022 crisis, JL politicians repeatedly expressed their desire to form an alternative coalition with the Centre-Left. They made gestures toward the Centre by moderating their stances, de-prioritizing – but not completely abandoning – their commitments to combat ethnic and national inequality (Odeh 2019). Following the September 2019 and March 2020 elections, most members of the JL recommended Benny Gantz, who led the anti-Netanyahu camp, to form government.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite the JL’s support, public statements indicating willingness to compromise, and the high electoral costs associated with yet another round of elections, the anti-Netanyahu camp could not reach an agreement to form a JL-backed governing coalition (Barnea 2019; Hecht 2020). Political leaders from within the anti-Netanyahu camp cited the ideological gap between them and the JL as a primary reason for the inability to form a government (Drucker 2022b; Kodner 2022).

Ahead of the March 2021 elections, the UAL split from the JL. As an independent party, it reneged on the JL’s demand for an independent Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories, and omitted any reference to national Palestinian identity (Haklai and Abu Rass, 2022). Its leaders repeatedly stated that the state’s Jewish nature cannot be changed, and reasoned that by accepting the hegemonic, ethnic-hierarchical status quo – indeed, by breaking from the ideological common denominators expressed in the 2006-2007 Vision Documents – they will be better positioned to 1) satisfy voters’ desire for access to executive power, and 2) secure material gains for their constituents (Drucker 2022a; Kul Al-Arab 2021).

How can we explain these rapid organizational transformations? Why was the JL – a popular, electorally successful initiative – disbanded? Pundits and academics (myself included) have previously pointed a finger at the internal political culture within the JL as the primary reason for its disbandment (Abu Rass 2019; Ghanem 2019). They accused the Palestinian leadership of prioritizing personal, career-driven interests over the general will to present a united front. While this argument is not without basis, its explanatory power is limited. Instead, I will show that a contraction in political opportunity structures – objective and subjective – plays a much more significant role.

**3. The Political Environment: Israel’s Rightward Turn**

This section will outline changes in the Israeli political environment (in Israel proper, within the “Green Line”). I will describe an objective, measurable, steady contraction in the political opportunity structures facing Palestinians in Israel. This contraction has legal, institutional, and discursive dimensions. Legally and institutionally, Palestinian (as well as Jewish-Israeli, left-wing) political actors are directly constrained, while hegemonic opponents are empowered. Discursively, the rightward shift in Israeli hegemonic ideological discourse is primarily expressed through exclusion and delegitimization of Palestinians, and their counter-hegemonic allies, within the public sphere. From a Gramscian analytical perspective, these changes constitute a rightward shift in the bounds of Zionism, Israel’s hegemonic ideology. This shift has triggered tactical recalibrations within the Palestinian political leadership, which ultimately led to undulating patterns of cohesion and fragmentation outlined in the previous section.

Scholars have long recognized a rightward shift within Israel’s hegemonic discourse. Employing a Gramscian lens, scholar Rafaella A. Del Sarto argues that, since the second Intifada, a “Neo-Zionist” consensus emerged within Israel, characterised, by a zero-sum outlook regarding security and regional politics, a pervasive sense of being surrounded by enemies (a “villa” in a hostile “jungle”), and the conviction that peace with the Palestinians is unattainable (Becke 2019; Del Sarto 2017). Del Sarto shows that while the shift to the right has been a “constant feature” since the 1970s, it escalated after the Second Intifada, when regional and local political realities were increasingly perceived by Israelis in zero-sum terms. This outlook helped bolster a coalition between ideological settlers, who strive to increase Israeli settlement while expanding its borders territorially, and other segments of Israeli society – namely, the Mizrahi and Russian communities (Del Sarto 2017, 161-72). Ami Pedahzur differentiates between the “old radical right” within Israel, which has mostly been concerned with settlement and territorial expansion, and an emergent “new radical right” movement, distinguished by its more forceful nativism, authoritarianism, and open call to ethnically cleanse the Land of Israel of its Arab inhabitants (Pedahzur 2012). Shlomo Fischer argues that, through a “concerted effort”, the “religious nationalism” associated with the Religious Zionist stream “has become part of the hegemonic right-wing outlook” (Fischer 2022, 258). Others speak of an emergent “Neo-Zionist” hegemony, characterized by a break from Zionism’s traditional commitments to procedural democracy and liberalism (Jamal 2017). Though the methods used by these scholars to conceptualize this change differ, they share a clear bottom line: Israeli hegemonic discourse has been drifting rightward for some time. Arguably, this process began in the 1970s, with the Labor party’s fall from grace, accelerating through the Second Intifada (2000) and the re-election of Benjamin Netanyahu (2009).

