# Ethnic and Lateral Underbidding: Evidence from Israel and Turkey [DRAFT]

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# Ethnic and Lateral Underbidding: Evidence from Israel and Turkey

Recent scholarship has moved past the outbidding model of inter-ethnic competition, revealing a variety of alternative strategies. This article explores these alternatives among the Palestinian and Kurdish leaderships within Israel and Turkey. While elites chose underbidding rather than outbidding in both cases, only Kurdish elites successfully bid laterally, attracting support from among members of the Turkish majority. This difference can be explained by examining differences in the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries – the extent and method in which ethnic differences are institutionalized – in each case.

**Introduction**

Recent scholarship has begun to unpack the strategies ethnic actors use in intra- and inter-ethnic competitions. Moving beyond the classical, "outbidding" model, which predicted ethnic factions will adopt more radical positions and strategies than their competitors to secure the support of their co-ethnic constituencies (Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972), new research shows that ethnic factions have a variety of strategies at their disposal. While new studies specify several of alternatives to the classical outbidding model (Coakley, 2008; Zuber, 2013), they only begin to explain why and when these alternatives arise. What leads ethnic actors to choose one strategy over another? What causes ethnic elites to extend their appeal across ethnic boundaries? To answer these questions, I examine ethnic party strategies among the Kurdish and Palestinian leaderships within Turkey and Israel. Tracing historical developments, and focusing on recent electoral challenges – Turkey's 2023 election and Israel's 2019-2022 political crisis – I identify differences between these two, otherwise quite similar cases. Both the Kurdish and Palestinian leaderships adopted more moderate positions in their bids to join broad alliances bent on unseating long-serving incumbents (Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan). In both cases, these broad alliances had ultimately failed. A notable difference, however, pertains to these leaderships' appeal: while both the Kurdish, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the Palestinian Joint List (JL) attempted to position themselves as both ethnic and broad-tent, left-wing parties, only the HDP had consistently succeeded in its lateral bid for ethnic Turkish support. Failing to breach the bounds of legitimacy in Israel, the JL splintered into separate parties, pursuing different strategies, including ethnic underbidding (adopting more moderate positions while focusing exclusively on the co-ethnic community), static bidding

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(maintaining the exclusive focus on the co-ethnic community without changing political positions) and ethnic outbidding.

I argue that the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries, or the extent and manner in which ethnic hierarchies are institutionalized, explains these differences. It explains the HDP's ability to simultaneously act as an ethnic and as a broad-tent, socialist party, and the JL's failure in that regard. Polities which rely on enforced assimilation to maintain their ethnic hegemonic orders, like Turkey, are more likely to have historically fostered cross-cutting identities to facilitate ethnic minorities' assimilation. These identities can be mobilized by ethnic elites (representing majorities and minorities alike), enabling lateral bidding. In comparison, polities that use discriminatory exclusion to regulate ethnic differences, like Israel, are not likely to have salient cross-cutting identities for elites to draw upon. As a result, they have highly ethnically segmented electoral markets, with virtually no cross-ethnic voting (Horowitz, 1985, p. 342) – an unfavorable environment for lateral bidders. This explains the JL's failure to establish a broad, inter-ethnic coalition with elements of the Israeli Left, and the absence of lateral bidding strategies among Palestinian parties in the latest Israeli election. These findings somewhat contradict recent scholarship, which correlates the level of ethnic segmentation in electoral markets with the extent of outbidding among ethnic minorities. I conclude by urging scholars to analyze majority-minority interactions as dynamic rather than static processes, to incorporate structured inequalities into their analyses, and to view strategy formation as a relational, mutually-constitutive, context-dependent process.

In the next section, I overview the theoretical literature on ethnic party strategies. I then trace strategic developments in the the Kurdish and Palestinian cases, establishing values for the

dependent variable. In the following section, I trace the drivers of these choices, highlighting the role of ethnic hegemony and the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries.

**Ethnic party strategies**

Originally formulated by Rabushka & Shepsle (1972) and later elaborated by Horowitz (1985), the ethnic outbidding model of intra-ethnic competition predicts that factions will turn toward increasingly extreme positions to secure the support of their ethnic communities. This is linked to incentive structures in competitive political environments (for example, in majoritarian, multi-party democracies). In his influential study, Horowitz (1985) argued that since ethnic parties cannot "defray competitive losses by diversifying [their] clientele" (p. 344), intra-ethnic competition becomes a matter of political survival which, in turn, incentivizes outbidding as a means of preserving the ethnic support base. In addition to driving leaders to adopt more extreme ideological positions in the formal, electoral arena, outbidding may also drive the adoption of more radical, violent strategies (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 358–359; Rabushka & Shepsle, 1972, p. 83). Scholars still use ethnic outbidding to explain intra-ethnic fragmentation processes, and as a model of conflict escalation (see, for example: Haklai, 2011, pp. 146–172; Vogt et al., 2021). Other scholars investigate outbidding's impact on a variety of variables, including conflict dynamics, goal accomplishment and tactical preference formation (Cunningham et al., 2012; Pearlman, 2011; Toft, 2007).

As part of the scholarly drive to disaggregate ethnic groups into organizations (Pearlman & Cunningham, 2012), new theories of intra-ethnic competition have shown that ethnic

outbidding is not inevitable, but rather one of several possible competitive dynamics. In an early, influential piece, Chandra (2005) highlights the importance of institutional context in determining the prevalent dynamic of competition within and among ethnic groups; contrary to the classical outbidding model's predictions, Chandra shows that inter-ethnic coalitions can be fostered by appropriate institutional incentives. Building upon this foundation, scholars clarified which specific institutional and strategic configurations are most conducive to outbidding (Coakley, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2009; Sanjaume-Calvet & Riera-Gil, 2022; Stewart & McGauvran, 2020; Toft, 2007; Zuber, 2013; Zuber & Szöcsik, 2015). While there is some disagreement, these studies generally agree that: (1) ethnic outbidding is not inevitable; (2) outbidding is more likely when ethnic movements contain multiple organizations; (3) competitive, majoritarian electoral systems are amenable to fragmentation and outbidding; and (4) the existence of salient, cross-cutting sociopolitical cleavages, producing non- and multi-ethnic competitors, disadvantages outbidders.

