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The "ethnic-split" in contemporary Israeli Politics and the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

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Contents

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to determine the role of the "ethnic-split"[1] between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews in contemporary Israeli politics, particularly in regard to the non-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since Netanyahu's return to power in 2009. I argue that this ethnic division has had considerable influence on the division of constituencies to right-wing and left-wing politics, so as to be regarded as a significant factor in determining Israeli policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After the 1967 war the Labor Settlement Movement (LSM) became paralyzed by two conflicting currents: On the one hand, desires of continuing the state-building project into the newly occupied territories; and on the other, the emergence of a civil society, and in it, key actors who sought to restrain the state-building efforts in favor of economic development and the returning of the captured lands for peace with the Palestinians and the neighboring Arab countries (Shafir and Peled 2002, 3).

In the 1977 elections, the Avoda (labor) lost its supremacy to Menachem Begin's Likud (consolidation) party for the first time in Israeli politics. This paralysis, alongside allegations of the party's corruption and nepotism, were two of the factors that helped bring about this political change (Ibid., 2). Another factor, no less significant, was the marginalization of Mizrahi Jews by the LSM Ashkenazi-dominated establishment, which led them vote for Begin in high numbers, granting the 1977 elections its alternative name - "The revolt of the Sephardim" (Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 355).

Begin's Likud carried out a series of economic reforms, aimed at dismantling the corporatist socio-economic structure on which the LSM power had been based, which led to severe inflation and economic slump. Then, the Likud-Avoda coalition[2] government carried out the 1985 Emergency Economic Stabilization Plan (EESP), which paved the road for economic liberalization and globalization of Israel. For Mizrahi Jews, these changes meant a loss of social services and growing socio-economic inequality. Catering to their grievances, Shas - a *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) party and social movement - emerged, capitalizing on the Mizrahi public's enduring marginalization (Peled 2006, 129-130).

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1 The ethnic split is a term used to refer to the relations and gaps between Jews of Mizrahi origin and Jews of Ashkenazi origin.

2 Following the 1984 election, due to each party's inability to form a coalition on its own, the Avoda and the Likud joined hands in a rotation government – Shimon Peres of the Avoda served as Prime Minister for the first two years, succeeded by Yitzhak Shamir of the Likud in 1986.

Israel scholars Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir view the evolution of Israel as defined by the dialogue, competition and mutual restraint between three discourses of citizenship: republican, liberal and ethno-national. Each discourse favors a certain incorporation regime and entails the inclusion and exclusion of certain social groups (Shafir and Peled 2002, 7-8). The republican discourse had been dictated by the LSM ideological hegemony and its centralized institutional structure. Later, conflicting currents of economic liberalization and globalization, on the one hand, and the rise of religious social movements, like Shas and Gush Emunim[3], on the other, led to the gradual decline of the republican discourse and to a rising competition between the ethno-national and liberal discourses of Israeli citizenship (Ibid.).

In the 1990's, as the Avoda returned to power, it seemed as if the liberal discourse was gaining the upper hand. Indeed, several significant developments had been taking place: the 1992 "constitutional revolution"[4] and the empowerment of the Israeli Supreme Court, increased tolerance of cultural diversity, the new role of the Bank of Israel and more diffuse bodies of the business community, secularization and most importantly, the Oslo agreements (Peled 2006, 130-131). In November 1995, however, this trend changed when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir, a 25-year-old *mesorati* (religiously-traditional) Yemenite Jew. The assassination took place following demonstrations in which the Avoda leadership was slandered by the Israeli right-wing, reflecting the deepening chasm in Israeli society over the Palestinian issue.

In the 1996 elections campaign, in the midst of a severe wave of terror-violence against Israeli citizens which followed the striking of the Oslo accord, Netanyahu discredited his left-wing opposition utilizing such slogans as: "No peace, no security, no reason to vote for Peres [Netanyahu's opponent of the Avoda]" and "Peres will divide Jerusalem". He also assertively challenged the trustworthiness of Yasir Arafat and the Palestinian leadership and blamed them for the ongoing terror. Netanyahu asserted that he

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3 Gush Emunim (Bloc of the faithful), which began operating in 1967, is the religiously motivated Jewish settler movement seeking the establishment of greater Israel through settlement and annexation of the occupied territories.

4 In 1992 the Knesset adopted two basic laws, Human Dignity and Liberty, and Freedom of Occupation, having to do with the protection of human rights. In 1995, Aharon Barak, then President of the Supreme Court, established the supremacy of basic laws over ordinary legislation, in his court ruling for the case of Bank Mizrahi vs. The Minister of Finance. In so doing, he granted the Supreme Court the authority to over-rule any legislation that contradicts these laws - an interventionist judicial paradigm which he termed "judicial activism" (Segal 2006).

would restore Israel's security and protect its cardinal interests, thus securing much better results in negotiations (Peretz and Gideon 1996).

As he assumed power, American and domestic pressure caused Netanyahu to sign the Wye Accords in 1998, thus formally accepting the principle of exchanging occupied land for peace. However, encumbered by more radical elements from within his own party, Netanyahu seemed reluctant to act on this principle. Throughout his terms he preferred to pose as a leader who would perpetuate Israel's cultural distinctiveness in the face of secular globalization's homogenizing effects, thus catering to the religious right-wing (Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 512).

Netanyahu lost power to Ehud Barak in the 1999 elections, indicated the desire of many Israelis to see a revival of the peace process, yet his efforts for reconciliation ended in an impasse (Ibid., 513-515). In September, head of the opposition, Ariel Sharon, went on a controversial visit to the temple mount (al-Aqsa mosque) and ignited the flames of the second *Intifada* (Goldenberg 2000). The *al-Aqsa intifada* and Israel's military response marked unprecedented levels of violence between the Israeli and the Palestinian sides (Cleveland and Banton 2009, 515-516).

Sharon won the 2001 elections from Barak and subsequently carried out a large-scale operation well into the occupied Palestinian territories, with the aim of stopping the attacks on Israeli citizens (Ibid, 516). He was rewarded for his hardline approach vis-à-vis the Palestinians and obtained another sweeping victory in the 2003 elections.

A later attempt at reinitiating talks by prominent Israeli and Palestinian politicians came with the Geneva accord of December 2003. Sharon, recognizing a favorable public response to the initiative amidst the on-going bloodshed, decided to promote his plan for a unilateral evacuation of all Israeli citizens from the Gaza strip and the withdrawal of the IDF from the territory. In the summer of 2005, Ariel Sharon ordered the launch of the so-called *hitnatkut (*"Disengagement"), gathering the support of left-wing parties to counter the opposition of more hawkish factors from within his own Likud party. In November 2005, this opposition finally led Sharon to leave the Likud, along with a third of its Members of Knesset (MKs) and to found Kadima (Forward), a new center party, as he termed it. (Ibid. 518). In January 2006, Ehud Olmert stepped in as head of Kadima after Sharon was felled by a stroke. Olmert's position was confirmed by elections later that year as he defeated the old-new Likud leader, Binyamin Netanyahu (Ibid, 519).

The kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit by *Hamas* and its rocket fire on Israel led Olmert to impose a blockade on the Gaza Strip. Then, *Hamas* violently

repressed *Fatah* opposition and consolidated its rule in the territory. The PA President, Mahmoud Abbas, responded by dissolving the *Hamas* government in the Palestinian Authority and to establish a new *Fatah* emergency cabinet (Ibid. 522-523). Thus, Israel came to face two distinctly different Palestinian entities in the two Palestinian territories and the Gaza strip became the major fighting front in the conflict.

Olmert then embarked on his own endeavor of promoting a resolution, but the 2008 Gaza war terminated negotiations between the sides (Issacharoff, A. 2010a; Uni et al. 2007). Olmert's intent to continue the legacy of his predecessor's vision was also undermined by the results of the 2006 Lebanon war and later by the coming to light of his involvement in corruption schemes (Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 519). Following his resignation, Tzipi Livni stepped in as Olmert's replacement. After failing to put together a new governing coalition, she soon lost to Netanyahu in the 2009 elections (Marcus 2009, 58).

Netanyahu has repeated his commitment to the two-state solution on several occasions and, pressured by Washington, made certain concessions towards the Palestinians to support his declaration. Most notable, upon coming to power, Netanyahu announced a ten month "construction freeze" period of Israeli settlement, excluding Eastern Jerusalem (Sofer 2009). The Palestinians, then, delayed entry into negotiations, demanding the inclusion of Eastern Jerusalem and threatening to turn to the UN for recognition (Issacharoff 2010b). In September 2010 the construction freeze period ended, only one month after the Palestinians finally agreed to enter negotiations and despite American pressure on Israel to prolong it (Mozgovaya 2010). Several days later, Netanyahu said that if the Palestinians would be willing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state he would promote further freezing of construction. The Palestinians refused, arguing that there was no connection between the two issues (Haaretz Service 2010).

Since then, Netanyahu has frequently demanded that the Palestinian recognize Israel as the legitimate state of the Jewish people as a preliminary condition for negotiations. As this condition entails the rescinding of Palestinian refugees' right of return, the Palestinians have systematically refused. This demand has, thus, been instrumental in Netanyahu's placing the blame for the stalemate on the Palestinian leadership. On issues of settlement, Netanyahu has concluded that those pointing to the continued hostility towards Israel as the result of Israeli presence in the occupied territories are confusing cause and effect (Netanyahu 2009). In addition, Netanyahu has often brought up the issue of the *Fatah* PA government's need to stop incitement against Israel, thereby undermining Abbas's image as a valid partner for peace on the Israeli side

(Harkov 2014; Keinon 2015). He was also quick to denounce the *Fatah-Hamas* reconciliation efforts and eventual agreement, saying it proves Abbas's lack of commitment to peace (Ravid and Issacharoff 2011).

The popular Arab uprisings of 2011 gave further domestic and international legitimacy to Netanyahu's tentativeness on the Palestinian issue (Eran 2011, Goren and Podeh 2013). The persistent rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and various rounds of escalated violence in the territory (Benn 2012; Lapin 2014; Stratfor 2012), have legitimized Netanyahu's constant warning against the rise of another "*Hamastan*" (*Hamas* land) in the West Bank if the IDF were to withdraw its forces. Images of brutal decapitations and executions displayed by ISIS gave impetus to Netanyahu's comparing the two organizations (Jerusalem Post 2007; Alter 2014). Finally, Netanyahu has been frequently blamed by the left-wing for using the issue of Iranian nuclear designs to divert international and domestic attention from the Palestinian issue (Kuttab 2013).

Due to all this, liberal actors have come to see Netanyahu's declarations of wanting to promote a two-state solution as mere "lip service" meant to curb domestic and international pressure and the demands raised by him as intentional barriers to peace. These actors, hoping to regain power, have continued to assert the need for Israeli initiative on the Palestinian issue in order to bring about a resolution.

In 2015, directly following Netanyahu's second re-election since his return to power, sporadic calls made by frustrated left-wing voters to cease solidarity with the weak strata of Israeli society appeared on facebook. "Don't tell me about minimum wage, unemployment in the south and hungry children"[5], one surfer wrote. Another declared: "Development town inhabitants - voted for Netanyahu? No more solidarity and donations!" (Globes Service 2015).