**a. Law**

Recent years have seen a slew of legislative efforts to limit opposition to Israeli government policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, expressions of Palestinian nationalism, and the maneuverability of Palestinian MKs and activists (“Elected But Restricted” 2019). Additional bills and proposals aimed to restrict the activities of other, joint and predominately-Jewish organizations who oppose the Occupation, or call for greater equality between Jews and Arabs. In 2018, the Knesset approved the “Nation-State law” (formally, “Basic Law: Israel - The Nation State of the Jewish People”), a “basic” (constitutional) law which demoted the status of Arabic from an official to a “special” language, specified Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, and denied “the right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel” from all but the dominant Jewish majority (“Knesset Basic Law” 2020; Ben-Youssef and Tamari 2018). Several scholars commented on the importance of this law, which further cemented ethnic hierarchies in Israel (Ghanim, 2021; Kamir 2020; Tatour 2021). According to Dov Waxman and Ilan Peleg, the Law represents “the triumph of ethnocracy over liberal democracy”, entrenching exclusive Jewish ownership of the state as part of an ongoing trend toward illiberalism and majoritarianism within Israel (Waxman and Peleg 2020). Its impacts on ordinary Palestinians, activists and politicians are still unfolding. So far, most rulings that relied on the Law pertained to education: In 2020, an Israeli court used it to block funding for transportation from two Arab students, residents of Karmiel (a predominately Jewish city with no Arab schools), who had to commute to another city for schooling.[[3]](#footnote-3) In its decision, which was the first to rely on the Nation-State Law, the court reasoned: “Establishing an Arabic-language school... [and] funding school transportation for Arab students, for anyone who needs it anywhere, could change the demographic balance of the city and damage its character” (Noy 2020; Jeremy Bob 2020). Relying on the Nation-State law in 2022, Israel’s Ministry of Education asked educational institutions to declare that they will not “mark Israel’s Independence Day … as a day of mourning” – a decision that effectively bans commemorations of the Palestinian Nakba in Arab schools (Kadari-Ovadia, 2022).

Though the number of court rulings relying on the Nation-State law remains small, its significance cannot be overstated. Further, it must be understood in a broader legal context, among other bills that target expressions of Palestinian nationalism, silence Palestinian and left-wing CSOs, weaken democratic institutions, and erode civic equality. Notable examples include: (1) the 2011 “Nakba Law”, which empowers the Ministry of Finance to cut funding to public institutions that commemorate the Palestinian Nakba, (2) the 2011 “Boycott Law”, which forbids the promotion of boycotts against Israeli companies (even those that operate in the Occupied Territories alone), (3) the 2016 “Transparency Law”, which requires Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to disclose foreign-government funding[[4]](#footnote-4), (4) the 2017 “Entry Law”, which bars entry into Israel from persons who publicly advocate boycotting Israel or the settlements in the Occupied Territories, (5) the 2022 renewal of the “Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law”, which bans the granting of Israeli citizenship or residence permits to Palestinian residents of the Occupied Territories who are married to Israeli citizens, and (6) a ban on the display of Palestinian and other “enemy state” flags in publicly-funded institutions, which passed first reading in 2022 (Hauser Tov, Shpigel, and Khoury 2022; “Laws Designed to Silence” 2021; Shpigel 2022; Waxman and Peleg 2020, 193). These examples constitute a clear trend in the legal realm; toward further-entrenched ethnic hierarchies, greater intolerance and persecution of Palestinian and counter-hegemonic voices.

**b. Historical-institutional trends**

Scholars have shown that while the status of the Palestinian community in Israel has improved in some areas, significant gaps between Arabs and Jews remain in areas such as land policy, urban planning, education, and economic development (Agbaria 2017; Kedar, Amara, and Yiftachel 2018; Khalidi and Shihadeh 2016). In 2021, the life expectancy of Palestinian citizens was almost four years lower than Jewish citizens (“2021 Annual Report” 2021, 5). Palestinian infant mortality rate was higher, and Palestinian average income was lower – even when compared to Jewish Israelis with a similar educational background. While access to education has improved at all levels in the 21st century, and while the quality of primary and secondary education has improved, there remains a large gap in funding between Arab and Jewish schools (Haddad, Haj-Yahya, and Rudnitzky 2018). In the realm of planning and housing, where Palestinians have historically faced acute institutional disadvantages. The community continues to face land expropriation and, more significantly, inadequate land allocation by Israel’s various (local and national) Planning and Building Commissions for the construction of new housing units (Alfasi 2003; Zaken 2020; Khalaily and Shani 2020). Thus, Palestinian citizens of Israel are forced to build illegally, without permits and under threat of demolition. Additionally, Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel are segregated in a variety of formal and informal ways; geographically, within their separate education systems, and at work (Diab, Shdema, and Schnell 2022). The Israeli government recently issued resolutions “922” and “550” to address some of the economic and infrastructural inequalities between Jews and Arabs within Israel, but their full impact remains to be seen (Levi and Suchi 2018). Several interviewees saw these resolutions as purely economically-motivated, and questioned their ability to address lingering structural inequalities between Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel.

While the Palestinians within Israel operate in a different political-institutional context, their relationship with the Jewish majority and the state cannot be examined adequately in isolation from the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Looking at Israeli-Palestinian relations broadly, the fourth phase saw continued Israeli control, settlement, territorial expansion, and demobilization within the Occupied Territories. It saw continued denial of political rights from Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, increased segmentation of Palestinians into cantons within the West Bank, unceasing Israeli human rights violations, the cementation of Israeli territorial control and, most broadly, entrenchment of ethnic hierarchies in all areas under Israel’s control (“A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea” 2021; “Israel’s Apartheid Against Palestinians” 2022; Shakir 2021). The legal, institutional and discursive changes in Israel’s political environment cannot be separated from these wider processes.