In addition to specifying the institutional and strategic conditions that are conducive to outbidding, scholars have begun to unpack outbidding's alternatives. Contrary to Horowitz's assertion that "party competition in an ethnic party system occurs within ethnic groups but not across ethnic group lines" (1985, p. 342), these scholars have shown that cross-ethnic appeals can be strategically sound, even under conditions which were considered conducive to outbidding. Coakley (2008), for example, shows that hegemonic ethnic elites are challenged not only by outbidders, but also by "nonethnic counterbidders who seek to impose an alternative, nonethnic cleavage to replace the existing one", and by "ethnic underbidders who define themselves as centrist and abjure all ethnic loyalties" (p. 766). Developing Coakley's typology

further, Zuber (2013) constructs a matrix of six strategies ethnic elites can adopt when competing for their constituents' support (Table 1). These strategies emerge from the intersection of two criteria: the positional criterion (how moderate or radical are the group's claims compared to preceding, co-ethnic actors?), and the appeal criterion (does the group appeal exclusively to the ethnic community, or not?). Alongside *ethnic* bidding dynamics, wherein actors appeal exclusively to the ethnic community while adopting more or less radical strategies relative to co-ethnic elites, Zuber identifies *lateral* bidding as a theoretical possibility, whereby actors appeal to constituencies across the ethnic divide.

[Table 1]

While these studies provide a solid foundation, they only begin to explain why and when these alternatives arise. What leads ethnic actors to choose one strategy over another? While Coakley offers an invaluable foundation, specifying underbidding and lateral bidding as theoretical possibilities, his study's conclusion is broad; it is not so much about the conditions that produce outbidding's alternatives as it is about those that enhance the prospects for *all* challengers in an ethnically bifurcated electoral system – outbidders, underbidders and lateral bidders alike (2008, pp. 788–789). Zuber (2012, 2013) argues that ethnic actors' strategic choices are mutually constitutive, within and across ethnic lines: ethnic parties respond to the political landscape, adapting their strategy based on environmental and interactive cues. She also argues that we should pay attention to ethnic actors' goals: those who prioritize policy change

face different incentives compared to those seeking access to power, impacting their choices (Zuber, 2013). Other notable studies include Sanjaume-Calvet & Riera-Gil (2022), who trace the declining importance of ethnicity among secessionist parties during a period of heightened territorial conflict in Catalonia, and Stewart & McGauvran (2020), who advocate incorporating ideology as an independent variable in any examination of ethnic party strategies. While this literature offers a strong foundation, it remains unripe, with a small number of studies offering consistent but broad conclusions. This study aims to expand it. In the following sections, I show how ethnic minority elites' strategic choices were influenced by the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries, using evidence from Israel and Turkey.

## Kurdish mobilization in Turkey

The Kurdish people is spread across the borders of modern-day Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. The latter hosts 15 million Kurds – the largest of these communities, comprising around 20% of Turkey's population (the exact figure is contested, since official Turkish census data no longer include ethnolinguistic indicators; Gourlay, 2020, p. 5). Organized Kurdish nationalism emerged around the time of the Turkish Republic's establishment, in 1923. Its leaders – traditional Kurdish elites who had enjoyed a large degree of political and cultural autonomy under Ottoman Rule – did not petition for statehood: instead, they emphasized Kurdish-Turkish fraternity, mobilizing constituents in support of Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkish national movement on the basis of a shared, Muslim, cross-cutting identity (Bozarslan,

2008, pp. 337–342). Following the state's establishment, however, the new Kemalist[1] regime pursued assimilationist policies which aimed to "Turkify" minority populations. Use of the Kurdish language was prohibited, and Kurdish cultural expressions – like traditional names and dress – were banned (Gourlay, 2020, pp. 19–32). These policies triggered Kurdish revolts – 27 in the state's first two decades – which were militarily repressed at great cost to the central government (Bozarslan, 2008, pp. 338–342; Kurt, 2021, pp. 508–513). Following these episodes of mobilization and repression, Kurdish politics entered a "period of silence" which lasted until the early '60s, when a new generation of educated youth arose to lead a reinvigorated, if fragmented, political movement (Bozarslan, 2008, p. 343). This revival has been linked to the development of a radical left-wing movement within Turkey in the wake of the 1960 military coup, which was sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle. Kurdish politics radicalized further in the '70s, as new organizations were formed – most notably, the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978.

After Turkey's 1980 coup, the new regime reinforced the ban on Kurdish culture, arrested and tortured thousands of Kurdish activists and militants, and dismissed legally elected mayors (Bozarslan, 2008, pp. 349–350). The PKK consolidated organizationally, incorporating several suborganizations into its structure, turning into a mass movement (Gunes, 2012, pp. 101–123). Within the PKK, power became increasingly concentrated around its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who had initiated an armed campaign in 1984 with the aim of establishing an independent Kurdistan (Saeed, 2017, pp. 98–99). The campaign, which started with targeted raids on police and military outposts in rural areas, expanded to include more frequent, large-

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[1] Following common usage, this article uses "Kemalism" in reference to Turkey's official, secular, statist and ethnonational founding ideology (Casier & Jongerden, 2011).

scale confrontations with the Turkish military, reaching a peak in the early 1990s (Gunes, 2012, pp. 101–123). It continued, with some interruptions, until Öcalan's capture in 1999. While the PKK mostly targeted the military and police, the organization had also targeted civilians (Gunes, 2012, p. 108). As a result of the state's counterinsurgency campaign, tens of thousands of Kurds were killed, and millions displaced from the countryside into cities across Anatolia (the exact figures are contested: see Gunes, 2012, p. 131; Kirişci, 2008, p. 184). One consequence of this dispersal was the geographic spread of support for the PKK.