These expressions reveal a long-standing annoyance with Israeli society's weaker strata's seemingly paradoxical and persistent tendency to favor an economically neo-liberal, right-wing and ethno-nationalist agenda over a social-democratic left-wing liberal agenda. This tendency, primarily held by Mizrahi Jews living in the peripheral areas of the state or cities, is seen as preventing the Ashkenazi-dominated "liberal peace-camp" from returning to power. This left-wing response, then, alludes to the argument which is at the core of this paper – that the Mizrahi public is the main ethnic group that is sustaining the right-wing rule.

The first chapter consists of literature based examination of the relations between three groups in Israel – Mizrahi Jews, Ashkenazi Jews and Arabs (citizens and

5 All translations from Hebrew are my own.

non-citizens) - in the context of the rising competition between the liberal and the ethno-national discourses of Israeli citizenship. Using theoretical realizations of social identity theory, I show that the Mizrahi public's early marginalization and their ensuing position in Israel's social structure has led many of them to adhere to the ethno-national discourse of Israeli citizenship and to develop negative attitudes towards the Arab population.

In light of their continued socio-economic marginalization, politicians would cater to their political orientation and contribute to the consolidation of an Israeli-Mizrahi identity. This identity has aided this public in gaining a more central place in Israeli society while maintaining a level of distinctiveness in the face of the secular elitist Ashkenazi public. To illustrate this, I draw upon Israeli Journalist Amnon Levi's documentary TV series "The Ethnic Demon", alongside comments made by public figures and politicians.

The second chapter begins by reviewing the attitudes of the ethno-national and liberal discourses on the two main divisive issues in Israeli society – the Palestinian issue and the relationship between religion and state. Using proposed legislation and comments made by certain politicians, I show that anti-Arab attitudes have become increasingly prevalent among ethno-nationalist politicians, thus reinforcing suspicion and hostility towards the Arabs.

I then analyze the three elections in which Netanyahu triumphed (2009, 2013 and 2015), relying on secondary literature and selected primary sources from parties' election campaigns and comments made by politicians. In doing so, I account for the various actors within each political bloc, right-wing and left-center, showing how the divisions between coalition and opposition were shaped, allowing Netanyahu to maintain power.

The third chapter shows how the Mizrahi public's socio-political orientation, outlined in the first chapter, has generated two interlinked practices which have been instrumental in bringing Netanyahu to power and sustaining his rule: First is the Mizrahi public's tendency to vote right, analyzed through observing the distribution of votes in two development towns (DTs) with a high portion of Mizrahi voters; second is the delegitimization of the left-center bloc and its association with secular elitist Ashkenazi hegemony by right-wing actors, thereby culturally alienating it from the Mizrahi vote. This is demonstrated through examples of proposed legislation and statements made by politicians and public figures. This second set of practices explains the persistence of the first set of practices.

1. Intergroup Relations in Israeli Society

Ashkenazi-Mizrahi Relations

Early relations and Mizrahi marginalization

The LSM enacted a “homogeneous settlement colony” organized around a republican discourse by which all individuals were evaluated based on their contribution to the success of the Zionist colonial project, defined as the common moral good (Shafir and Peled 2002, 17). The *chalutzim* (pioneers) considered the Zionist project a European quest of civilizing the barbaric East (Smooha 1978, 55). Therefore, early Mizrahi arrivers were distinguished by the Ashkenazi-dominated establishment as "natural workers" as opposed to the Ashkenazi "idealist workers", the former providing *quantity* and the latter providing *quality* to the Zionist effort (Peled 2006, 125).

Within a decade of the start of Mizrahi immigration in 1948, the Jewish ethnic balance in Israel had changed from 20% Mizrahi and 80% Ashkenazi at the start of immigration to 42% Mizrahi and 58% Ashkenazi by its end (Shafir and Peled 2002, 15). The Ashkenazi establishment needed to cope with a massive influx of Mizrahi Jews brought about by the former's own initiative in order to establish a Hebrew majority in the land of Israel (Peled 2006, 126).

Upon their arrival under the ethno-nationalist Law of Return[6] Mizrahi Jews were granted full civil and political rights. The incorporation and assimilation model of the Zionist movement was inspired by ideas derived from modernization theory. Thus, it was thought that through time and effort, the Mizrahi population would come to adopt the Ashkenazi population's values and acquire the social skills and manners to become fully integrated into a Western-like state. However, as long as Mizrahi Jews did not "develop" themselves to meet these Western standards, they were rejected and marginalized and many barriers were set before them, which hindered their integration (Peled 2006, 123).

Utterly excluded from both communal *kibbutzim* and cooperative *moshavim*, they were sent to settle in abandoned Arab villages or in newly established DTs in the peripheral areas of the state. This settlement policy was meant to provide personnel for lower military ranking positions as well as cheap unskilled labor for the country's emerging industry and agriculture (Peled 2006, 125-126).

6 .Passed in 1950, the law grants automatic Israeli citizenship to Jews immigrating to the country

Social Identity Theory – Mizrahi Protest and Assimilation

Social identity theory distinguishes between two types of *subjective belief structures*, that is a group's members' beliefs and understanding of their relationship with a certain outgroup, which tends to influence individual and group self-definition and political behavior. (Jackson 2010, 750-751). In the Israeli case, the social belief structure faced by Mizrahi Jews has been ambiguous, depending on their year of arrival, where they have settled and their overall upbringing. Thus, various social dynamics came into play, influencing the individual choices and political orientation of members of the Mizrahi public in different directions.

A *social change* belief structure is one in which lower-status groups generally perceive upward social mobility as out of reach. This might drive low-status groups who come to recognize the social order as illegitimate to attempt at improving their group's social value by engaging in *social competition* with other groups, typically evoking lateral or downward comparisons with lower-status groups (Ibid.). In the case of Mizrahi Jews this would mean a comparison with the Arabs – an important aspect in understanding the relationship between these two groups, as I will later show.

The first engagement in *social competition* and expression of Mizrahi grievances came at the Wadi Saleb demonstrations in Haifa in 1959. Later, in 1971, the Black Panthers movement, founded by second generation young Mizrahi Jews, took to the streets to protest their continued discrimination and neglect by the Ashkenazi-dominated establishment. The movement's efforts did much to promote awareness of issues of social inequality in Israel and contributed to the realization that Mizrahi Jews form a distinctive public, facing particular barriers and hardships – a point of view which had hitherto been rejected by the Ashkenazi establishment (Lev and Shenhav 2009; Goodman and Barak 2011, 183).

When upward mobility of a lower-status group is seen as possible as part of a *social mobility* belief structure, members of lower-status groups might try to dissociate themselves from their group and attempt to join the higher-status group (Jackson 2010, 751). In Israel, this is epitomized in certain Mizrahi Jews seeking assimilation into the Ashkenazi-dominated establishment by adopting Ashkenazi-like manners, speech, and behavior. Such Mizrahi individuals have often been referred to as *mishtaknezim* (Mizrahi who have "turned into" Ashkenazi).

Amnon Levi, an Israeli journalist born to parents of Syrian origin in Rishon Letzion, an ethnically mixed city in the center of Israel, reflects upon this phenomenon in

his documentary TV series "The Ethnic Demon". Levi, who admits to being a *mishtaknez*, speaks of the gradually growing consciousness of his own strangeness and his need to change in order to assimilate (Levi 2013, Episode 1). Levi interviews various other figures of Mizrahi origin who have occupied senior positions in influential spheres in Israeli society and speak of the painful price they paid in order to fit in – drifting away from their families, judging their traditional ways through Western eyes and becoming estranged from their own *Mizrahi* culture (Levi 2013).

Another phenomenon demonstrating Mizrahi individuals' attempts at dissociation from their *Mizrahi* culture and seeking upward mobilization, has been marriage to Ashkenazi counterparts. In 1984, 25% of all Jewish marriages were mixed-marriages. This figure represents the most recent data available due to the fact that the Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel has ceased collecting data with regard to ethnic affiliation of third generation Israelis. Despite the lack of up to date data, a long-time scholar on Mizrahi-Ashkenazi relations, Professor Yehuda Shenhav, assesses that since 1984 this figure has not grown (Levi 2013, episode 2).

As dominant social groups attempt to maintain the social order and prevent the collective action of lower-status groups, they may promulgate an ideology of potential social mobility (Jackson 2010, 751). The heroic story and the nurtured symbol of Natan Elbaz is a prime example of the promulgation of the "melting pot" ethos, by which service in the Israeli army is depicted as a channel for social mobility and assimilation.

Elbaz migrated to Israel alone from Morocco and became a soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). In 1954, while sorting hand grenades in a tent in his military base, Elbaz heard a click sound indicating that one of the grenades had been ignited. Recognizing he was surrounded by other soldiers he embraced the grenade to his body, saving his friends at the expense of his own life. For this act, Elbaz was embraced by the Israeli nation and commemorated as a symbol serving to promulgate the myth that "in the IDF, all are equal". Service in the Israeli army and even more so, the sacrifice of one's life, then, came to be seen as the ultimate proof of loyalty to the collective (Geffen 2014).

In his show, Levi demonstrates the substantial gap between this myth and reality. In the 1950's and 1960's the use of the *kaba* (acronym: quality group) as a tool for the selective appointment of candidates for security service, served as an effective tool for creating ethnic separation within the Israeli army. By way of the *kaba* the potential contribution of candidates was assessed, thus designating them to different units and positions. The parameters used to determine an individual's *kaba* have granted an intrinsic advantage to Ashkenazi candidates, thus designating them to serve in elite units,

white-collar and officer positions. Mizrahi candidates, on the other hand, would be typically designated to serve in blue collar and logistical positions, combat units with lesser prestige and in NCO positions. Until the mid-1970's it can be said that the *kaba* strongly dictated an individual's prospect on his draft day. Today, although gaps have diminished, there is still a substantial differentiation in the positions Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews typically find themselves occupying during their military service. This is at least partly due to the fact that Ashkenazi candidates for security service, given their typically better socio-economic circumstances and more ambitious upbringing, tend to show higher motivation of pursuing a "meaningful service" (Levi 2013, episode 1).

Current Mizrahi Subjective Belief Structure

As Peled notes, the enduring gaps between the Ashkenazi and the Mizrahi publics mask socioeconomic gaps among the Mizrahi public itself, about a third of which belongs to the Israeli middle-class and has been, more or less, integrated into Israel's Ashkenazi-dominated society. This gap is due, first and foremost, to the earlier arrival time of Mizrahi Jews of Asian origin, which allowed them to obtain favorable housing options in central areas of the state, often in former Arab towns and villages. Those arriving later, typically North African in origin, were mostly sent to settle in DT's on the periphery of the state or the cities. They were, thus, physically distanced from the Ashkenazi public and from state institutions and services, and obtained housing of lesser real-estate value. This latter group typically constitutes the remaining two-thirds of the Mizrahi public and still occupies a marginal position in Israeli society (Peled, 2006, 118-119). This difference would be bound to influence their understanding of the social order and thus their political orientation.