**c. Hegemonic analysis**

These legal and institutional shifts were accompanied by ideological and discursive ones. They are best viewed as part of a deep hegemonic transformation, which Waxman and Peleg liken to those that have transpired in Hungary and Turkey over the past two decades (Waxman and Peleg 2020, 196). This subsection will explore manifestations of this hegemonic, discursive transformation. One its most remarkable features is the growing public intolerance toward Palestinian citizens of Israel and their representatives – a process which, I argue, began with the Second Intifada, accelerating in 2009. It marks a major departure from the height of the third phase, when cooperation between Zionists and Palestinian nationalists entered the bounds of tolerable politics. As we shall see in this section, today, the Jewish majority conditions Palestinian parties’ legitimacy upon their disavowal of Palestinian nationalism, and their abandonment of their anti-occupation and equality-driven agendas – cornerstones of Palestinian politics (Jamal 2011, 165). As we shall see, these hegemonic-ideological transformations play a crucial role in explaining the Palestinians schism within Israel, between those who sacrificed ideological commitments in exchange for political legitimacy – the “hegemonic-accommodationist” camp; and those who chose to maintain their ideological commitments at the cost of continued exclusion – the “hegemonic-rejectionist” camp.

In the ‘90s, Israeli politics were characterized by a hegemonic war of position between post- and neo-Zionists; between those who wanted to emphasize the state’s Jewish or Democratic characteristics (Ram 2011). During the third phase, there existed a large, organic Israeli “Peace Camp”, which emphasized the state’s liberal-democratic characteristics and pushed for a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. Whether this camp’s leader, PM Yitzhak Rabin truly intended to establish a fully independent Palestinian state (a topic of ongoing debate; Ehrlich 2004, 217; Khalidi 2020, 192-206; Rabinovich 2018), his administration *was* exceptional, as it was the first to legitimize partnership with Palestinian politicians – among them, Palestinian nationalists. In doing so, the Rabin administration – representing an organic camp, and Zionism’s historic, Labor-led, hegemonic “core” – seriously raised the question of restructuring ethnic relations within Israel. Furthermore, at the height of the third phase, Israel’s democratic character was emphasized through a “constitutional revolution” – the passing of two “basic” (constitutional) laws that protected certain human rights. (Michelman 2018). Calls for greater equality, for an end to the Occupation, and for the establishment of a Palestinian state were hotly debated and fiercely opposed, but they fell within the bounds of tolerable hegemonic discourse. As Raffaella Del Sarto and others argue, however, the bounds of hegemonic discourse changed radically after the Second Intifada, with the emergence of a “neo-Revisionist” or “neo-Zionist” hegemonic consensus, which emphasized Israel’s ethnic-hierarchical character and drove its politics rightward (Del Sarto 2017, Ram 2011; Rouhana and Sultany 2003).

This process, which began with the Second Intifada and accelerated with Benjamin Netanyahu’s re-election in 2009, turned previously acceptable political positions into intolerable ones. To be labeled “left wing” became considered an insult (Waxman 2016). Illustrative examples include: (1) Likud’s 2006 “Smolmert” campaign, which labeled then-PM Ehud Olmert as a leftist (“Smol” means left in Hebrew; Moalem 2006), (2) the emergence and high public visibility of several right-wing CSOs, associated with Religious Zionism and the settler movement, which counter the activities of human rights organizations by defaming them in the public sphere, express support for the IDF, and promote Jewish settlements in the West Bank, Negev and mixed cities within Israel (Jamal 2018)[[5]](#footnote-5), (3) government officials’ legitimization and frequent collaboration with these right-wing CSOs (Pinson 2022; Waxman 2016), (4) frequent attacks on left-wing CSOs by Israeli politicians – including liberal Zionists (Pinson 2022; Shmuli 2015; Somfalvi and Rimerman 2015), (4) growing “insistence on loyalty”, and emphasis on Israel’s Jewish character, in its education system (Pinson 2022; Waxman 2016), (5) the revocation of national awards from left-wing recipients (Morag 2022), (6) the lack of media coverage of state-sanctioned and settler violence in the Occupied Territories (Del Sarto 2017, 78-81) (7) the exclusion of ethnic and political minorities from mainstream media (Granot 2021), and (7) the delegitimization of Palestinian activists and MKs and their routine portrayal as fifth columns in mainstream media discourse (Del Sarto 2017, 123-33).

A primary source of evidence for the rightward hegemonic shift is the electoral decline of the Liberal Zionist Left. Broadly, the Liberal Zionist stream consists of parties such as Labor, Meretz, Yesh Atid, and Blue and White; parties ranging from the center to the left of the political spectrum, which are simultaneously committed to liberalism, secularism and Zionism. During the third phase, the pursuit of a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – including territorial concessions – stood at the forefront of this stream’s demands, and its commitment to liberalism was pronounced (Daniele 2016; Mandelbaum 2012; Pappé 2015). Electorally, the most liberal, left-leaning parties within this stream – Meretz and Labor – had steadily declined since then. In 1992, Labor received 44 seats in the Knesset, and Meretz 12 (Figure 2). By 2022, Labor declined to just 4 seats, while Meretz failed to pass the electoral threshold. Across the Center-Left spectrum, political discourse shifted to the right. Since 1999, both Labor and Meretz unified with other, smaller, center parties on occasion, and changed their names: in 2015, for example, Labor ran together with former Likud member Tsipi Livni’s “Hatnua” party, in a joint list called “the Zionist Camp” (Daniele 2016, 471). This, and other similar attempts by Labor and Meretz to rebrand, to include both centrists and hawks in their lists, and to emphasize their commitments to Zionism, are telling; they are indicative of the Israeli Left’s turn away from its third-phase, liberal-egalitarian commitments, and of the overall hegemonic drift rightward within Israel (Daniele 2016, 481-82).