Turkey's first pro-Kurdish parliamentary party – the People's Labor Party (HEP) – was established in 1990, at the height of the Kurdish insurgency, by a group of pro-Kurdish MPs who were expelled from the Kemalist, Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP). This short-lived party was banned by Turkey's constitutional court in 1993 (as were each of the subsequent nine Kurdish parties, save for the latest incarnation, the HDP (O'Connor, 2017, pp. 9–11). It was not directly affiliated with the PKK, and not all of its members were Kurdish; it adopted a clear pro-Kurdish orientation, but reached beyond the Kurdish community for electoral support from among the broader Turkish Left, setting a pattern that was followed by its successors. Indeed, though there is little doubt that Turkey's successive Kurdish parties should be classified as ethnic, their ability to consistently attract a significant number of ethnic Turkish voters, and to ally with non-ethnic, left-wing parties (at the cost of alienating some conservative Kurds), is noteworthy (Alptekin, 2018, pp. 216–218). The emergence of the HEP triggered the reorganization of the Kurdish movement within Turkey into two constitutive parts – legal-electoral and illegal-insurgent. While these wings are intertwined, their connections are informal: the PKK benefits from the existence of sympathetic political parties with wide support bases in

parliament, and so, while it does not officially endorse them, neither does it antagonize them. At the same time, Turkey's pro-Kurdish parties benefit from the ambiguous nature of their relationship with the PKK, which allows them to maintain credibility in the eyes of radical Kurdish voters while maintaining a level of support from the broader Turkish public (O'Connor, 2017, p. 14).

The PKK moderated its stance in 1993, when it declared the first of several unilateral ceasefires. Over the following decade, its ideology and demands shifted gradually from Marxism-Leninism and the demand for Kurdish independence toward libertarian socialism and the demand for autonomy within Turkey. Inspired by Murray Bookchin's concept of social ecology, Öcalan formulated these ideas, from prison, into a cohesive political philosophy dubbed "Democratic Confederalism", which was officially adopted by the PKK in 2000 (O'Connor, 2017, p. 16). Within this left-libertarian framework, "the term democratic autonomy began to be used to refer to the Turkey-wise, the term democratic confederalism to the region-wise and the term democratic modernity to the global-wise application of Öcalan's new programme" (Yeğen, 2021, p. 327). The broader Kurdish movement quickly fell in line, adopting this philosophy, which continues to guide both its legal-electoral and illegal-insurgent wings (Gunes, 2012, pp. 135–174).

The conflict gradually subsided in the early 2000s, culminating in the initiation of a formal peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government in 2013, which brought hopes for a permanent political resolution. This period saw the growth of the movement's legal wing, which had its legitimacy enhanced and ideology reinvigorated by Öcalan's autonomist vision (Yeğen, 2021, p. 328). Kurdish civil society and grassroots organizations openly held

panels and conferences, and the Kurdish cause featured prominently in public and media discourse. This culminated with the pro-Kurdish HDP's historic electoral achievement in the June 2015 general elections, as it surpassed the 10% electoral threshold with 6 million votes (13.12%), securing 80 (out of 550) seats in parliament and denying incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) a parliamentary majority for the first time since its ascension in 2002 (Gurses & Romano, 2021, p. 291). With its broader appeal and more moderate stance, the HDP succeeded in mobilizing new voters, including ethnic Turks, and Kurds living in Turkish-majority urban centers (Alptekin, 2018; Yeğen, 2021, p. 329).

On July 20 that year, an Islamic State bomber attacked a pro-Kurdish event near the Syrian border, killing at least 33 participants. Two days later, two Turkish police officers were killed. The Turkish government held the PKK responsible, and a major military offensive ensued, ending the peace process. The government's campaign targeted both wings of the Kurdish movement: in what amounted to "one of the most brutal phases in the three-decade-long conflict", nearly all Kurdish mayors were removed, and thousands of HDP members were arrested, including former presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş (Gurses & Romano, 2021, pp. 291–299). Scholars and commentators linked the government's abandonment of the peace process, and its subsequent campaign against the Kurdish movement, to myriad processes including (1) the rise of the Islamic State (IS) organization in Iraq and Syria, (2) diminishing prospects of Turkish ascension into the European Union, (3) the 2016 Turkish coup attempt and its repercussions, including the declaration of a state of emergency and crackdowns on state employees and civil society organizations (CSOs), (5) Erdoğan's push to aggrandize the executive and (6) his embrace of the ethnonationalist far-right (the latter, some argue, was partly

driven by competitive electoral processes – above all, the need to reverse the HDP's electoral gains; Günay & Yörük, 2019; Gurses & Romano, 2021; Hoffman, 2023). Kurdish-Turkish relations had not meaningfully improved since. Indeed, the conflict's international dimension – involving Kurdish groups in northern Syria and Iraq – had escalated.

The existence of parallel, conservative, Islamist political streams within the Kurdish community is noteworthy. Self-interested Muslim elites, unsympathetic to the Kurdish movement but critical of official, secular Turkish nationalism, have mobilized Islam to earn the Kurds' support as early as the '50s. In these early years, "repressive state policies stayed in place, but the state strategically used religion to align Kurdish representatives. This strategy was followed by other political parties both from left and right wings in the next decades" (Kurt, 2021, p. 516). The '80s saw the emergence of several Islamist Kurdish organizations. While some, like the Kurdistan Islamic Party (PIK), maintained their commitments to Kurdish nationalism, others – most notably, Kurdish Hizbullah (unrelated to the Lebanese Shiite organization) – adopted pan-Islamist positions, opposing the PKK's secular nationalism (Kurt, 2021, pp. 520–524). Kurdish Hizbullah fought openly against the PKK in the 90's, receiving unofficial government support until Öcalan's capture in 1999. With the adoption of Democratic Confederalism, the PKK broke from its strictly anti-religious, Marxist-Leninist commitments, giving rise to a "Kurdish-Islamic synthesis", accepting and incorporating religiosity into its ideology to a greater extent (Kurt, 2021, p. 524). At the same time, Kurdish Islamists had, shifted toward overt nationalism, calling for constitutional recognition of Kurdish language and culture, and for autonomy. This is best illustrated by the emergence of the Free Cause Party (HÜDA

PAR), an electoral offshoot of Kurdish Hizbullah – in 2012. Though it is still active, its impact has been minor; it never surpassed 100,000 votes (Kurt, 2021, p. 527).