In his show, Levi conducted interviews with small groups of middle school and high school Mizrahi students in DTs Netivot, Kiryat Malachi, and Ofakim and in Shchunat Hatikva, a disadvantaged neighborhood in southern Tel-Aviv. These third generation Mizrahi teenagers testify to having known almost no Ashkenazis during their lives and perceive their own culture and values as different from those of the *Ashkenazim*: The Mizrahi home is "warm" and parents teach their kids to be joyful and enjoy life, while the Ashkenazi home is "cold", has lots of books, the food is not good, and parents urge kids to focus on their education (Levi 2013, episode 1).

The interviewed teenagers see their own future in blue-collar professions. White-collar and management positions, in their view, are filled by Ashkenazim, who enjoy far better opportunities for success. They also assess their chances of attaining

prestigious military positions as lower but see them as a significant channel for gaining social prestige and appreciation in Israeli society (Ibid., episodes 1 and 3).

Levi clearly shows that in today's Israel there are still large, closed off Mizrahi neighborhoods. The vague stereotypical descriptions of the Ashkenazi culture as provided by these teenagers reveal the vast estrangement and disparity which still exists between large parts of the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi communities in Israel today.

Nir, one of the respondents who grew up in Shchunat Hatikva in south Tel-Aviv, went to a school attended by both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi teenagers. He tells of having had Ashkenazi friends, spending time with "them" and says that some of them are "very good people". It seems that this interaction with the Ashkenazi public might have influenced Nir's attitude, as he seems to risk being more optimistic about his own future. The others in his interviewed group, show similar attitudes to other Mizrahi teenagers in DTs, despite being geographically closer to the Ashkenazi public (Ibid. episode 3). However, as Levi notes, this group of teenagers seems more angered by their deprived circumstances than DT respondents who seem more accepting of their social reality. One of the respondents declares: "They [Ashkenazi Jews] get the senior jobs and we [Mizrahi Jews] get the lousy jobs". Another expresses anger at the reality in which Ashkenazi youth continues to live in their parent's home at the age of 30, while he had had to quit school in order to help provide for his family (Ibid., episode 3).

Another interesting account in Levi's show is that of members of a Mizrahi social movement who are convinced that discrimination and racism are prevalent in Israel today. They point to the selection process in entering nightclubs and to the stereotypical labels *ars* or *freha* typically applied to Jews of Mizrahi origin, still used Israel today. They also speak of a glass ceiling faced by Mizrahi individuals in obtaining senior positions in various realms, which they see as "closed clubs" to which individuals are admitted based on their network of acquaintances. In addition, they point to the vast disproportion of Mizrahi youth attending vocational schools as well as to the enduring demographic distribution by which the great majority of DT inhabitants are still of Mizrahi origin (Ibid., episode 4).

Indeed, in the mid-1960's, 70-80% of DT inhabitants were of Mizrahi origin. In the 1970's DT student were channeled in high numbers into newly established vocational schools with far fewer options of attending theoretical schools which would allow them to pursue higher academic education and more profitable jobs. Accordingly, at that time 1 out of 4 university graduates was of Mizrahi origin and a gap of 25% in salary was registered between the Jewish ethnic groups. In 2011 the very same 25% gap among salaried

employees was discerned. Vast disproportion in vocational school attendance by Mizrahi youth still exists and in 2013, the ethnic disproportion of university graduates remained at 1 out of 4, with only 9% of all university professors being of Mizrahi origin (Ibid., episodes 1 and 3). Substantial gaps in representation still exist between the two groups in many significant spheres: the banking system, senior positions in Israel's security organizations, media position as news anchors or chief editors, senior positions in the judicial system, academia and the government. Professor Yinon Cohen, who conducted comparative research between the second and third generation of Mizrahi immigrants, asserts that there is no sign that ethnic gaps are diminishing in the third generation (Ibid., episode 4(.

It is likely that a lack of opportunities due to past discrimination of Mizrahi Jews, their own lack of self-criticism and continued discrimination, all play a part in the enduring gaps between the two Jewish groups. What concerns me here, however, is the perception of many Mizrahi individuals of low socioeconomic means and the emotions generated by their interpretation of their social reality. As I contend later in this chapter, these have contributed to the consolidation of what I term an Israeli-Mizrahi identity. To understand the consolidation of this identity, however, we must first account for the relationship between the Mizrahi public and another critically marginalized group – the Arab, citizen and non-citizen, public.

Mizrahi-Arab Relations

Ever since the first clashes between Arabs and Jews in the land of mandate Palestine, the Arab population had been treated by the Jews with suspicion. With the foundation of the Jewish state, Arabs, seen as a potential fifth column, were brought under Israeli military administration. One exception has been the Druze community whose sense of particular identity has been treated differently by the Israeli state since 1949. Thus they're differentiated from the Arabs, designated as "Druze", rather than Arab, in their identification cards and serve in Israel's military (Kaufman 2004, 53-54).

The intermediary position of Mizrahi Jews as a semi-peripheral group, placed between the hegemonic Ashkenazi elite and the peripheral Arabs has led to a contentious intergroup relationship between Mizrahi Jews and the Arab public. Tel-Aviv University's Yoav Peled presents two factors which led to the formation of this tension: labor-market competition and the politics of identity. In the early 1960's, following the lifting of Israeli Military Administration, Arab citizens were introduced into the Israeli labor market and

were then, in 1967, joined by non-citizen Palestinians from the newly occupied territories. In times of economic constraint, Mizrahi Jews found themselves in competition with cheap Arab labor and experienced wage loss and unemployment (Peled 2006, 117-118). Surveys in the late 1980's indicate that in DT's, where labor market competition was high, respondents showed a high rate of support for "transfer"[7] of Arabs outside of Israel and for their exclusion from the Jewish labor market. Following the first *intifada* and the Oslo accords of 1993-1994, non-citizen Arabs were excluded from participation in the labor market. Sociological theories that embed social conflict in labor market competition would have predicted that this decline in competition would generate change in Mizrahi's attitude towards the Arab population but this was generally not the case (Bonacich 1972; Ibid. 124). Here, the second factor, politics of identity, comes into play.

As a *social change* belief system predicts, those Mizrahi Jews whose circumstances and upbringing led them to perceive their potential for upward social mobilization as low, evoked downward comparisons and sought to privilege themselves at the expense of those more deprived social groups - citizen and non-citizen Arabs. Many of them clung to the ethno-national discourse as an affirmation of their privileged status as Jews, seeking to distance themselves from the Palestinian population, to which they were culturally and economically closer. Therefore, they came to perceive the Palestinians with hostility and to oppose the Oslo agreements, seen by them as the capstone of the process of globalization and secularization and deprivation of the social and political value of their Jewish identity (Peled 2006, 131-133).

Ran Cohen, formerly a military colonel and member of the left-wing Meretz party, migrated to Israel from Baghdad and grew up in a predominantly Ashkenazi *kibbutz*. Cohen, a *mishtaknez* by all standards, asserts that the hatred of Mizrahi Jews towards the Arabs was conceived in Israel and was exacerbated due to the efforts of political forces that sought to win over Mizrahi constituency (Karpel 2016). Indeed, in the process of Israel's changing citizenship discourse, political actors have attempted to appeal to the Mizrahi public and capitalize on the inter-group dynamics of Israeli society. Hence, the negative attitudes of the Mizrahi public towards the Palestinian population would serve well in mobilizing the Mizrahi vote.

Early Capitalizing on the Ethnic Dimension of Israeli Society

7 The "transfer" of all Palestinians, citizens and non-citizens alike, out of the Land of Israel (Peled (2006, 121

Ran Cohen traces the beginning of politicians' capitalization on the ethnic dimension of Israeli society to Begin (Karpel 2016). Dr. Omar Kamil of Leipzig University concurs, saying that Begin, himself an Ashkenazi, exploited the hostility of the Mizrahi public towards the Ashkenazi left (Kamil 2001, 54-55).

In the election campaign of 1981, Israeli actor and entertainer Dudu Topaz delivered his infamous "*Chah-chahim* Speech"[8] in Malchei Israel square in Tel-Aviv during an Avoda convention three days prior to elections. Topaz said: "It is a pleasure to see this crowd, and a pleasure to see that there are no chah-chahim who ruin election conventions". Topaz went on to comment on Mizrahi Jews' supposedly inferior role in the military and noted that among the crowd present that night - the Avoda support base prominently made up of Ashkenazi Jews from *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* - were the soldiers and commanders of the combat units (Barzilai 2011).

On the following evening, at the very same place, Begin made sure to give the Mizrahi public special attention, delivering a fierce denunciation of Topaz's message. He glorified Jews of Mizrahi origin for their role in the underground organizations that operated prior to the foundation of Israel, who fought and "died with a hand-grenade in hand", implicitly referring to the heroic Natan Elbaz and passionately cried "Ashkenazi?! Iraqi?! Jews! Brothers! Warriors!" (Begin 1981).

Others of the predominantly Ashkenazi left-wing would continue to provide occasional stereotypical comments that further alienated the Mizrahi public. In 1983, leftist journalist Amnon Dankner, published an article in which he compared Mizrahi Jews to Baboons. Shulamit Aloni of the left-wing Meretz party criticized Mizrahi demonstrators, calling them "barbarian tribal forces, marching to the sounds of Tam-Tam drums" (Shohat 1991, 146).

Begin, head of the revisionist Zionist Herut (liberty) party, declared his ambition for the establishment of greater Israel and joined hands with more centrist parties to establish the Likud. Also, the rise of Gush Emunim influenced HaMafdal (acronym: religious nationalist party) that began taking a more radically religious stance, favoring Begin's ethno-nationalist and pro-settlement position. Consequently, in 1976 its partnership with the Avoda came to an end **(**Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 364). Cleveland and Bunton comment in their book that "Begin did not create [the] atmosphere of religious resurgence, but he was in accord with it and used it to further his own political agenda…

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8 The phrase Chah-chahim (riffraff) is a derogatory slang term used by Jews of Ashkenazi origin to refer to Jews of Mizrahi origin.

primarily focused on the retention of the territories occupied during the June War" (Ibid., 356).

Peled notes that adverse economic and cultural effects due to processes of globalization might lead deprived groups to emphasize their particular socio-cultural identity through nationalist or religious movements that oppose the forces of globalization (Peled 2006, 129-130). Because Begin made no more progress in promoting their social integration than his predecessors, many of the Mizrahi public turned to Shas, the *haredi* Mizrahi party, which emerged in 1982-1983 (Kamil 2001, 49, 55).