*Figure 2: The Zionist Left’s Decline and the Rise of the Center, 1992-2022[[6]](#footnote-6)*

In their stead, centrist parties have emerged and grown. These maintain some of the Left’s core commitments to liberal and secular values, but are also markedly militaristic and nationalist. They de-prioritize or completely omit the demand to end the Occupation, and reject the idea of forming governments backed by Palestinian parties (Yiftachel 2013). Notable examples include Yesh Atid and Blue and White, emerging in 2013 and 2019, respectively. Overall, the Liberal Zionist stream adopted what Jan-Werner Mueller calls a “positional centrist” approach, seeking equidistance from either pole of the ideological spectrum in order to appear pragmatic and hold on to power (Mueller 2021). This phenomenon is not unique to Israel. As Mueller argues, positional centrism can end up legitimizing extremism by refraining from taking a firm stance against it. As a result, a drift in hegemonic-ideological norms can occur, including the legitimization of anti-democratic practices. Taken together, the growing intolerance toward ideas associated with the liberal Left, the growth of the Israeli Center, the demise of Israel’s peace movement and the Left’s turn rightward all serve to illustrate this rightward shift; particularly, the growing acceptance of majoritarian ethnonationalism as a guiding, organizing hegemonic principle. These processes have been analyzed extensively by pundits and academics, including Gramscian hegemonic analysts (Cachlili 2022; Del Sarto 2017, 211-26; Wolloch 2022; Yizhar 2014, 109-56). To question privileged status of the Jewish majority, or to call for an end to the occupation in the Occupied Territories are both considered unacceptable political discourse in Israel today. To express support for these positions – rejected across the aisle – is tantamount to political suicide.

The triumph of neo-Zionism, or neo-Revisionism in Israel is also characterized by the legitimation of the extreme right. Previously unacceptable political positions – ones that were prevalent, doubtlessly, but not tolerated in public political discourse – have become acceptable, even mainstream. Most notable in this regard is the increased visibility of Kahanism, a far-right political movement and ideology based on the views of Meir Kahane, who founded the Jewish Defense League in the United States and the “Kach” party in Israel. Kahanism has been defined as an “ultra-nationalist” ideology, characterized by four basic principles: “hostility toward non-Jews, nationalism whose main expression is the desire for territorial expansion, hostility to democracy and the justification for the use of violence” (Pedahzur and Canetti-Nisim 2006). Additionally, Kahanists demand the expulsion of Palestinian citizens from Israel (Kahane 1981). Meir Kahane became a member of Knesset in 1984, but was marginalized by the Israeli mainstream, his party boycotted across the isles.

Kahanism regained its legitimacy after the Second Intifada, as the Israeli political spectrum turned rightward. In 2009 – the year Benjamin Netanyahu’s returned to office as prime minister – Michael Ben Ari, a known disciple of Meir Kahane, was elected to Knesset under the National Union party. Recent years have seen the rise of several far-right parties and lists, including National Union, The Jewish Home, Yamina (“Rightwards”), and Otzma Yehudit (“Jewish Power”). While not a committed Kahanist, the rise of Avigdor Lieberman – a hawkish, far-right, secular politician – and his Yisrael Beiteinu (“Israel is Our Home”) party are also indicative of this change: his 2009 election campaign targeted Palestinian citizens, using the slogan “no citizenship without loyalty”, and called for a transfer of Palestinians from Israel into the Occupied Territories (Del Sarto 2017, 130; Rosenberg 2009). Yisrael Beiteinu secured 15 seats that year, and it was included in government. Bezalel Smotrich, an MK since 2015 (best known as the leader of the Religious Zionist Party, which ran under several different lists), publicly espoused several Kahanist positions since being elected to Knesset: in a 2016 interview, for example, he refused to label Baruch Goldstein – the perpetrator of the aforementioned Hebron massacre – a terrorist, and said it is “true” that Israeli Jews cannot be considered terrorists (Weiss 2016). He also championed segregation between Arabs and Jews, labeled himself a “proud homophobe”, called reform Judaism “fake”, and supported a shoot-to-kill policy on Palestinian rock-throwers in the Occupied Territories (Graham-Harrison 2017; Lis 2016; Pileggi 2015; *The Times of Israel* 2016). Speaking to the Knesset in October 2021, Smotrich told Arab MKs that they were “here by mistake, because Ben Gurion did not finish the job and throw you out in 1948” (Shpigel 2021). Threats of ethic cleansing have become routine, even among members of larger, more mainstream parties (Bender 2022; Rapoport and Fakhoury 2022).

Perhaps the most notable example is Itamar Ben-Gvir – a member of Knesset since 2021 and the Minister of National Security since late 2022. In his youth, Ben-Gvir protested the Oslo Accords, and in 1995 – weeks before PM Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination – he boasted of stealing an emblem from Rabin’s vehicle, stating: “just as we got to this emblem, we can also get to Rabin” (Maltz 2016). In 2007, he was convicted of incitement to racism for carrying signs that read, “Expel the Arab enemy” and “Rabbi Kahane was right: The Arab MKs are a fifth column” (Lefkovits 2007). A picture of Baruch Goldstein hung in his living room until 2020 (Attali and Alon 2020). Before running for Knesset, he worked as a defense lawyer, representing several Jewish-Israelis suspected of terrorism and hate crimes, including the convicted perpetrator of the 2017 Duma Arson Attack (which cost the lives of three Palestinians – a married couple and their 18-month-old child; Ben Zion and Ari Gross 2015; Libman 2020). Ahead of the 2022 elections, his “Jewish Power” party’s campaign promoted the expulsion of members of the JL to another country (Sarah Rep 2022).