Electorally, the turn of the millennium saw strong Kurdish support for mainstream Islamists. Most notably, Erdoğan's AKP fielded impressive 29%, 53% and 59% of the vote in Kurdish-majority provinces in the 2002, 2007 and 2011 elections, respectively (Girasun, 2023b). These figures fell to 28% and 35% in 2015 and 2018 – a remarkable decline which has been attributed to the collapse of the peace process, the counterinsurgency campaign and Erdogan's turn toward right-wing ethnonationalism (Günay & Yörük, 2019). Still, in Istanbul – "the world's largest Kurdish city" – only a quarter of the Kurdish population voted for the HDP in the historic, 2015 elections (Hoffman, 2023). Strategic or otherwise, the decision to vote for mainstream candidates indicates that while the PKK-led national movement is popular, it is not hegemonic. Overall, this complicated history illustrates the electoral significance of the Kurdish vote to all actors on the Turkish political stage.

The HDP maintained its broad appeal despite the conflict's reignition. It adopted more moderate positions compared to those that characterized the preceding two decades, forming new, formal and informal alliances with the Turkish Center (Gourlay, 2020, pp. 211–215). The 2018 general elections – the first after Turkey's 2017 switch from a parliamentary to a presidential system – demonstrated these trends clearly. Ahead of the elections, the HDP pressed to be formally included in the newly-established Nation Alliance – a broad coalition of opposition parties led by the Kemalist, Republican People's Party (CHP) – but was rejected. HDP chairman Selahattin Demirtaş ran for president from prison, receiving 8.4% of the vote, and his party 11.7% of the parliamentary vote (Fishman, 2019, p. 358). In the 2019 local elections,

the HDP refrained from running its own candidates in Turkey's Western, Turkish-majority provinces, opting to support others who had better chances of winning, including CHP candidates (Gourlay, 2020, pp. 213–214). Despite the 2022 lowering of the electoral threshold from 10% to 7%, which would have allowed the HDP to pass with relative ease, a third electoral alliance – the Labor and Freedom Alliance – was formed ahead of the 2023 general elections between the HDP, the Party of Greens and the Left Future (YSP) and four smaller, left-wing parties ("Turkey Lowers National Threshold to 7%," 2022). Continuing the pattern that began with the 2019 local elections, the HDP and the Labor and Freedom Alliance refrained from running their own presidential candidate, instead opting to support the CHP's candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, over concerns of splitting the center-left vote (Hacaoglu & Kozok, 2023).

Helming a wide electoral alliance encompassing Turkish nationalists, conservatives, Islamists and Kemalists – supported by the leftist Labor and Freedom Alliance – Kılıçdaroğlu performed well in polls ahead of the 2023 general elections (Girasun, 2023a). While the Kurdish vote was considered pivotal to the success of either one of the main presidential candidates, it soon became clear that Kılıçdaroğlu would secure it. This, despite "long years of ignoring Kurdish voters and significant historical baggage", as Girasun argues (2023a). Erdoğan leveraged this to his advantage by accusing Kılıçdaroğlu of aligning with "terrorists" (Hayatsever, 2023). Kılıçdaroğlu secured a majority of the Kurdish vote in the first round, but since no candidate secured the requisite overall majority (Erdoğan received 49.52%, Kılıçdaroğlu 44.88%, ultranationalist Sinan Oğan 5.17%, and Kemalist Muharrem İnce 0.43% of the votes), a runoff was declared between the top two candidates. Kılıçdaroğlu's rhetoric shifted noticeably, taking an ethnonationalist and especially anti-migrant tone. He vowed to expel Syrian

refugees, and struck a deal for the endorsement of Ümit Özdağ, the leader of the right-wing, anti-immigrant Victory Party (ZP; Gavin & Poyrazlar, 2023). Kurdish turnout fell in the second round, though support for Kılıçdaroğlu was still highest in Kurdish-majority provinces compared to the national average. Erdoğan won the presidency with 52.18% of the vote.

Turning back to theoretical classification, we can say that the top two candidates outbid each other ahead of the presidential runoff, competing for the support of the Turkish ethnonationalist right. Though this trend is most evident in the 2023 presidential elections, it can be traced back to Erdoğan's turn away from his Kurdish support base and toward the ethnonationalist right in 2015. Meanwhile, the HDP has consistently bid laterally over the same time period, appealing to the broader Turkish public. As this section shows, this strategy is not a recent innovation, but has rather been a consistent feature of the Kurdish movement since the '80s. But while previous alliances may have maintained firm ideological commitments, the turn toward Democratic Confederalism in 2000 and the HDPs actions since 2015 can both be considered as turning points in which Kurdish leaders moderated their stances while extending their appeal across ethnic boundaries.

**Palestinian mobilization in Israel**

About two million, or 21% of Israel's citizens are Palestinian Arabs ("Israeli Population Rises to 9.795 Million on Rosh Hashanah Eve," 2023). Scholars divide this community's political history into four distinct phases, based on its leaderships demands and organizational patterns (Haklai & Abu Rass, 2022). The first phase, which began with the state's establishment in 1948 and lasted

until the late '60s, was characterized by "quiescence": Palestinian mobilization was limited, and the community had no independent representatives in the Knesset (Israel's parliament; Ghanem, 2001; Lustick, 1980, p. 25). Instead, Palestinians had predominately voted for the ruling Mapai party's affiliated, Arab client parties. Scholars attribute this to the collective trauma the community had experienced during the 1948 war, which included mass displacement, the depopulation of Arab urban centers and the subsequent loss of much of historic Palestine's political and intellectual leadership (Cohen, 2010; Ghanim, 2011). Maintaining policies designed to separate Arabs and Jews and viewing the remaining Palestinian population as a potentially dangerous fifth column, Israeli policymakers chose to formally exclude rather than accommodate or assimilate this national minority (Degani, 2017). Palestinian citizens were crowded into enclaves and placed under military rule, which lasted until 1966 and included harsh restrictions on freedom of movement, speech and assembly (Bäuml, 2011).