Some extremist *haredi* Jewish streams reject the very idea of a Jewish nation-state as a rebellion against god and are therefore unwilling to engage with it in any way. The mainstream of *haredi* circles, however, has taken a more pragmatic stance and has participated in the Israeli political game in order to promote it distinctive interests (Leon 2014, 20-21). The basis for the relationship between the *haredi* factions and the Israeli state has been the status quo agreement - a letter from Ben-Gurion to two leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis, affirming that the Jewish state would be respectful of certain religious principles. As the power balance between religious and secular parties would, at times, shift, either side would attempt to secure certain gains in coalition negotiations and to alter the status quo. This has generally benefitted the *haredi* factions, who are chiefly concerned about promoting their own sectoral interests and are willing to compromise on essentially all other issues. Thus, through the years, the *haredi* factions have secured the exemption from military service for their public and considerable financial benefits for their autonomous religious institutions. They've also managed to retain their dominance over Jewish marital issues and conversion procedures through their control of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the retention of other religious legislation, such as *Kashrut* (the set of Jewish religious dietary laws) in official institutions and the *Sabbath*'s (Saturday) status as a day of rest (Troen 2016).

This public is also divided along the line of ethnicity and mutual stereotypes between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi *haredim* has been prevalent. The Ashkenazi *haredim* are organized in homogeneous and secluded communities (Leon 2014, 20-21). Two Ashkenazi *haredi* factions united under a single list Yahadut HaTora (the Torah Judaism) since the elections of 1992 have determined their approach on various issues strictly based on religious concerns. For instance, in 1999, Yahadut HaTora left Netanyahu's coalition in protest of shipment of turbines to the Ashkelon Power station on the *Sabbath*. As it is not bound by Gush Emunim's religious doctrine, it was willing to be part of Sharon's 'Disengagement' approving coalition. Nonetheless, because the right-wing camp as a

whole has a more conservative view on religious issues, Yahadut HaTora has tended to align itself with this camp (The Israeli Democracy Institute 2015).

The Mizrahi *haredim*, on the other hand, has had far more contact with other non-*haredi*, primarily Mizrahi, parts of the Israeli public. Moreover, since many Mizrahi *haredim* were not raised in ultra-religious families, others in their family might have more loose religious ties. In this sense, the Mizrahi *haredi* public has been more permeable to outside influence and fittingly demonstrates political behavior that is more aware of and responsive to its heterogeneous religious and social environment (Leon 2010, 22).

The foundation of Shas, appealing particularly to the Mizrahi public, was a natural reaction to the socio-economic changes of the 1980's and 1990's and to charges of patronization of Ashkenazi *haredi* circles (Leon 2010, 28). Nonetheless, as their political interests are often akin, or can otherwise coexist, these *haredi* factions have often strengthened their bargaining position by joining hands in negotiations, and have sat together in nearly every governing coalition[9].

For years, the country's leaders had ignored the cultural traditions and customs of Mizrahi Jews' who were typically religiously traditional. In this respect, Kamil argues that "Shas offered the Sephardim [Mizrahim] what the Israeli state failed to do: integration into Israeli society through a network of educational and social service institutions" (Kamil 2001, 50). Shas managed to establish a wide network of synagogues and independent educational religious institutions, provided social services, financial support, and medical care, created jobs and better housing opportunities, and conducted religious ceremonies and marriages. Its synagogues came to play a significant social role for Mizrahi communities in DTs or disadvantaged neighborhoods, who rarely conceive of upward social mobility and created a feeling of unity and security, functioning as social and religious homes (Ibid, 60).

Shas promoted a new Zionist identity constructed solely on Jewish religion as defined by the Sephardi *minhag* (custom) (Ibid, 59). Thus, it became a major factor in elevating the religious Jewish component of Israeli identity as a basis of solidarity in the competition for dominance over Israeli citizenship discourse (Peled 2006, 128). The other, against whom Rabbi Ovadia Yossef, Shas' spiritual leader, sought to establish this new identity, was "not the Ashkenazim in general, but the Zionists, especially the Avoda

9 Shas sat in Rabin's 1995 and later in Peres's 1996 coalition, without Yahadut HaTora. In the 2013 coalition, Netanyahu broke with both the *haredi* faction – this will be explored in the following chapter.

Zionist establishment that has marginalized Mizrahim since the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine" (Kamil 2001, 59).

As the *self-esteem hypothesis* contends, social identity processes and formulation are motivated by people's pursuit of a relatively favorable self-conception (Jackson 2010, 751-752). Thus, the emphasis of the religious orientation of the Mizrahi public and its empowerment in Israeli politics would serve to generate an improved self-conception among them and a feeling of occupying a more central position in Israeli society. Complementary to this, Brewer's *optimal distinctiveness* theory holds, individuals of low-status groups strive to achieve an optimal balance between their own groups' inclusion and its distinctiveness. Accordingly, in the face of the counter-currents of globalization and secularization, the religious credentials of Mizrahi Jews would also serve to distinguish themselves from the secular-Ashkenazi-left. Hence, the religious credentials of Mizrahi Jews have served Mizrahi feelings of social inclusion but have also contributed to this public's affirmation of its own distinct identity.

Shas's leadership had initially shown a moderate approach towards the Palestinian issue in comparison to its more hawkish voters - Mizrahi of the low socio-economic strata, who were mostly former Likud voters (Peled 2006, 113). Under the leadership of Arie Deri, the party carefully walked the line between hawk and dove on the Palestinian issue, abstaining from voting on the Oslo agreements, but allowing them to pass in the Knesset. Also, Shas's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, who issued an edict in 1979 allowing the return of occupied territories in order to save Jewish lives, refused to reiterate this message as the Oslo accords began to be implemented (Ibid., 113-114).

This highly pragmatic politics allowed Shas to act as the pivoted balance between a left-wing and a right-wing government, since the two big parties, Likud and Avoda, were unwilling to govern together. This position allowed it to demand further financial support which helped it increase its electoral record, growing from its initial four seats in the 1984 election to a staggering 17 seats in 1999 (Kamil 2001, 62, 50).

From the mid-1990's the state began seeing Shas and its endeavor of promoting an Israeli identity based on Sepharadi (Mizrahi) customs, as a challenge to the social order and a threat to the established Israeli identity, which had been based on the values of secular Zionism. The state would seek to restrict financial support to the party's institutions. So too, prior to his election in 1999, Ehud Barak begged forgiveness of Mizrahi immigrants for the injustice that had been done to them by the LSM and vowed to work in order to improve their deprived social status. But after elections, as Barak became

increasingly focused on Israeli-Palestinian negotiation, he neglected this cause and the Mizrahi public continued its reliance on Shas's civil society institutions (Ibid., 62, 66).

Under the leadership of Eli Yishai, who succeeded Deri after the latter had been convicted of receiving bribes in 1999, Shas was led by its constituency's hardline approach on the Palestinian issue and took an increasingly hawkish stance on the Palestinian issue and against Israeli-Arabs. Yishai withdrew from Barak’s coalition government, while the Camp David summit of 2000 was taking place, depriving him of his Knesset majority. As Minister of the Interior, Yishai issued an executive order, which since became a law, halting family unification between citizen Arabs and non-citizen Arabs in the occupied territories (Peled 2006, 114-115).

In 2002, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef visited *haredi* settlement Immanuel, his first visit to the West-Bank in many years, to attend the conclusion of a 30-day mourning period for the death of ten of its residents who were killed in an attack by Arabs. The Rabbi aggrandized Immanuel's residents as heroes and wished for many more like them. This event, Peled claimed: "marked the completion of the transformation of Shas [into] a party firmly rooted in the camp of the Israeli right wing" (Peled 2006, 115). Its distinction between Jews and non-Jews "has helped Mizrahi *haredi* circles to depict themselves as the gatekeepers of Jewish nationalism in Israel" (Leon 2014, 29). Nissim Leon has called this: "the transition of a fundamentalist confrontational [to the state] religious ideology into an assertive, religio-nationalist ideology" (Ibid. 20-21).

The Consolidation of Israeli-Mizrahi Identity

There are those who nurture the belief that discrimination and racism still exist in Israeli society today. On the other hand, there's the typical Ashkenazi response whenever debate over ethnic gaps is evoked: denouncing political forces for exploiting ethnicity for political gains, blaming the Mizrahi public for a lack of self-criticism and victimization and claiming that discrimination is a thing of the past. Accordingly, Israeli universities refrain from providing data which accounts for its personnel's ethnicity. Also, as noted, the Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel does not collect data with regard to the ethnic origin of third generation immigrants (Levi 2013), which is indicative of the government's willful ignorance of ethnicity as a guiding factor in its formulation of socio-economic policies.

While Levi's interviewing method and overly dramatic tone need to be observed critically, the accounts of teenagers, social activists and other Mizrahi leaders of opinion (*mistaknezim* or not) are telling. He reveals a large Mizrahi public that is "closed off" from the Ashkenazi public and asserts its ethnic origin and aware of its long-standing marginalization and misrepresentation in influential spheres in Israel (Ibid, episodes 2 and 4).

Jecki Ben Zaken, an Israeli businessman of Moroccan origin, draws a comparison between Mizrahi Jews and immigrants from the former USSR that arrived in Israel in the 1990's and have achieved far better integration into Israeli society. He explains the gaps between the two communities by saying that these later immigrants were more orientated towards investment in their kids' education. In contrast, he says, "When my grandmother received her social security pension, she would use that money for having a 'proper' holiday dinner" (Levi 2013, episode 4).

Accounts such as these, pointing to a lack of self-criticism among Mizrahi Jews to explain the ethnic gaps, are rare. More commonly, responsibility is cast onto a third party. Thus, when Levi asks a group of kids who is to blame for their situation, they unanimously declare: "the government", while the social activists expressed anger at what they called "the media's silence" on the issue of the ethnic gaps (Ibid).

A survey conducted by The World Health Organization among a sample of 5,000 Israelis showed that Jews of Mizrahi origin are twice as likely to suffer from depression or anxiety than Ashkenazi Jews. Other research that has been conducted on ethnic gaps shows that differences in the rate of psychiatric disorders can directly correlate to the exposure to direct or implied negative attitudes and to differences in social status and power (Nakash and Levav 2012). Such instances in the Israeli case may include stereotypical and demeaning coverage of Mizrahi Jews in entertainment shows and commercials, sporadic encounters of racism throughout an individual's life and general awareness of one's ingroup misrepresentation (Levi 2013). In this respect, I also noted several instances of stereotypical epithets ascribed to the Mizrahi public in political contexts by secular Ashkenazi left-wingers.

The debate over Mizrahi marginalization is also avoided by many *Mizrahim* themselves. In an interview with Haaretz, Levi tells of a Mizrahi woman who approached him angrily and expressed her grievances regarding the airing of his show (Gueta and Tucker 2013). Levi and others in his show repeatedly mention that the issue of ethnic discrimination was never debated in their own homes amongst their families. Yehuda

Shenhav attributes the avoidance of this issue on the Mizrahi side to feelings of shame evoked by their discrimination (Levi 2013, episode 1).

Regardless of such opposition, it is my contention that the enduring marginal position of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli society have contributed to the consolidation of a Mizrahi identity among those of them who assess their chances at upward mobility as slim. The teenagers interviewed by Levi dealt with their situation by praising their own culture and stereotyping the Ashkenazi one. They also showed no special desire to marry an Ashkenazi counterpart and some went as far as to predict that they would never be accepted into an Ashkenazi family (Levi 2013).