Right-wing politics are increasingly resonant among ordinary Israelis. In a 2013 survey by the Israeli Democracy Institute, a combined total of 48.9% of Jewish Israeli respondents either agreed or somewhat agreed that Jews deserve greater rights than non-Jews in Israel – an increase of 13% compared to a 2009 survey conducted by the same institute (Hermann et al. 2013, 91). In a 2016 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 79% of Israeli Jews said “Jews deserve preferential treatment in Israel”, and 48% either agreed or strongly agreed that “Arabs should be expelled or transferred from Israel” (“Israel’s Religiously Divided Society” 2016). Only 8% of Israeli Jews identified as left-wing, while 37% identified as right-wing and 55% as centrists. In an index of Arab-Jewish relations, which has been published every two years since 1976, a clear picture emerges: since 2015, Jewish attitudes have been characterized by “exacerbation” regarding “almost all issues” pertaining to Arab-Jewish relations (Smooha 2020, 194). The author finds that while most Jewish respondents value Jewish-Arab coexistence in principle, “the right of the Arabs to live in the country as an equal minority is conditioned on their acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state and on the non-adoption of a Palestinian identity” (Smooha 2020, 196). The share of respondents who agree with this sentiment has been growing since 2015. Furthermore, the author found that growing shares of Jewish respondents did not want Arabs to live in their neighborhoods (51% in 2017, and 60.4% in 2019), did not feel comfortable shopping in malls where Arabs were present (31.3% in 2017, and 37% in 2019), and did not want Arab students in Jewish high schools (50% in 2017, and 51.7% in 2019; Smooha 2020, 195). In 2015, 82.4% of Jewish respondents agreed that “there is a right to exist within Israel for an Arab national minority with full civil rights”, but this figure declined to 76% in 2017, and 75.7% in 2019 (Smooha 2020, 195). Growing minorities of Jewish respondents wish to deprive Arabs of the right to vote, and support the expulsion of Arabs from Israel (Smooha 2020, 198).

Recent developments – including the May 2021 events, and the establishment of Israel’s most right-wing government, in late 2022 – contributed to Palestinians’ perceptions of greatly deteriorating environmental conditions. The conflagration of May 2021 was unprecedented in scale, with mobilization, repression, rocket fire, and military bombardment occurring simultaneously on multiple fronts, in Gaza, Jerusalem, Israel proper, and the West Bank. It was also unprecedented in kind: for the first time since the state’s establishment, large-scale intercommunal violence broke out within the Green Line, between Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel. While Palestinians and Jews were killed in the riots, the police’s response was highly disproportionate, contributing to an atmosphere of impunity: by June 10th, 2021, Israeli police arrested at least 2150 individuals, 91% of whom were Palestinians (Abdu 2022; Amnesty International 2021). The open aim of the police’s mass arrest campaign was to re-impose “deterrence”: many Palestinian detainees were protesters who were not involved in intercommunal rioting (Abu Sneineh 2021). An August 2022 analysis shows that “Israel's state attorney's office has filed 397 indictments against 616 defendants” in relation to the May 2021 events, “545 of whom are Arabs, including 161 children” (Abdu 2022). They affected me personally, when my parents’ Jewish neighbors left Jaffa for their extended families, as mobs of extremists torched homes and businesses in the mixed city. These events shocked Palestinian activists and leaders, leaving many fearful, hopeless, and disillusioned. Similarly, the re-election of Benjamin Netanyahu in late 2022, and the establishment of the most right-wing government in Israel’s history, had contributed to a growing weariness even among Palestinian activists and politicians, who are used to working under hostile conditions (interview 1, 2, 3…).

These examples are all constitutive of the Israeli political environment, illustrating a steep decline in the structure of political opportunities facing Palestinians in Israel. They serve to illustrate the growth of the Israeli Right, the growing acceptance of far-right discourse, and the increasingly rigid boundaries of ethnic hegemony in Israel. Considering this phase together with the preceding three phases of Palestinian politics, the *third* phase stands out a liberal exception to the norm. Indeed, only in the third phase did the hegemonic boundaries in Israel become permeable, and Palestinian participation became legitimized: fiercely opposed, but legitimized nonetheless. Only in the third phase did a vocal, audacious, combative peace camp emerge as a hegemonically contentious, alternative political force within Israel. From this perspective, the fourth phase can be seen as a swing *back* in the political-hegemonic pendulum; back to a more rigid understanding of Zionism and of the Land of Israel as the exclusive home of the Jewish people. The fourth phase is only exceptional in the extent of exclusionary discourse rather than in nature, as it brought the extremist, far-right into the heart of Israeli consensus. This is the context in which the Joint List was formed, disbanded and reformed. I show that Palestinian parties’ decision to unite, and their subsequent schism, can *both* be explained by leaders’ perceptions of growing hostility, at different levels. Using the pendulum metaphor again, when Israeli hegemony swung back to the right following the Second Intifada, Palestinian elites perceived the environment as increasingly hostile. Leaders felt threatened and reacted by pooling their organizational and material resources. When the environmental conditions continued to deteriorate, and Palestinians’ hopes of affecting change through partnership with the Jewish Center-Left were lost, unity made less tactical sense to elements within the Palestinian leadership, leading to schism and despair.