The second phase began when military rule ended, lasting until the mid-'80s. It was marked by independent, audacious Palestinian mobilization (Haklai, 2011, pp. 71–111). Palestinians mounted contentious demonstrations, organized strikes, and participated in general elections with high turnout rates. These activities were mostly organized through the binational Israeli Communist Party (ICP) and its successors: while other political organizations with different ideological orientations had existed beneath the surface, the ICP acted as the sole legal (and therefore most visible) vehicle for Palestinian national mobilization during this phase. Scholars characterize it as a period of national awakening, influenced by "renewed contact with the Palestinians in the occupied territories [the Occupied Palestinian Territories or the OPT, comprising the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which were captured by Israel in 1967] and by the

rise of the Palestinian national movement" in the diaspora (Rekhess, 2007, p. 2). The ICP started as a binational party, aspiring to mobilize the broader Israeli left while simultaneously providing the only legal venue for the overt expression of Palestinian nationalism.

The third phase, beginning in the early '90s, was marked by organizational fragmentation along ideological lines, and by ethnic outbidding. Liberal reforms within Israel allowed new Palestinian parties to form, providing formal expression to nascent ideological streams: a national stream, which demanded recognition for the Palestinians as an indigenous national minority with special, collective rights, and an Islamist stream, which emphasized religious issues and pushed for greater religious autonomy for Palestinian Muslims (Ghanem, 2001). Dozens of Palestinian CSOs were established in a variety of areas including advocacy, education, religion and social service provision (Jamal, 2020, pp. 137–154). Mirroring the newly-fragmented political landscape, these CSOs had (and continue to have) unofficial party affiliations, working with, and providing support for an associated party. Alongside the three ideological streams which crystallized during this phase, a small but considerable number of Palestinians continued to support Zionist parties (22.8% of voters in 2013), especially center-left parties (Haklai & Abu Rass, 2022, p. 46). Meanwhile, the communist stream had shed its strict Marxist-Leninist commitments, adopting a more nationalist orientation while maintaining core socialist values. Confronted with new, co-ethnic competitors, the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE; the ICP's latest manifestation) was forced to articulate its demands more clearly along the newly introduced ethnic dimension of political competition (Haklai, 2011, pp. 131–135). Indeed, this phase saw the emergence of an outbidding dynamic between the Palestinian parties, who all adopted indigenous minority nationalism as an ideological

centerpiece (Jamal, 2011; Rekhess, 2007). One of the most visible manifestations of turn can be seen in the publication of several "Vision Documents", drafted by a wide array of Palestinian elites, which outlined the community's future vision and political demands, including its recognition as an indigenous national minority deserving of special collective rights (Jamal, 2011, pp. 161–187).

These processes – fragmentation and outbidding – which are emblematic of the third phase, cannot be isolated from the broader political context of deteriorating inter-ethnic relations; the Second Palestinian Intifada (or uprising) of 2000-2005 in OPT, and the violent repression of Palestinian mobilization within Israel at its outset, exacerbated the community's mistrust in the state and its institutions (Jamal, 2011, pp. 202–203). Deteriorating state-minority relations fueled inter-ethnic competition, and crystallized indigenous minority politics among Palestinian citizens. This trend is reflected by declining Palestinian voter turnout rates (Rudnitzky, 2019).

In 2015, in response to the raising of Israel's electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25%, the four main Palestinian parties – the DFPE, representing the communist stream; the National Democratic Assembly (NDA), representing the nationalist stream; the United Arab List (UAL), representing the Islamic stream; and the Arab Movement for Renewal (AMR), an ideologically ambiguous party largely driven by its leader's popularity – formed a single electoral list, the Joint List (JL; Figure 1; About the List, n.d.). Though unity had initially been forced upon Palestinian leaders by the threshold increase, it proved extraordinarily popular: the JL received 13 of the Knesset's 120 seats, breaking the record for the total number of seats won by Arab parties. Palestinian voter turnout increased, and the number of Palestinians voting for predominately-Jewish parties decreased compared to the previous (2013) election (Rudnitzky,

2015). The next election, in April 2019, was the first of five rounds held between 2019-2022 as part of a political crisis surrounding the indictment of PM Benjamin Netanyahu, which divided the political landscape into roughly even pro- and anti-Netanyahu axes. Internal disagreements over the placement of candidates within the list resulted in the JL's disbandment before the first of these rounds; the electorate responded negatively, punishing the List with historically low turnout rates. Judiciously, Palestinian leaders re-established the JL ahead of the second round (September 2019), which the electorate rewarded with high turnout rates, setting a new record of 15 Palestinian parliamentary seats after the third (2020) round.

[Figure 1]

Many voters adopted a pragmatic outlook, demanding representatives prioritize joining a governing coalition over strict ideological commitments (Navot, Swaid, et al., 2023, pp. 245–250). The successive elections held between 2019-2022 allowed the leadership to adapt to these demands. Furthermore, since Israel's political crisis revolved almost entirely around the question of Netanyahu's fitness for office, other issues became less pronounced, including those which had traditionally defined Israel's left-right divide, such as Israeli-Palestinian relations (Baram, 2022). This empowered the JL, whose support was necessary for the anti-Netanyahu axis to form a government. Capitalizing on this opportunity, chairman Ayman Odeh made public overtures toward the Center-Left ahead of the second round, de-emphasizing inter-ethnic relations and indicating the JL's willingness to make significant compromises to be included in an alternative

to Netanyahu's coalition (Barnea, 2019). While the support base of the JL (and its constituent parties) had always been overwhelmingly Palestinian, it campaigned extensively in Jewish cities in the run up to the third (2020) round, but it only managed to make limited gains among Jewish citizens (Peylan, 2020). Following this round, the JL unanimously recommended Benny Gantz – Netanyahu's main rival, and a former IDF chief of staff who had boasted about sending parts of Gaza "to the Stone Age" in his election campaign (Wootliff, 2019) – be tasked with government formation (Eichner & Sha'lan, 2020).[2] Despite this, and despite the considerable electoral repercussions associated with triggering yet another elections cycle, negotiations between the anti-Netanyahu camp and the JL failed. Gideon Saar, a key figure in the anti-Netanyahu camp, said the ideological gap was too wide to bridge (Kodner, n.d.).