Despite potential differences in the degree of the emotional response to their marginalization based on their geographical proximity to the Ashkenazi public, the correspondence of attitudes of Mizrahi teenagers toward their social reality is striking. When Levi presents this correspondence of attitudes to the group from Shchunat Hatikva, the four respondents unanimously and decisively confirm.

This common Mizrahi view and the seeming coming to terms with and praising of their own identity is appropriately accounted for by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *theory of practice*. Individuals' *habitus*, that is, an array of subjective but not individual schemes, perceptions, and conceptions common to members of the same group, gives rise to an *ethos* shaped by the type of objective regularities that determine "reasonable" and "unreasonable" conduct. These incline agents to "make a virtue out of necessity" - loving the inevitable and refusing the unthinkable (Bourdieu 1977, 10, 86).

Another area where the Mizrahi public has suffered enduring marginalization is in culture, as budgets of the Ministry of Culture and Sports were overwhelmingly directed towards European-orientated dance, theater, and music. In the last two decades, however, one cultural aspect, Mizrahi music, has had great success (Ibid., episode 3). Occasionally referred to as Mediterranean-Israeli music, Mizrahi music has retained its ethnically-distinguished name as opposed to the term "Israeli music", which has been used to refer to Hebrew European-orientated and Ashkenazi-dominated genres of music (Horowitz 2005, 202-203).

Mizrahi music has also been heavily mocked by the Ashkenazi public. Yossi Gispan, a prominent Mizrahi lyricist interviewed in Levi's show, comments: "when I received the Acum (Acronym: Society of Authors, Composers and Music Publishers in Israel) Prize, I got 90,000 talkbacks – shallow, cheap, etc – the hell with it, it is the same people [who] left the same place, spread all over the world, and returned to the same place. Then why did they return 'rotten'?!". Gispan speaks of an enigmatic and undefined

'they', who will not curb his popularity and dedication to [emotionally] moving the people of Israel (*am Yisrael)*. 'They' are the critics - Jews who show a condescending and cynical approach towards his success, rather than stand by him in solidarity. Gispan shows a non-apologetic defiance of these critics, demonstrating a sense of pride in his achievements (Levi 2013, Episode 3).

I would argue that Mizrahi music has come to play a role similar to the religious credentials of Mizrahi Jews, elevating their self-esteem and moving them into a more central position in Israeli society while distinguishing them from the secular Ashkenazi public. The often cheerful nature of this music alongside its mass popularity, on the one hand, and its critical scrutinizing and stigmatization on the other sharpens the contrast between a Mizrahi public that sees its own culture as having joyful and warm attributes, and an elitist Ashkenazi culture.

As Bourdieu notes, a group's shared present and past position in the social structure and the homogeneity of its individuals' conditions of existence leads their practices to be objectively harmonized without the need for intentional calculation (Bourdieu 1977, 79). Bourdieu uses the term *practice* to refer to conventional or routinized human action, which is the result of the individual's active interpretation of each new situation, guided by certain norms and rules. Practice becomes regulated and regular because it is guarded by the relationship between the *objective social structures* and the ensuing *habitus*.

Objective social structures are statistical regularities (for example employment rates, income curves, probabilities of access to secondary education, the frequency of holidays) that convey to individuals a sense of reality and understanding of their society (Ibid., 77). In Israel, the *objective social structures* have been highly influenced by individuals' ethnic affiliation, leading Mizrahi Jews to an intermediary social position.

The two ensuing factors, which explain the development of hostile attitudes of Mizrahi Jews towards the Arab population - labor market competition and the politics of identity - in Bourdieu's theoretical terminology, may be referred to as *generative schemes*. These are principles which have set in place a system of integrated cognitive and evaluative structures that have generated a unification of practices (Ibid., 124). Due to these, Mizrahi Jews have adhered to the ethno-national discourse of Israeli citizenship, in the face of the rise of the liberal citizenship discourse and globalization's homogenizing effects, as an affirmation of their privileged status as Jews in a Jewish state.

As politicians have catered to their political orientation, they have contributed to the consolidation of an Israeli-Mizrah identity. The social credentials obtained by the resurgence of Mizrahi Music has also aided this process. This identity is comprised of Mizrahi Jews of the lower strata of Israeli society, living primarily in the DT's or in disadvantaged neighborhoods, who perceive their chances of upward mobility as low. Their *habitus* is constituted by values, customs, and norms, derived from two separate sources: one, is their normative understanding of Israeli citizenship through an ethno-national, religious and ethnically purist prism; second, is by their understanding of their particular Mizrahi identity, characterized by warm and joyful cultural attributes, distinguished from the secular elitist Ashkenazi 'other'.

The preceding *generative schemes* have yielded two separate but intimately linked sets of practices: First, they have guided the voting tendencies of individuals belonging to the aforementioned Israeli-Mizrahi identity. Second, they have set in motion a process of delegitimization of liberal actors by right-wingers. These liberal actors have also been linked to secular elitist Ashkenazi hegemony. In doing so, this second set of practices has alienated the liberal discourse from Mizrahi voters and explains the persistence of the first set of practices – their tendency to vote for right-wing parties.

In the third chapter of this paper, I demonstrate how the manifestation of these practices has made this Israeli-Mizrahi identity a crucial part in sustaining the right-wing rule. First, however, I will review Israel's political system in the intensifying battle between the ethno-national and liberal discourses since Netanyahu's return to power and analyze the three elections in which he had won.

2. Israel's Political System in the Increasing Discursive Battle

At the 1999 elections, in which Barak succeeded Netanyahu, fifteen parties ended up occupying seats in the Israeli Knesset. This plurality of parties in the Israeli political system yielded political instability, as would be expected when parties of conflicting agendas unite in a coalition. For instance, the *haredi* Shas party entered the coalition alongside Tommy Lapid's rigorously secular party, Shinui (change), promoting an anti-clerical message and a fight against so-called "religious coercion".

A general anti-religious atmosphere was prevalent during these election campaigns. Yisrael BeAliya, representing the former USSR migrants, campaigned forcefully, seeking to obtain control over the Ministry of the Interior from Shas, which had held it for nearly a decade. Shas had challenged the "Russian" migrants' Jewishness, also

designating the personal status of some of them to be non-Jews, using its grip on the Ministry and the *haredi* control of marital issues through the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (Ibid, 12; Leon 2014, 25). This led to mutual stereotyping between the "Russian" and the Mizrahi publics and to highly sectoral voting among each of them (Mazin 2006, 12).

As Cleveland and Bunton comment in their book: "...the issue of peace with the Palestinians was no less divisive than the differences between secular and religious sectors of Israeli society… Israel's electoral system embedded these differences in day-to-day political life, ensuring further factionalism and stalemate" (Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 513). Surely these two issues, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the relationship between religion and state, are the main *two divisive issues* in the battle over Israeli citizenship.

Sharon's break from the Likud to form Kadima, a new center party, marked a significant transformation in the Israeli political system, breaking the traditional rivalry between the left-wing Avoda and the right-wing Likud parties (Ibid. 518). Under Sharon, Kadima was seen to represent a blend of initiative towards the promoting of a resolution to the Palestinian issue alongside insistence on Israel's cardinal interests, and respect for the Jewish tradition and symbols. As Olmert succeeded Sharon in 2006 elections, he still managed to maintain a considerable portion of Mizrahi voters, limiting Netanyahu's Likud to a mere 12 seats.

Under Livni's new leadership and deprived of Sharon's long-standing and well-established right-wing credentials, Kadima's position on the two divisive issues would come to appear largely indistinguishable from that of the left-wing Avoda. This allowed Netanyahu's Likud to make a substantial 'comeback', gaining 27 seats in the 2009 elections – enough to depose Livni of her short-lived position as Prime Minister. Nevertheless, Kadima had retained its self-proclaimed category as a center party.

Granted the declining attractiveness of the left-wing "brand" due to its delegitimization, which began during the Oslo agreements, and was later exacerbated, this relatively new category of the center party was taken up by new political actors. Since Netanyahu's return to power, it has thus become widely acceptable to speak of two blocs in the Israeli political system – the left-center bloc (the peace camp) and the right-bloc (the national camp). In 2009, the parties that were typically seen as constituting each bloc roughly correlated with the division of proponents between the liberal discourse and the ethno-national discourse, respectively. The emergence of new center parties would later problematize the category of the left-center bloc as representing a cohesive "peace-camp". These developments will be addressed throughout my analysis of the various elections. To

begin with, however, I shall hereby broadly outline the ethno-national and liberal approaches since Netanyahu's return to power.

Ethno-National and Liberal Attitudes since the 2009 Elections

Netanyahu's predecessor's failed attempts at promoting peace and the various rounds of violence that had transpired during their terms had done a lot to enhance mistrust and hatred between the Israeli and the Palestinian sides (Cleveland and Bunton 2009, 516). These events would also facilitate ethno-nationalists in asserting that Israel has no partner for peace on the Palestinian side and in delegitimizing the Palestinian struggle.

Ethno-nationalist actors often depicted the conflict as a cultural and religious one, rather than a mere territorial "beef", which, therefore, could not be resolved by the ceding over of territory. The efficacy of this projected image would rely on the Israeli collective memory of having been repeatedly attacked by its neighboring Arab states and the view of Arab and Muslim states' alignment with the Palestinians as a double-standard, given their own suppressive regimes. All of this is seen to attest to a deeply rooted hatred of Israel - a scapegoat for international criticism in an intrinsically hostile region.

Netanyahu, as I have shown in the introduction, and other ethno-national actors, would thus depict the Palestinian leadership as uninterested in peace and blame it for promoting incitement and terrorism. The assertion of a lack of an effective Palestinian peace-seeking government in the territory and the region's turbulent, unpredictable and hostile nature would all serve to justify the forestalling of negotiations.

Liberal actors, on the other hand, are optimistic about the possibility of cooperation with the Palestinians and the achievement of a sustainable peaceful resolution. These actors represent primarily secular-Ashkenazi Jews from the mid to upper class as well as *mishtaknezim* of Mizrahi origin. Mahmoud Abbas', the left-wing claims, has shown his peaceful inclination by combatting radical militants, has recognized Israel's right to exist, and is ready to reach an agreement with Israel. Liberals view Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and people as a major problem to both Israeli National Security and to the well-being of its own social fabric. Furthermore, due to demographic projections and to the two peoples' inability to peacefully coexist within a single state, the two-state solution, they say, is an inevitable one. Hence, they've continued to endorse and urge initiative on resolving the Palestinian issue.

The most radical proponents of the liberal discourse, namely, the Arab factions Balad, Raam and Taal, and the Jewish-Arab party, Hadash, in principle, seek to establish a

universalist citizenship model which would entail the utter abolition of Israel's Jewish identity and the enactment of the right of return of Palestinian refugees (Neuberger 2001, 82). These actors have focused their attention on the frequent denunciation of Israeli occupation and some of their members have openly rejected Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. This has buttressed an ethno-national current of exclusionary rhetoric and measures against Israel's Arab citizens, which started after Rabin's assassination. Given the ethno-national interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as rooted in a broader Israeli-Arab conflict and considering the attractiveness of this exclusionary stance among many voters, particularly from the Mizrahi public, this should come as no surprise.