**4. The Two-Pronged Palestinian Response**

This section describes Palestinian elites’ perceptions of political opportunity, and their own perspectives on the leadership’s successive unifications and breakups. My analysis of interview data suggests that the above-mentioned political-environmental challenges provoked two new strategic responses among the Palestinian leadership, which, in turn, explains the schism. Several respondents agreed that the JL’s formation was driven by both tactical considerations (in response to the raise in the election threshold) and public pressure to unify (Personal interview with prominent Palestinian civic activist, April 20, 2022; with Palestinian journalist, civic and grassroots activist, January 2, 2023; with Member of Knesset, January 10, 2023). The ongoing exclusion faced by Palestinian politicians, however, as well as deteriorating environmental conditions, triggered two competing strategic responses. The first response, which I label “hegemonic-accommodationist”, attempts to gain political legitimacy – and with it, access to executive power, securing material improvements – by withdrawing its challenge to Israel’s ethnic hegemonic order. Exemplified by the UAL, this response is characterized by acceptance of the minority’s subordinate status. In effect, it revives the patron-client relationship that dominated Jewish-Palestinian relations in Israel during the first two decades after the state’s establishment (Cohen 2010; Haklai 2011). A second, emergent tactical response is characterized by loss of faith in Israel’s political institutions in favor of non-formal, extra-parliamentary, contentious politics. Both responses break from the leadership’s traditional tactical preference over the past 25 years: waging a counter-hegemonic struggle from within, using routine political means, in both the civic and political spheres; by a “war of position”, to put it in Gramscian terms. Palestinian mass mobilization throughout 2020, and the outburst of contention of May 2021, exemplify this response.

**a. The popular push for unity**

The rapid changes in the voting patterns of Palestinians in Israel, outlined in the second section, indicate an organic demand for unity among the Palestinian electorate. It responded to the JL’s formation (ahead of the 2015 elections) and reformation (ahead of the September 2019 elections) with considerably higher voter turnout rates, a high share of the vote going to the JL, and a correspondingly low share of the vote for predominately Jewish parties (Haklai & Abu Rass, 2022). These trends reversed both times the JL fragmented, with historically low turnout rates, a comparatively low share of the vote going to Palestinian parties and a relatively high share to predominately Jewish parties (Haklai & Abu Rass, 2022). At the same time, the low turnout rates following the JL’s disbandment, and the willingness of a considerable share of the electorate to vote for Jewish alternatives, indicate a concurrent lack of faith in the Israeli political system. As concluded in a 2020 Israeli Democracy Institute report, while unity has likely provided a breath of fresh air for Palestinian politics within the Green Line, the JL’s failure brought the electorate *back* to a baseline state of apathy, disaffection, and lack of faith in the possibility of change (Rudnitzky 2020). The report shows that, despite the spikes in voter turnout following the JL’s establishment, there is a clear overall downward trend in Palestinian participation in Israeli elections since the Second Intifada, accompanied by a growing disaffected population which refrains from voting deliberately, as a “tactical move” (Rudnitzky 2020).

Recent surveys shed light on the grassroots processes driving these strategic-organizational changes, strengthening the above-suggested inferences regarding Palestinian voters’ electoral preferences. On the one hand, respondents – Palestinian citizens of Israel – have consistently expressed a desire to be included in government in recent years: in a survey taken ahead of the 2015 general elections, 61% of respondents said their representatives should join a ruling coalition (Khoury 2015). Ahead of the April 2019 elections, 87% of Palestinians stated that “an Arab party in the Israeli government” would be either “very acceptable” or “fairly acceptable” (Scheindlin 2019). Support for Palestinian MKs formally joining or extending their support for a ruling coalition was similarly high in a survey conducted ahead of the September 2019 elections, at 77.8% (Rudnitzky 2019, 7). On the other hand, this survey also reveals a constituency that lost faith in the prospect of change through Israeli political institutions. In the survey conducted ahead of the September 2019 elections, 26.4% said they did not intend to vote in the upcoming election, and 42% were undecided (Rudnitzky 2019, 2). Respondents who did not intend to vote provided the following reasons for their abstention: 34% pointed to “the harmful attitude and treatment of Israeli Arabs by Israeli Jewish politicians”, 20.6% answered “no party represents me”, and 17.8% objected in principle to voting. How are those popular trends, concurrent among the Palestinian community in Israel, reflected among activists, practitioners and politicians?

**b. The hegemonic-accommodationist response**

Recent developments – the United Arab List’s decision to split from the JL, its ability to pass the election threshold, the historically low Palestinian turnout rates in the March 2021 general elections, and the contentious mobilization of Palestinians in response to the May 2021 escalations in Gaza and Jerusalem – exemplify the diverging strategic responses. The hegemonic-accommodationist response – exemplified by the UAL’s actions – reflects a decision to concede to the bounds of acceptable hegemonic discourse, in exchange for political legitimacy. The *disaffected* response – exemplified by the low turnout rates and the increased level of Palestinian mobilization within the Green Line – reflects a growing sense of disillusionment, leading to the abandonment of formal politics and the pursuit of other, contentious avenues for political activity.

While the JL did not accept the ethnic hegemonic order, we can nevertheless identify within it a turn toward accommodating the Jewish majority during Israel’s 2019-2022 political crisis. JL chairman Ayman Odeh attempted to build a broad “democratic camp” with the Zionist Left. As noted in the second section, Odeh announced palatable, modest demands ahead coalitional negotiations in 2021, de-prioritizing – but did not completely omitting – the demand to end the Israeli Occupation. Following its split from the JL, the UAL took this a step further, completely omitting demands to restructure ethnic hierarchies in Israel from their campaign. Its approach was openly opportunistic: the list’s leader, Mansour Abbas, argued that the Arab leadership should reposition itself at the center of the political spectrum in order to be included in a future governing coalition (Makover-Blikov 2020). Shortly after the elections, he defined himself as a “proud Arab and Muslim, citizen of Israel”, without referencing Palestinian identity, and he declared that his party is reaching out to all segments of Israeli society (Bender and Vaserman 2021). Following the formation of a coalition government, Abbas stated that he would have preferred for his party’s to join a “fully right-wing government”, since that would have resulted in greater “recognition from across the Israeli political and social spectrum” (*Maariv* 2021). These statements show a clear strategic reorientation toward accommodating the ethnic hegemonic order, taking steps not to challenge it by limiting the scope of the minority’s demands to the bounds of tolerable hegemonic discourse (for example, material improvements for Arab localities, combatting organized crime, and limited improvements in infrastructure and planning).