The Islamist UAL split from the JL ahead of the fourth round (2021). Its leaders distanced themselves by dropping traditional demands, including the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, omitting all reference to a Palestinian national identity, and focusing solely on the community's internal, material and civic issues (Navot, Hindi, et al., 2023). UAL leaders repositioned the party as Muslim and conservative, focusing on "immediate local problems" while "glossing over the Palestine issue" (Navot, Hindi, et al., 2023, p. 1982). UAL leader Mansour Abbas openly reasoned that by accepting Israel's ethnic-hierarchical order, and by breaking from the rest of the Arab leadership's traditional identification with the Left, the UAL could more effectively satisfy voters' demands for (1) access to executive power and (2) socioeconomic improvements (Makover-Blikov, 2020). Abbas leveraged Israel's political stalemate by declaring his willingness to support any governing coalition, right or left, including

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[2] In Israel, the mandate to form government is given to the leader who receives the greatest number of recommendations from MKs. Palestinian parties traditionally refrain from making a recommendation.

one led by PM Netanyahu. While the UAL had successfully passed the electoral threshold, receiving four seats, Arab turnout had decreased to 44.6% – a historical nadir (Rudnitzky, 2022).

The UAL negotiated with both the pro- and anti-Netanyahu axes. During coalitonal negotiations, in May 2021, violent clashes broke out between Israeli forces and Palestinian worshipers in Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque compound, leading to a major escalation that included mass Palestinian mobilization in Israel and the OPT, violent clashes between demonstrators and armed Israeli forces, rocket fire from Gaza and Israeli bombardment (Amnesty International, 2021; Navot, Hindi, et al., 2023). The May 2021 Events are remembered as the first time intercommunal violence between Palestinians and Jewish citizens spilled into the streets in Israel proper (as distinguished from the OPT) on such a scale. Among Palestinians, the "Dignity" or "Unity Intifada" is also remembered for its spontaneous demonstrations, in which protesters demanded unity and rejected their traditional leadership (Habib Allah, 2022; Tatour, 2021). In response, Israeli authorities arrested Palestinians in a "sweeping" manner in order to instill "deterrence", while failing "to protect Palestinian citizens of Israel from premeditated attacks by groups of armed Jewish supremacists" (Amnesty International, 2021). Commentators characterized this as a low point in Conflict, broadly, and in majority-minority relations within Israel, specifically (Beaumont et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop – less than a month after hostilities ended – the UAL became the first Palestinian party to formally join an Israeli coalition as part of the broad anti-Netanyahu bloc. Alongside center-left parties, this coalition included Yamina ("rightward"), a far-right party associated with the setter movement, and Yisrael Beiteinu ("Israel is our home"), led by the

hawkish Avigdor Liberman. Though the UAL received no ministerial portfolios, it leveraged its position as a coalitional partner to implement economic development and crime reduction plans for the Arab sector (Navot, Hindi, et al., 2023). However, its leaders were careful not to rock the coalitional boat, refraining from challenging the ethnic-hierarchical status quo. Most notable in this regard was the low profile they kept facing several, volatile incidents with the potential to reignite inter-ethnic tensions and lead to the coalition's breakdown – contrary to commentators' expectations, and despite harsh criticisms from former partners in the JL (Khoury, 2022). Examples include the killing of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, Israeli forces violent attack on her funeral procession, heightened tensions at the al-Aqsa Mosque, and the annual ultranationalist procession through Old Jerusalem's Muslim Quarter known as the "Flag March", which grew to unprecedented scales (Shakieb, 2022). Despite the UAL's remarkable ability to withstand these pressures, the fragile coalition succumbed to centrifugal forces; it was finally disbanded when MKs from the right-wing Yamina party defected (Azoulay, 2022).

Netanyahu's bloc secured a 64-seat majority in the fifth and final round, with the support of the Jewish-supremacist, Otzama Yehudit ("Jewish Power") party, bringing the political crisis to an end in late 2022. The JL disbanded ahead this round, due to a mixture of ideological and interpersonal disagreements; the NDA ran alone, but did not pass the electoral threshold, while the DFPE and AMR ran together in a mutual electoral list, securing five seats. The UAL secured five seats as well ("Israel Election Final Results," 2022; Halabi, 2022). The year 2023 was marked by a surge in violent crime within the Palestinian community, costing the lives of 241 persons – more than twice as many as the previous year (Breiner & Haj Yahia, 2023). 2023 was also marked by escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (before Hamas' October 7th attack

and the ensuing attack on Gaza) – an escalation which cost the lives of at least 200 Palestinians and nearly 30 Israelis by August 21; the highest overall number of annual conflict-related casualties since 2005 (Lederer, 2023). This article's first draft was prepared in February 2024, four months following Hamas' October 7th attack, which cost the lives of at least 1,139 Israelis; four months into Israel's attack on Gaza, which cost the lives of at least 29,000 Palestinians. Though these events' full ramifications remain to be seen, there is little doubt that they will have profound impacts on both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, broadly, and on majority-minority relations within Israel, specifically. So far, the Palestinian community within Israel has faced an intimidation campaign and a wave of arrests over pro-Palestine statements shared online and at workplaces, resulting in widespread fear (Diaz & Frayer, 2023). Tellingly, compared to the May 2021 Events, Palestinian citizens have not mounted large-scale demonstrations thus far.

Returning to Zuber's system of classification, we can see that the Palestinian leadership diversified strategically, beyond outbidding, since 2015. Both the JL and UAL adopted markedly more moderate stances on the positional criterion, de-emphasizing national identity for the sake of inclusion and legitimacy. Despite their attempt to appeal to members of the Jewish community, and despite increasing their power and moderating their stances, JL leaders were unable to breach the bounds of acceptable Israeli politics, remaining marginalized. The UAL, however, succeeded where the JL failed by (1) completely abandoning prior commitments to Palestinian nationalism (underbidding the JL), (2) declaring its willingness to partner with anyone, and by (3) focusing narrowly on the Muslim majority within the Palestinian minority. Thus, the UAL moved toward greater exclusivity on the appeal criterion and toward greater moderation on the positional criterion, deploying ethnic underbidding as an electoral strategy.