This trend would continue during Netanyahu's reign, as occasional expressions of Arab citizens' support for the Palestinian cause and their representatives' persistently controversial comments and actions have been utilized by ethno-nationalists in order to justify their hawkish views against Israeli-Arabs. For instance, following member of Knesset (MK) Hanin Zoabi's participation in the Marmara flotilla[10] to the besieged Gaza Strip, MK Miri Regev of the Likud party stepped up to the Knesset podium and attacked Zoabi in Arabic: "Go to Gaza, you traitor" (Ravid 2010). Another example is an amendment approved by Israeli Cabinet ministers requiring non-Jews wishing to become Israeli citizens to pledge their loyalty to Israel as a Jewish and democratic State (Lis 2010). Thus, using harsh delegitimizing discourse and proposed exclusionary legislation, ethno-nationalist actors have reinforced suspicion towards Israel's Arab citizens and nurtured the view of an intimate connection between the two Arab publics on the two sides of the green line (Depietro and Dodd 2012).

The left-center bloc typically dissents from the attack and marginalization of the Arab public. Even if its actors may not agree with the controversial comments and actions of Arab representatives, these parties dedicate far less time and energy to denunciation and show greater tolerance. Also, the left-center bloc is bound to rely on the Arabs' parliamentary support in order to pass any future agreement between the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Moreover, the criticisms of Israeli policy by the left-wing party Meretz, while consistent with the attitude of more moderate liberals, has paid increased attention to

10 On May 31st, 2010, six ships left Cyprus, sailing under Turkish flags with the intention of breaking the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, carrying humanitarian aid and construction material. The Israeli military sought to take over the ships in international waters and prevent them from reaching their destination. While attempting to take over the lead ship "MV Mavi Marmara", Israeli soldiers encountered violent resistance and wound up shooting eight Turkish citizens and one America-Turkish citizen dead. The event caused a severe diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Israel (The New York Times 2010).

the injustice of Israeli occupation, employing rhetorical features akin to those used by the Arab factions.

On the other hand, the left-center bloc actors have been highly critical of what they perceive as the privileged position enjoyed by Jewish religious elements in Israel, whether settlers or *haredim* (Ashkenazi and Mizrahi). These publics, liberals say, have managed to force the government's hand to succumb to their demands: the settlers have gained much political and financial aid in their efforts of further settlement of the West Bank and have subordinated Israeli policy to their interests of settlement and annexation; the *haredim* have been exempt from military service and enjoy considerable financial benefits to support their religious institutions and secluded way of life and exert coercive religious measures in the public sphere.

While on the right, the particular religious doctrine or devoutness of the different actors (*haredi*, religious Zionist or traditional centrist) and hence, their ensuing political agenda, may vary considerably, the liberal actors are fairly uniform in their ambitions, wishing to eliminate the role of religion in Israeli political and public life and to see these publics brought into line with the rest of Israeli society (Neuberger 2001, 82-83).

Different liberal actors, however, will grant this aspect varying degrees of attention. Here too, Meretz but also Hadash, have been the most forceful opponents of religious forces and of expressions of religious coercion, while other liberal actors have granted this issue secondary attention (Ibid. 83).

In the following subchapter, I will analyze the three elections systems in which Netanyahu triumphed. This will then lead to my final chapter, in which I will illustrate the role of the Mizrahi public in sustaining the right-wing rule in light of the process of the left-wing's delegitimization.

Netanyahu's Tenure – Winning Three Elections

The 2009 Elections

As Livni came to replace the resigned Olmert, Shas's Eli Yishai demanded increased state benefits for large families and the guarantee that Jerusalem will remain united under Israeli rule if any future agreement with the Palestinians were to be signed. In retrospect, it seems that a deal had already been struck between the Likud and Shas to prevent the emergence of a Livni-led government (Marcus 2009, 58; O'Loughlin 2008). So it happened that following the subsequent elections, Netanyahu gained a larger number of

supporting mandates to put together a government, despite Livni's Kadima being the bigger party (Ibid, 64).

Netanyahu sought an unorthodox alliance with the moderate liberal Ehud Barak's Avoda (Ibid.). Alongside this intrinsically left-wing actor, Netanyahu signed other coalition agreements with HaBayit HaYehudi (‘The Jewish Home’, formerly HaMafdal - 3 seats), representing Gush Emunim and the religious Zionist public, and with his long-standing allies, the *haredi* factions: Mizrahi Shas (11 seats) and Ashkenazi Yahadut HaTora (5 seats) (Marcus 2009).

Another ethno-national actor added to Netanyahu's coalition was Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beitenu ('Israel is our home'), whose views on issues of national security as a whole, and on the Palestinian issue, in particular, often corresponded with those of Netanyahu. Liberman, an immigrant from the former USSR relying heavily on the "Russian" vote had branched out of the Likud in 1998, protesting Netanyahu's willingness to proceed according to the guidelines of the Oslo agreements. While doing so, he managed to recruit valuable members from the Russia-sectarian party Yisrael BeAliya, to found Yisrael Beitenu as a right-wing party (Mazin 2006, 12). In 2004, Liberman broke his tentative alliance with HaIhud Leumi and declared Yisrael Beitenu's transformation from an ‘all-Israeli right-wing party, most of whose electorate was coincidentally Russian-speaking’ to a ‘Russian party with an Israeli accent’ (Khanin 2010, 60-61). The party grew from 4 seats in 1999 to 11 seats in 2005, and finally to 15 seats in the debated 2009 elections (Ibid. 63). This growth demonstrated the "Russian" public's desire to take a stance on both Israel's national concerns while also tending to its own sectarian interests (Ibid, 68). Also capitalizing on the Russian vote in the 2009 elections, were Kadima, with Marina Solodkin as its "Russian" representative and the Likud with its ‘Russian wing’, represented by Ze'ev Elkin, Yuli Edelstein, and Natan Sharansky.

Remaining in the opposition were the left-center actors Livni's Kadima (28 seats), Meretz (3 seats) and the Arab factions and Hadash (11 seats), alongside HaIhud HaLeumi (4 seats) – an ultra-nationalist right-wing actor.

The 2013 Elections

After failure to pass the 2013 fiscal budget, elections were called in October 2012. Prior to the elections, Netanyahu and Liberman decided to join hands and run in a single list – HaLikud-Beitenu. Predicted to win 45 seats in the first polls, HaLikud-Beitenu wound up obtaining only 31 seats (Peters 2013, 318). While it did manage to garner

considerable "Russian" support, it lost votes to two popular emerging actors, considerably empowered by the currents of the Israeli public's dissatisfaction with the rising cost of living and in particular, the rising housing prices expressed in the mass protests of summer 2011. These two actors were to have a significant influence on the coalition negotiations: The first, Yair Lapid, a renowned and highly-consensual Israeli journalist, established a new center party Yesh Atid ('There is a Future'). The party's campaign targeted the Israel middle-class that was, in Lapid's words, "collapsing under the burden" of taxation and military service, while other sectors, particularly focusing on the *haredim,* enjoyed undeserved privileges like financial benefits and exemption from military service. Its campaign further focused on issues of education, aid to small businesses, and the reform of the political system (Peters 2013, 320). The party won an astounding 19 seats, drawing its lion's share of votes from the rapidly diminishing Kadima, which now, under the leadership of Shaul Mofaz, obtained only two seats compared to Livni's 28 in the 2009 elections.

The second actor was Naftali Bennet, the new head of HaBayit HaYehudi, a self-made start-up millionaire and a veteran of the elite Sayeret Matkal military unit. Bennet combined endorsement of economic entrepreneurship, innovation, and social justice, along with traditional Jewish values and hard-line nationalistic attitudes on the Palestinian issue (Peters 2013, 319). Under Bennet's rejuvenated leadership and after having absorbed HaIhud HaLeumi, HaBait HaYehudi now obtained 15 seats in the Knesset, compared to its previous 3 in the 2009 elections. This rise was based primarily on the religious Zionist vote, but also on the Mizrahi vote, both primarily derived from former HaLikud-Beitenu supporters.

HaLikud-Beitenu with its 31 seats now needed at least four additional partners to form a coalition (Ibid., 318-319). Prior to the elections, Shas applauded the merger HaLikud-Beitenu as revealing the true nature of Netanyahu's Likud. Deri declared: "from a party of the people HaLikud-Beitenu has turned into an arrogant and flamboyant party that represents Russians and whites… this is a wake-up called to all the Sephardim". The party launched its campaign titled "the Jewish soul", posing as the future gate-keeper of the Jewish religion in the coalition (Levy 2013, 205).

Lapid and Bennet strengthened their bargaining position by agreeing that only together would they enter Netanyahu's coalition. Lapid, who campaigned harshly against the *haredi* factions, was set on preventing them from being part of the new coalition. Thus, Netanyahu was forced to neglect his long-standing allies, the *haredim*, in order to gain the support of Lapid and Bennet (Peter 2013, 321-322).

Due to this shift in focal points towards socio-economic issues and the principle of an equal sharing of the burden (alongside the usual attention given to the Iranian issue), these elections saw the striking absence of the Palestinian issue. Lapid, who was presumed to be a central actor in favor of a two-state solution, made only vague pronouncements on the need of reinitiating negotiations (Peters 2013, 320-321). Shelly Yachimovich, the new Avoda (15 seats) leader, also neglected the Palestinian issue, as she focused on advocating the party's socio-democratic agenda and speaking of the need to tend to the lower strata of Israeli society. Tzipi Livni, who remained dedicated to the Palestinian issue, failed in her attempt to unite Lapid and Yechimovitz into a single list in order to defeat Netanyahu, founded *HaTnua* ('The movement') obtaining only 6 seats.

As the election results were in, Yachimovich's Avoda and Livni's HaTnua called on Lapid to join their effort of forming a bloc of left-center factions, together with the Arab factions, that would block Netanyahu's ability to form a coalition. Lapid rejected this idea, declaring that he would not collaborate with Hanin Zoabi, the controversial Arab MK, and urged Yachimovich and Livni to join him in Netanyahu's coalition in order to prevent a right-*haredi* government (Mendel 2013; Zitun and Brut 2013).

Lapid's alignment with Bennet's ethno-nationalist HaBayit HaYehudi proved that he was less concerned about the Palestinian issue than others in the left-center bloc may have hoped. He also, for the time being, seemed less vehemently opposed to Netanyahu.

Yachimovich would turn down the idea of joining the coalition, speaking of the need to replace Netanyahu, not join him. Livni, on the other hand, like Barak before her, joined Netanyahu's coalition as a liberal among ethno-nationalist actors and the more centrist Yair Lapid, assuming the position of Israel's head of the negotiations team on the Palestinian issue.

In the opposition now remained: Meretz (6 seats), the long-standing objector to Israel occupation and the only opposition actor to emphasize the urging imperative of the two-state solution; Shelly Yachimovich's Avoda that would pay added attention to socio-economic issues; the *haredim* (18 seats) and the Arab factions (11 seats).