UAL-affiliated interview participants openly confirmed that the party’s decision to drop its counter-hegemonic commitments was strategic, in order to gain legitimacy and, with it, access to power. UAL leaders have confirmed this in media interviews, too (XXX). Its ability to pass the election threshold reveals a substantial constituency for whom access to political power, and the promise of tangible material improvements, are perhaps more important than prior counter-hegemonic commitments. Indeed, supporters of the UAL expressed pride in being included in government. Interviews confirm that this strategic reorientation is organic, and that, for its active supporters, it satisfied a desire for political legitimacy and access. For example, a UAL-affiliated mayor of a Bedouin locality said:

“Everybody knows that I belong to the United Arab List. The way the speak to me changed. They consider me like a member of government. … Because of this, they treat me differently. Once, for example, the director for the Israel Land Administration acted in a way I did not like. So, I called Dr. Mansour Abbas, and he called [the director’s boss] in Jerusalem. The director then called Mansour and said: ‘we can sit down and work it out, why did you have to to call the Jerusalem office?’. This is a simple example. Dr. Mansour Abbas' presence [in government] provides us heads of Arab local councils with strong support, regardless of whether we belong to the United Arab List or the Joint List” (Personal interview, April 5, 2022).

Additional examples will be added.

**c. The hegemonic-rejectionist response and the spread of disaffection**

The UAL’s former partners in the JL blamed it for the schism, feeling betrayed. Interviews illustrate the depth of the schism. A Member of Knesset said the following:

“For those who still expect us to run together [with the UAL]: so long as they are willing to cooperate even with Kahanists in government; so long as they do not raise the occupation as a top priority, and vote in favor of horrible, terrible proposals… What can we do with them? We have no reason to cooperate with them. They are the ones who disbanded the whole affair. Unilaterally. It's true that they tried to blame us, but that is not true. They decided to go for a defeatist political position, and... are you a little familiar with Malcolm X?”

*Rida Abu Rass*: “Yes”.

*MK*: “You know, they decided to be the house slave” (Personal interview, January 10, 2023).

XX other interview participants who are not associated with the UAL expressed similar sentiments. In a similar vein, Ayman Odeh, chairman of the DFPE, called Mansour Abbas a “pet Arab” in a 2023 interview for an Israeli talk show (Tocatly 2023). Clearly, the hegemonic-rejectionist camp harbors a great deal of resentment for the UAL.

I define the hegemonic-rejectionist camp in opposition to the accommodationists. Unlike the accommodationists, hegemonic-rejectionists maintained their counter-hegemonic commitments. However, interviews, as well as the election and survey data presented above, suggest a growing *disaffected* constituency within this camp. The disaffected maintained their counter-hegemonic commitments, but reject participation in Israeli institutions. This rejection can be ideological (they find Israeli institutions illegitimate), or circumstantial (they no longer find value in participating in general elections). This is exemplified by declining voter turnout rates, and the turn toward other, non-formal political means; toward a Gramscian “war of maneuver”. While Palestinian voter turnout in general elections has consistently been lower than Jewish turnout, the historically low levels following the JL’s disbandment ahead of the April 2019 and March 2021 elections indicate the growth of this constituency. The data presented in this paper confirm this interpretation. Disaffection is evident in interviews, too: even though most interviewees worked within the formal political and civic spheres (MKs and activists; only a minority of interviewees were grassroots organizers), most of them expressed frustration and disappointment with what could be achieved through Israeli institutions, and hope for the creation of other, non-formal forums of political mobilization. Examples.

Disaffected interview participants lamented the breakup of the JL. For example, an executive director of a CSO, said:

“The Joint List's disbandment was done in a very polarizing way. It's not the case that there are two lists that disagree but coexist, but rather, there is now a loud competition between the two, and it created a situation that returned us to the '70s, where a portion of the Arabs are in the coalition, and part of the Arabs in the opposition. This is very, very hard for us”.

As this participant conveys, the Joint List was professionally convenient, integrating the Palestinian civic sphere, which was and continues to be organizationally fragmented along party lines. Conversely, the List’s breakup was professionally difficult for some activists, as was the UAL’s participation in a governing coalition alongside right wing parties. For example, the same executive director stated:

“We have a clear and expressly written position as a CSO, which goes contrary to the idea that our work should be limited to budgets and resources, due to the coalitional agreement. We, as a CSO, would like to continue on both paths: the path of equality in budgets and resources - and this is the direction taken by the UAE, for example - but also the path of symbolic and substantial equality, which is closer to the Joint List. So, we did not concede any of those - we try to work on both areas, and we try to maintain an equal distance from both lists, and this takes a lot of energy and effort”.

The JL’s utility as a centralized coordinative mechanism was conveyed by XX other interview participants. That the UAL’s split caused professional-organizational difficulties was shared by XX other interview participants. XX interview participants also rejected the accommodationist tactic (the idea that the PCI should limit the scope of its demands in exchange for greater executive power and material improvements).