Overall, Palestinian politics since 2015 has seen the emergence of lateral bidders (the JL, 2015-2022), ethnic underbidders (the UAL, 2021-present), static bidders (the DFPE and AMR, 2022-present) and ethnic outbidders (the NDA, 2022-present).

**Hegemonic transformations**

The Kurdish and Palestinian cases have remarkably similar background characteristics. The ratios between majorities in minorities are similar (roughly 80%-20%); both cases are part of a broader confrontation between states and stateless peoples including diasporas in neighbouring countries; in both cases, ethnic rather than civic forms of nationalism are salient among titular majorities. Both cases have recently seen diminished prospects for inter-ethnic reconciliation, rising authoritarianism and crackdowns on minority mobilization. The 2023 Turkish election shares many characteristics with Israel's 2019-2022 crisis, including the increased visibility and strength of the ethnonationalist right among titular majorities, the growth of ethnic minority parties, the creation of broad alliances among opposition parties with the sole purpose of unseating long-standing incumbents, and these alliances' failure to join forces with ethnic minority parties despite their increased strength. In both cases, incumbents representing titular majorities resorted to ethnic outbidding, adopting more extreme stances and narrowing their appeals to the ethnic majority, while allying with ultranationalist hardliners – Erdoğan with the MHP (Gourlay, 2020, p. 213), and Netanyahu with Otzma Yehudit. Ethnic minorities have recently suffered repression shocks in each case – the Kurds in 2015, and the Palestinians in May 2021.

Despite these similarities, the Palestinian and Kurdish leaderships differ in their organizational and strategic-interactive characteristics. Since its institutionalization into interrelated legal and nonlegal wings in the early '90s, the Kurdish leadership has been more cohesive, and its organizational structure more stable, than the Palestinian leadership in Israel. From the outset, the Kurdish movement had strong connections with elements of the broader Turkish Left, and when the electoral wing emerged in the '90s, it continued to rely on considerable support from ethnic Turks while carefully maintaining its Kurdish support base. Around the same time, the Palestinian leadership in Israel entered its outbidding phase. Over the last decade, the Kurdish leadership has moderated its stances and reached across the ethnic divide, while facing electoral challenges from Islamists – Turkish and Kurdish – for the conservative Kurdish vote. While the Palestinian leadership followed a similar trajectory since the establishment of the JL in 2015 – bidding laterally and moderating its stances – it was unable to maintain unity in spite of grassroots and electoral pressures, leading to its re-fragmentation into separate parties with different strategies including ethnic underbidding, static bidding, and ethnic outbidding. Why? How has the HDP been able able to simultaneously maintain unity, secure the support of ethnic Kurdish constituents, and appeal to the broader Turkish public? And why did the JL fail? Analysis suggests that the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries plays a significant role.

In *Democratizing the Hegemonic State*, Ilan Peleg offers a typology of regime types based on the extent and method in which ethnic differences are institutionalized, and examines the ways these "ethnic constitutional orders" transform in response to a variety of pressures. He uses Israel and Turkey as central case studies, classifying them as "ethnic hegemonic" regimes –

where ethnic hierarchies are deeply institutionalized – but notes an important difference regarding in their approach toward ethnic minorities: while Turkish elites have historically aimed to forcibly assimilate or "Turkify" the Kurdish minority, Israeli elites sought to exclude Palestinian citizens while "Judaizing" the land (Peleg, 2007, pp. 36, 176). He notes that both cases have seen "mild", "cosmetic" transformations in the years preceding the book's publication: "Although these hegemonic states did not really change their overall constitutional order, which continues to be dominated by one ethnonational group", he argues, "they have introduced modest changes and have done so in the overall direction of more equality and inclusion" (Peleg, 2007, pp. 168–169). He lists several reasons for these mild transformations, including internal demographic and cultural pressures, but ultimately stresses the impact of international norms under the emergent liberal global order. 17 years after this work's publication, right-wing ethnonationalism has ascended globally, international institutions have weakened, and the gradual liberalization processes that Peleg describes have reversed in each case (Del Sarto, 2017; Kurt, 2021).

Changes in the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries shape the landscape of cross-cutting identities that can be mobilized by elites, which in turn explains their strategic choices. As Peleg shows, Turkey has historically had more permeable ethnic hegemonic boundaries than Israel: while enforced assimilation served Turkey's ethnic constitutional order, it also allowed for limited mobilization on the basis of non-ethnic, cross-cutting identities, including ones based on secular internationalism and, later, Islam. Both Kurdish and Turkish elites exploited these identities, mobilizing constituents across the ethnic divide. On the Kurdish Left, the adoption of Democratic Confederalism cemented the movement's pivot away from

strict ethnonationalism, paving the way for lateral bidding. Turkey's mild liberalization in the '90s and 2000s enabled the formation of Kurdish parties, while internal processes – chiefly, the rise of political Islam – allowed self-interested politicians like Erdoğan to draw support from among conservative Kurds, receiving a considerable share of the Kurdish vote. This, without legitimizing or accommodating Kurds' national identity. And so, while the Turkish majority is privileged, the persistence of assimilationism toward ethnic minorities has allowed for the establishment of cross-cutting coalitions between Kurds, on the one hand, and both the Left and the conservative Right, on the other. Put another way, while inter-ethnic competition in Turkey is fierce, its "electoral market" is not perfectly "ethnically segmented" (Horowitz, 1985, p. 342) – voters can, and often do vote across ethnic lines on the basis of non-ethnic identities.