Netanyahu's alliance with Lapid and Livni, however, would be short-lived, as would his negligence of his long-standing political allies, the *haredim*. In December 2014, less than two years after the last elections, Netanyahu would dissolve his government, firing Lapid and Livni after the two had voiced their criticism against his various policies (Lis 2014).

The 2015 Elections

A television article by Israeli journalist Amit Segal reveals the strategy that led Netanyahu to his third straight victory in the 2015 elections. Initial polls granted 24 seats to HaMahane HaTzioni (Zionist Union), a merger founded upon a leadership rotation agreement between Isaac Herzog's Avoda and Tzipi Livni's HaTnua, aimed at replacing Netanyahu. Likud in this poll was to receive 20 seats with Bennet's HaBayit HaYehudi trailing by only two seats (Segal 2016). The polls' projection, however, still saw an advantage to the right bloc over the left-center bloc (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Moshe Kachlon, a moderate Likud dropout who, prior to the elections, founded a new party with a focus on socio-economic issues, would have likely chosen to respect the voting majority and to grant his mandate support to the biggest party. Thus, had Netanyahu emerged as the second biggest party after HaMahane HaTzioni, this could have quite possibly ended in a left-center government.

While Netanyahu won the 2013 elections in a landslide, the Likud-Beitenu merger proved to have been a mistake, and the two parties parted ways before the 2015 elections. Three reasons might explain the merger's poor results: the first was Netanyahu's disadvantage on socio-economic issues vis-à-vis the new emerging actors, Lapid and Bennet. Accordingly, this issue was now highly marginalized in Netanyahu's campaign, which rather gave ample predominance to the issue of Iranian nuclear designs (Ibid.). The second has to do with one considerable difference between the two leaders. While Liberman has taken an aggressive stance against religious coercion and the *haredi* factions, Netanyahu, who was interested in maintaining an image of a leader who values Israel's religious identity and cultural heritage, catered to religious forces in order to gain their support. In fact, the representatives of the Likud "Russian"-wing, Elkin and Edelstein, are both *mesortiim* (traditional) wearing a *yamaka*. In joining hands with Liberman, this image was now undoubtedly impaired.

The third reason, feeding off the previous two, was the fact that the unification of the parties seemed to guarantee an overwhelming victory for Netanyahu, according to initial polls. This allowed potential Likud voters to vote for other political actors whose socio-economic or religious tone they may have found more appealing, without fearing that the right-wing would lose its ruling position.

Surely, prior to the 2015 elections, notwithstanding growing dissatisfaction with Netanyahu's rule, focus group studies conducted by the Likud's election headquarters found that if a close race between Netanyahu and HaMahane HaTzioni were to unfold, many would vote for Netanyahu, preferring him over a left-wing government under Herzog and Livni (Ibid.).

Netanyahu's strategic headquarters created a direct communication channel through phone and text-messaging with a million of his potential Likud voters through segmentation of towns and neighborhoods. Four days prior to elections, as the polls were indicating that Netanyahu was on his way to a defeat, a voice message was then sent to a half a million potential Likud voters carrying the following message: "Hello, this is MK Miri Regev, I turn to you because the Likud might lose its rule to the left. The left, which has called us "chah-chahim" in the past and today calls us primitive amulet-kissers who prostrate themselves on the graves of saints [quoting the words of left-wing painter and writer Yair Garbuz[11]]. The condescending and arrogant Buji [Herzog] and Tzipi, will do all they can to continue to humiliate the people of the periphery and mock us, the *mesortiim*. Don't betray the Likud!". Another voice message was delivered to another half million potential voters: "Hello, this is Benny Begin [Likud MK and Menachem Begin's son]. I call on you to vote as I do - Mahal [the acronym used by Likud on the ballot slip] and more Mahal and more Mahal!" (Segal 2016).

While Segal does not state so, it seems highly likely that these two messages were aimed at different audiences. The latter voice message, recorded by Benny Begin, could appeal to any Likud voter. The former voice message, recorded by the iconic Mizrahi MK Miri Regev, carried an ethnically specific message and was undoubtedly aimed, first and foremost, at the Mizrahi public.

Following the dispatching of these messages, while mainstream media polls still showed a lead for HaMahane HaTzioni, Likud interior polls identified a three seat lead for Netanyahu. Nevertheless, Netanyahu's campaign headquarters decided to maintain the image of an imminent loss. This decision was based on the preceding realization that right-wing voters would be more inclined to vote for the Likud had they thought that the left-wing was about to emerge as the winner (Ibid.).

The evening before elections, Livni gave up her rotation premiership, thus leaving HaMahane HaTzioni's leadership to Herzog. This move, Shaviv says, closed the gap between the parties. On the day of elections, the Likud text-messaging scheme was launched, capitalizing on anti-Arab sentiment and fear of the growing strength of the Joint List[12]. One text message read "The Arab voting percentage is three times higher than

11 Yair Garbuz uttered these words in a left-wing convention prior to the elections, while speaking against what he termed - a growing extremism and ignorance, which has been corrupting Israeli society. While Garbuz stated that his speech had no particular ethnic designation, and indeed it had a far deeper essence than the one ultimately ascribed to it, it was reduced to and is remembered by these words and was termed by right-wingers - the second *chah-chahim* speech (Newman 2015).

average"; a second declared, "Herzog said he'll appoint an Arab minister" and a third "Hamas calls upon Israeli Arabs to go vote" (Segal 2016).

On mid-election-day, Netanyahu delivered the following message in a video uploaded onto his facebook page: "The right-wing rule is in danger. The Arab voters are moving in large number to the ballots. Left-wing organizations are bringing them in buses... Go to the ballots, bring friends and family and together we will close the gap between us and the Avoda. And with your help and with the help of God, we will found a national government that will secure the Israeli state" (Netanyahu 2015).

With this state of emergency projected by Netanyahu's election headquarters, the Likud managed to secure a staggering 30 seats, as opposed to its previous 31 when the Likud-Beitenu merger was in effect. This impressive achievement came at the expense of several parties: Bennet who finished with only 8 seats as opposed to his previous 15 lost both Mizrahi and settler votes; Deri's Shas, which finished with 7 seats as opposed to its previous 11, lost Mizrahi votes; and Liberman's decline to only 6 seats from his previous 15 in the 2009 elections, indicating the disintegration of the Russian vote (Miller 2015).

In Netanyahu's first two terms since his return to power, neither coalition nor opposition was coherently defined along the lines of one citizenship discourse. Rather, Netanyahu sought alliances with moderate liberal actors and, in the process, neglected other traditional allies. Despite much skepticism about his true intentions about the peace process, initially certain moderate liberals, such as Livni and Barak, gave Netanyahu the benefit of the doubt and were willing to join his coalition in order to counter more radical right-wingers in his coalition. The presence of these moderate actors in his coalition also helped Netanyahu gain credentials as a potentially peace-seeking leader.

However, this would change after his winning of a third straight election in March of 2015, before which Netanyahu had reversed his official stance on the Palestinian issue, saying that the two-state solution was no longer relevant (Ravid 2015). After such a proclamation and after having made no progress towards a resolution in his previous terms, Netanyahu was seen by left-center liberal as intrinsically opposed to peace more than ever before. Therefore, he was now bound to rely on his natural right-wing alliances and composed an extremely narrow 61 seat ethno-nationalist government with Habayit HaYeuhudi (8), Arie Deri's Shas (7), and Yahadut HaTora (6).

Netanyahu also added the moderate center-rightist Kulanu, with 10 seats led by Kachlon, a Mizrahi MK orientated towards a socio-economic agenda who became a viable

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12 Due to the raising of the electoral threshold in 2014, the four Arab factions united into a single list, which emerged as the third largest in the 2015 elections.

contender based on his ability to reform Israel's cellular market, bringing a drastic drop in prices. Kachlon campaigned under the slogan "Black in the Middle", referencing his own Mizrahi leadership of a political party (Azulay 2014).

In 2014, Liberman, reaffirming Netanyahu's position, reiterated his previously stated stance by which Israel would not agree to limit settlement expansion while expressing the willingness to evacuate settlements as part of an end resolution (Al-Araby al-Jadeed 2014; Ronen 2014). This alignment of attitude, however, should be considered in the context of the two leaders' rivalry, as Liberman has sought to establish himself as an alternative to Netanyahu. Setting aside their different approach on issues of religion and state, Liberman has also exercised a particularly hard approach against Israel's Arab citizens, overtaking Netanyahu on the right. Thus, he has frequently called for Umm al-Fahem, the West-Bank adjacent Israeli-Arab town, to be handed over to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and contested the loyalty of Israel's Arab citizens (DePietro and Dodd 2012, 9; The Times of Israel 2015a; Sherwood 2010).

Yet Netanyahu's Likud, on the whole, can hardly be considered to be less hawkish. Since the 2009 elections, veteran Likud members of the old generation, who have been insistent on Israel's democratic value have been driven out to make room for more populist extremist politicians (Verter 2016; Peters 2013). For Instance, Dan Meridor and Michael Eitan, two cabinet members who, in 2010, opposed the decision to require non-Jews to pledge their loyalty to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in order to become citizens, found themselves obtaining unrealistic runner-up slots prior to the 2013 elections. Likud MKs, like the aforementioned Miri Regev and many others, would prove no less hawkish in their anti-Arab stance than Liberman himself (DePietro and Dodd 2012). Netanyahu on the other hand, to conserve a moderate image, has avoided being at the forefront of this exclusionary trend. Nonetheless, as in his election-day video, he has made resonating contributions to it through ad-hoc and strategic pronouncements.

The rise of Kachlon and Liberman's decline allowed Netanyahu to send the latter into the opposition together with Herzog-Livni's HaMahane HaTzioni (24), the Joint (Arab) list (13), Lapid's Yesh Atid (11) and Meretz (5). These elections results clearly showed that the predominance of socio-economic issues in Israeli politics was short-lived and that the divisive tone between right-wing and left-center bloc reigned supreme.

The next and final chapter shows how the evolution of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi relations has influenced Israeli policy making on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, arguing that the socio-political orientation of the aforementioned Israeli-Mizrahi identity has been instrumental in bringing Netanyahu to power and sustaining his rule.

3. The "Ethnic-Split" and Generated Practices

As elaborated in the first chapter of this paper, the Mizrahi public's negative attitudes towards the Arab public and their ethno-nationalist orientation have generated two interlinked sets of practices: First, they have guided the voting tendencies of individuals belonging to the aforementioned Israeli-Mizrahi identity. Second, they have set in motion a process of delegitimization of liberal actors by right-wingers. These liberal actors have also been linked to secular elitist Ashkenazi hegemony. In doing so, this second set of practices has alienated the liberal discourse from Mizrahi voters and explains the persistence of the first set of practices – their tendency to vote for right-wing parties. This chapter will demonstrate the manifestation of these two sets of practices.