The prevalence of disaffection, even within among those with institutionalized roles, cannot be overstated. Many participants note the May 2021 events as a turning point which, in some cases, caused them to reevaluate the futility of their own work. Examples.

And so, the May 2021 Events can be viewed as an organic expression of the popular will to continue the counter-hegemonic struggle, while rejecting the established Palestinian political elite, as well as the institutions within which they operate; as a manifestation of the disaffected strategic response. Indeed, a notable feature of the May 2021 unrest is its contentious, grassroots nature, unguided by traditional political elites. During these events, the traditional leadership in both the civic and political spheres had often lagged behind grassroots activists, who took initiative. For example, while the High Follow Up Committee – an umbrella organization comprising of Palestinian leaders from both the civic and political spheres – called for a general strike on 18 May, 2021, they only did so after grassroots activists propagated their own call online, through social media. And while the May 2021 Events included many instances of indiscriminate inter-ethnic clashing, it also included an unusually high level of organized, politically motivated, contentious collective action.

**Conclusions**

The Palestinian schism within Israel was driven by diverging strategic responses to worsening exclusion and delegitimization. The “hegemonic-accommodationist” camp, spearheaded by the United Arab List party, is characterized by acceptance of Israel’s hegemonic ethnic order, the omission of demands to end the Israeli occupation over the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a focus on civic issues and material improvements for the Palestinian community. On the other hand, the “hegemonic-rejectionist” camp maintains the rejection of Israel’s hegemonic ethnic order at the forefront of its political program. It is further divided between a “disaffected” and a “Israeli-institutionalist” constituency. The former consists of those who lost faith in the possibility of change through Israel’s political institutions, preferring the establishment of alternative, communitarian institutions and non-formal, contentious politics. The “Israeli-institutionalist” group consists of those who place emphasis on continued political action through Israeli institutions, primarily the Knesset. Diachronic analysis of this case, at varying points since 2015, suggests that both organizational cohesion and fragmentation were caused by a perceived decline in political opportunities among Palestinian activists and politicians. At first, political actors banded together in response to the perception of threat, and as a tactical response to a structural barrier – the heightened election threshold. They pooled resources in order to amplify their collective power. This generated genuine hope and enthusiasm for unity as a strategy among the Palestinian electorate. When unity failed to bear fruit, and as political actors continued to perceive worsening environmental conditions, some reevaluated their goals and reoriented strategically, causing the schism.

My analysis suggests a curvilinear relationship between organizational cohesion and perceptions of political opportunity. When political actors’ perceptions of opportunity are *either* high or low, organizational fragmentation is likely to increase; medium levels are correlated with cohesion. In this model, strategic and ideological preferences serve as an intermediary variables: actors are free to be “picky” in open political environments, resulting in ideological differentiation and ultimately, organizational fragmentation. On the other hand, in closed, repressive, or exclusionary political environments – when political opportunities are scarce, and actors perceive scarce avenues toward goal-accomplishment – differences in *strategic* preferences are easily amplified, leading, also, to fragmentation. Interestingly, Palestinian politics in Israel has *generally* followed this pattern, since 1948: during the state’s earliest years, when the Palestinian community in Israel was placed under Military Rule and the environment was, arguably, the most hostile in the community’s history, the leadership was highly fragmented. Around the ‘70s-’80s, which, arguably, had medium levels of repression and exclusion, the leadership reached historic levels of cohesion. In the ‘90s, which were characterized by the perceptions of opportunity and hope, the leadership organizationally differentiated along ideological lines, with as many as four different parties in the Knesset, and a slew of new CSOs. And so, this theory could be tested by conducting a diachronic comparative analysis of this case over a longer period of time, through synchronic comparative analysis with other, contemporaneous cases, or both.

Lastly, this study has surprising implications for the study of ethnic mobilization. Scholars of ethnic politics have long noted that in societies with deep ethnic divisions, co-ethnic elites are incentivized to use increasingly extreme rhetoric when competing with one another – say, for votes. The opposite happened in this case: in order to appeal to the hegemonic, titular ethnic majority, and in order to gain political legitimacy, parties “out-moderated” one another. As far as I am aware, this phenomenon has not been discussed in the relevant literature. Theoretically, it is quite possible that, in general, highly asymmetrical power relations, coupled with high quality of life and therefore much to lose, produce an opposite trend: a push to accommodate the majority.

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1. Numbers denote the number of seats won by each party or list. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Israel, the mandate to form government is not given automatically to the leader of the largest party, but rather, the president grants it to the leader whose party received the greatest number of recommendations from MKs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Israeli school system is officially segregated, with three streams: secular-Jewish, religious-Jewish, and Arab. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Left-leaning, Palestinian, anti-occupation and human-rights CSOs rely on foreign-government funding to a greater extent than right-leaning ones, who tend to rely more heavily on private donors (Fuchs and Kremnitzer 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Notable examples include “Hunenu” (est. 2001), “Regavim” (2006), “Im Tirtzu” (2006), The Israel Land Fund (2008), My Israel (2010), “Derech Chaim” (2010), “Btsalmo” (2012), “Ad Kan” (2015), My Truth (2015) and “Torat Lechima” (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To an extent, the decision to classify a party as centrist is a matter of judgement. I included parties which were widely considered as such by Israeli media sources: The Third Way, The Center Party, Shinui, Kadima, Hatnua, Yesh Atid, Kulanu, Blue and White, and New Hope. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)