Unlike Turkey's liberalization, which led to the establishment of one dominant Kurdish party, Israel's liberalization led to the Palestinian leadership's fragmentation into several smaller parties. This has been attributed to the low electoral threshold of 2% (Haklai, 2011, pp. 154–161). But while the threshold's modest increase to 3.25% in 2014 can explain the JL's formation, it cannot explain its disbandment. The immediate reason for the UAL's defection, and for its abandonment of prior counter-hegemonic commitments, has more to do with the leadership's repeated failure to break through Israel's impermeable ethnic hegemonic boundaries in 2019-2022. Unlike Turkey, Israel has no salient cross-cutting identities for elites to draw upon – despite the ICP, DFPE and JL's best efforts to find common ground with non-Zionist and socialist elements of the Israeli Left – and therefore, much less cross-ethnic voting. In other words, unlike the Turkish case, Israel's electoral market is highly ethnically segmented. Increasingly so: a growing number Israelis find Palestinian participation in government

controversial, if not entirely illegitimate (Smooha, 2020, pp. 194–198). Even when the JL reached a peak of 15 seats, moderating its stances and publicly expressing its willingness to support the broad anti-Netanyahu opposition, it was not accepted. Aside from the brief, "mild", liberal interlude in the '90s, Palestinian exclusion has been a consistent feature of Israeli politics which can be traced back to its settler-colonial state-building patterns during the pre-state era, which was built on the basis of indigenous Palestinian exclusion (Jabotinsky, 1923). Lateral bidding had never been an option for Palestinian lateral bidders under impermeable hegemonic boundaries and segmented electoral markets. In contrast, Turkey's assimilationism allows self-interested elites – Turks and Kurds – to mobilize across ethnic divides, enabling lateral bidding strategies.


**Conclusions**

This article has shown that the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries plays a significant role in shaping ethnic leaders' strategic choices, by defining the landscape of available cross-cutting identities. It has also shown that moderation is viable and likely when elites seek to overcome impermeable ethnic hegemonic boundaries, as it facilitates their political survival and promises legitimacy and access. This pattern can be observed in both of the Kurdish and Palestinian cases. The different strategic choices in each case boil down to the ethnic appeal criterion: while both leaderships chose to moderate in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the hegemonic ethnic majority, and while both attempted to bid laterally, only the Palestinian leadership reverted to a fragmented state, failing to attract a significant number of supporters across the ethnic divide. As I have shown, this difference can be explained by examining the

particular historic and contemporary policies regulating ethnic differences in each case. Cross-cutting identities that could serve as a basis for broad, inter-ethnic political mobilization are few and far between in polities that regulate ethnic differences through exclusion and segregation, as in Israel. Attempts to build broad inter-ethnic coalitions based on cross-cutting identities, such as class, or on ad-hoc mutual interests, like the alliances that were created by opposition parties to unseat incumbents in both cases, are likely to fail in these settings. Instead, minority elites face pressure to bid exclusively among their own co-ethnic communities. On the other hand, assimilationist, ethnic hegemonic regimes permit elites to reach across the ethnic divide on the basis of non-ethnic, cross-cutting identities, as did Turkish and Kurdish leaders on multiple occasions. Lateral bidding can be sustained in the latter but not the former.

These are not static, but dynamic, mutually-constitutive processes (McAdam et al., 2001). As noted by Peleg, ethnic hegemonic boundaries can become more or less permeable over time, responding to domestic and international pressures. These changes can also result from the strategic interplay between minorities and majorities in competitive environments. Changes in the patterns of Kurdish voting and support shaped Erdoğan's own politics and discourse, shaping Kurdish politics, in turn. These processes feed into each other. Indeed, Turkey's ethnic hegemonic boundaries are showing signs of recalibration toward discriminatory exclusion in recent years, partly due to the interplay between the ruling AKP and its Kurdish opponents. As Günay & Yörük argue:

> "... fluctuating support for the AKP government in Turkey has been conditioned to a large extent by the way the party has dealt with the Kurdish question via different modes of ethnic politics, including changing configurations of repression and inclusion: (i) the Islamists grew in power

when they presented a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish ethnic question through ethnic and class-based inclusion of Kurds within the broad Islamic solidarity project; (ii) the Islamists lost their Kurdish voters – and thus their broader hegemony – when they failed to realize the promise of equality between Kurds and Turks … and (iii) the Islamists regained national power when they used anti-Kurdish repressive politics and growing authoritarianism to mobilize Turkish nationalist support in place of lost Kurdish votes. The AKP's ability to shift between these different logics of ethnic politics has laid the ground for its continuing political hegemony and growing authoritarianism" (Günay & Yörük, 2019, p. 38).

It would not be surprising if the Kurdish leadership fragments, like the Palestinian leadership, if this trend persists. While qualitatively different, the interactive, mutually-constitutive nature of ethnic party strategies is also evident in the Palestinian case: the leadership responded to structural pressures and voter demands by moderating its stances, to which Netanyahu responded – much like Erdoğan – by embracing the far-right and by delegitimizing the Palestinian leadership. In response, a section of the Palestinian leadership pushed the logic of accommodation further, reneging on prior counter-hegemonic commitments in exchange for legitimacy, inclusion, and the promise of influence and political change.

Evidence from these cases runs contrary to some recent findings, such as Zuber & Szöcsik's study (2015), which found that the level of ethnic segmentation in electoral markets corresponds to the level of outbidding among ethnic minority parties. While outbidders are likely disadvantaged when cross-cutting identities are salient, as Zuber & Szöcsik assert, it is unclear whether underbidders are disadvantaged when they are not. Indeed, the Palestinian case shows that moderation can prevail in highly segmented electoral markets, with impermeable ethnic hegemonic boundaries and virtually no cross-ethnic voting, through ethnic underbidding.

Together, both cases suggests that, when faced with greater exclusion and marginalization, ethnic parties may choose underbidding in pursuit of greater acceptance, legitimacy, and ultimately, power; the need to overcome exclusion can lead to moderation on the positional criterion of ethnic party strategies. The value of the appeal criterion – whether ethnic or lateral bidding prevails – depends on the permeability of ethnic hegemonic boundaries. In a broader sense, this investigation highlights the importance of accounting for the hierarchical structure of majority-minority interactions, as well as their dynamic, relational, mutually-constitutive nature. Abstract generalizations about both intra- and inter-ethnic competitive dynamics have limited explanatory power *in abstracto* – instead, these processes should be seen as dynamic, asymmetrical and context-dependent. It is my hope that scholars continue to identify and unpack unexpected ethnic party strategies using evidence from additional cases.

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