Mizrahi Voting

Socio-economically, the top one-third of the Mizrahi public have been more or less integrated into Israeli society. Their political orientation and electoral behavior have been highly indistinguishable from that of the secular Ashkenazi public (Peled 2006, 117). To be sure, not all of these would commonly be referred to as *mishtaknezim*. Rather, it is those who have adopted Ashkenazi-like manners, speech, and behavior and have typically adopted elements of the liberal discourse at the expense of the traditional backgrounds from which their parents have come, who would be "accused" of having undergone such transformation. While the root of this slang term cannot be traced, it points to the non-normative position of these Mizrahi Jews among their former ingroup. Therefore, their political orientation, typically in favor of left-wing parties, does not serve to guide the views of the great mass of the Mizrahi public – those who I have designated as hold an Israeli-Mizrahi identity.

Throughout the 1990's, the middle one-third of the Mizrahi public has typically been composed of Likud voters. The lowest one-third consisted primarily of Shas voters. In 2003, following the Oslo process during Barak's term, many Shas voters went back to voting for Sharon's Likud that won in a landslide with 38 seats, with the Avoda winning only 19 seats (Peled 2006, 118-119). As Sharon left the Likud to found Kadima, he drew a large portion of these voters with him. By the end of Olmert's term, however, with yet another impasse to negotiations, Kadima, now headed by Livni, lost most of this support base.

To analyze the Mizrahi vote throughout the three debated election systems I will observe the distribution of votes in the ballots of two DT's established in the 1950's, composed primarily of Mizrahi Jews of the lower socio-economic strata of Israeli society: Kiryat Malachi and Yeruham.

Gil Levy notes that while Shas contributed to the normalization of Mizrahi representation, it was simultaneously a part of the neo-liberal policy that promoted a politics of identity and the nurturing of cliental relations with its voters. As Shas enhanced its *haredi* tendencies, the party weakened its influence over the whole of the Mizrahi public (Levy 2013, 203). Indeed, as the subsequent data suggests, the vote of the Mizrahi public of lower socio-economic means would become prone to some diversification.

Kiryat Malachi

2009	26.3% Likud	17% Shas	14.2% HaIhud HaLeumi	12.8% Kadima	9.3% Yisrael Beitenu	9.3% HaBayit HaYehudi.
2013	28% Likud-Beitenu	23% Shas	16% HaBayit HaYehudi	10% Otzma LeYisrael[13]	5% Avoda	4% Yahadut HaTora
2015	40.9% Likud	15.9% Yahad[14]	13.7% Shas	8.7% Kulanu	7% HaBayit HaYehudi	5.6% HaMahane HaTzioni

Yeruham

2009	22.6% Likud	21.8% HaBayit HaYehudi	17.5% Shas	13.3% Kadima	9% Yisrael Beitenu	3.2% Ihud Leumi
2013	25% Likud-Beitenu	19% Shas	16% HaBayit HaYehudi	10% Yahadut Hatora	6% Yesh Atid	6% Avoda
2015	32.6% Likud	15% Shas	11% HaBayit Hayehudi	8.1% HaMahane HaTzioni	8% Kulanu	7.7% Yisrael Beitenu

(Central Elections Committee to the 18th, 19th and 20th Knesset, 2016)

Bourdieu notes that practices within a group are, to various extents, objectively coordinated because they are aimed at achieving similar or identical objective necessities

13 A new ultra-national faction which failed to pass the voting threshold

14 A newly founded party headed by Eli Yishai who left Shas after Arie Deri had reclaimed the party's leading seat.

(Bourdieu 1977, 80). Concomitantly, while the actors drawing support among these Mizrahi voters may show considerably variant approaches on the two divisive issues, they are overwhelmingly positioned on the ethno-national spectrum of Israeli citizenship discourse. In 2009, the only party not identified as right-wing which managed to garner any considerable support among these two DT's was Kadima, which still enjoyed Sharon's lingering legacy. By 2013 Kadima would diminish and this right-wing pattern of voting even hardened. In the 2015 elections, this line persisted, with moderate Likud retiree of Mizrahi origin Moshe Kachlon gaining some support in both DT's and with some support for HaMahane HaTzioni in Yeruham. If so, voters in both DT's can be said to rarely cross over to the Liberal spectrum of parties.

What is also apparent from the preceding data, is the success of the tactics used by Netanyahu in the 2015 elections, taking the posture of imminent loss. This success is indicated by the rise of votes for the Likud in both DTs between the 2013 and 2015 elections - a rise that came in spite of the breaking of the Likud-Beitenu merger, which would generally have been expected to weaken the Likud.

In an interview in Haaretz, Ran Cohen denotes the paradoxical political practice of Mizrahi Jews, as they continue to vote for a neo-liberal regime that perpetuates their poverty and general inequality)Karpel 2016). Admittedly, it would seem plausible that, granted their enduring socio-economic marginalization under Netanyahu's right-wing government, enough Mizrahi Jews would take a chance on voting for the social-democratic economic agenda of certain left-wing parties. In doing so, they could tilt the scale in favor of the left-wing camp and yield a considerable change in Israeli policy regarding the Palestinian issue.

As Bourdieu notes, a particular form of practice may incur negative sanctions when it strays from the boundaries of the environment with which it is confronted (Bourdieu 1995, 78). Accordingly, as the image of the left-wing came to be defamed and negatively labeled, carrying a left-wing political orientation would come to incur such negative sanctions in an ethno-nationalist Israeli-Mizrahi social environment.

Indeed, the persisting ethno-national Mizrahi voting pattern and its successful mobilization by Netanyahu in the 2015 elections in spite of continued socio-economic marginalization, underline just how estranged the Israeli left-wing has become from this public. The following subchapter will illustrate the process which has led the left-wing to this position and elaborate on the negative image which has been attributed to it.

Delegitimization of the Left-Wing and its Association with Secular Elitist Ashkenazi Hegemony

The second set of practices generated by the aforementioned *generative schemes* has been carried out by right-wing actors. As right-wing parties have sought to appeal to voters, particularly of the aforementioned Israeli-Mizrahi identity, against the background of failed reconciliation attempts and various instances of escalated violence, their anti-Arab attitudes hardened. Rather than conceding to the right-wing assertion that the Palestinian side is the obstacle for peace, liberal actors have challenged the sincerity of Netanyahu's intentions, while continuing to urge Israeli initiative towards a resolution. This, in turn, set in motion a process through which actors affiliated with the liberal discourse of Israeli citizenship have come under delegitimization by right-wingers.

The starting point of the process of the left-wing's delegitimization can be traced to the demonstrations against the Oslo agreements and the Avoda leadership, which preceded Rabin's assassination. Netanyahu had taken a leading part in this endeavor. A prime example can be found in his infamous quote of 1997 in which he told Rabbi Yitzchak Kadouri that "the left-wing has forgotten what it means to be Jewish" (JTA 1997). Since then, other right-wing actors have taken part in this endeavor, which has been extended to various other left-wing targets including politicians and political factions, "radical left" NGO's, the Supreme Court, media tools and figures and other culture icons.

This process is worthy of a comprehensive discourse analysis, tracing the origin and development of the terminology used to discredit these various actors and could stand on its own as the focal point of a dissertation. This chapter merely aims at exemplifying this process. Therefore, I bring here primarily recently occurring examples that should be seen as the products of a long and ongoing process.

The left-wing's delegitimization for this Mizrahi public, holding an Israeli-Mizrahi identity, is twofold: one, portraying the left-center bloc as straying from commonly accepted Israeli-Jewish values and solidarity, as prescribed by an ethno-national conception of citizenship; second, linking the left-center bloc to secular Ashkenazi hegemonic elitism and in so doing, culturally alienating it from the Mizrahi public. Both of these aspects will be accounted for in this subchapter.

A first prominent target of delegitimization is various NGOs concerned with ending the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and with the protection of Palestinian human rights. These are the same organizations who were supposedly driving the Arabs to ballots in buses, as Netanyahu falsely claimed on the 2015 election-day.

The IDF being a conscription army, is a widely consensual symbol in Israeli society. Since a large portion of these human-rights organizations' activity revolves around criticism of military actions and practices, they have occupied a marginal position in Israeli society. As such, these so-called radical-left NGO's have had to be financially reliant on donors exterior to Israel and have accordingly been active in internationally propagating the image of the Israeli occupation as an injustice. These organizations, therefore are seen by many Israelis as tarnishing Israel's image in the world and undermining the righteous efforts of the IDF to defend the citizens of Israel.

During Netanyahu's second and third terms, a legislation labeled "The NGO Law" was being promoted by members of his coalition. Since the law came into the public eye in July 2013, various clauses have been debated, initially aiming at restricting their foreign funding. Bennet then called it "the anti-Israeli NGO law" (Nachmias 2013b). In July of 2016, the finalized version passed the vote in the second and third readings in the Israeli Knesset, thereby making it an official Israeli law. It entailed that an NGO whose majority of funding originates from foreign states must disclose this information to the Israeli Corporations Authority and to markedly denote this in any advertisement or petitioning to a public representative. This criterion applies first and foremost to these so-called radical-left NGOs. Coalition members have endorsed the law on the ground that it will increase transparency regarding the involvement of other governments in Israel's domestic affairs. On the other hand, opposition members, such as Livni and Zehava Galon, head of Meretz, have called it political persecution of organizations who challenge the government's policy (Shalev 2016).

These NGO's would come under particularly heavy delegitimization at times of exacerbated violence. An instance of this is a social media campaign titled HaShtulim (The 'Moles'), which was launched in the midst of a recent terror wave in Israel during which many sporadic lone-wolf stabbing attacks were carried out by Palestinians against Israeli citizens and soldiers. The video was launched by Im Tirtzu (If you will [it is not a dream]), a right-wing social movement and begins with the image of a man with an Arab appearance who pulls out a knife in broad daylight on an Israeli street and stabs the camera filming the video (i.e., the viewer). The frame breaks and switches over to an image of Yishai Menuhin, a human-rights activist of Amnesty International, as a narrator reads: "Before the next terrorist stabs you, he already knows that Yishai Menuhin, a mole operated by the Netherlands, will help defend him from interrogation by the Shit Bet. The video proceeds to tarnish Avner Gvaryahu, Sigi Ben-Ari and Hagai El-Ad, three other

prominent human-rights activists, in the same fashion. The narrator then says: "Hagai, Yishai, Avner, and Sigi are Israelis. They live here with us and they are moles. When we fight terrorism, they fight us. The Moles law will outlaw them – Sign it!'" (Pulwer 2016).

The Moles Law was a draconian proposed legislation brought forth by Yoav Kish, a Likud MK, meant to single out NGOs that rely on foreign funding as “moles” operating on behalf of the supporting country. It would entail the prohibition of cooperation between the NGOs and government ministries and the IDF and would also allow for the Israeli Registrar of NGOs to submit requests to the Israeli court for dissolving them if their actions were seen to include hostile activity against Israel. Various other sanctions were listed. The law was termed unconstitutional by several public judicial advisers and it is doubtful if Kish himself had any real expectations that it would be seriously contemplated. Left-wing actors forcefully denounced the organization and MKs of Meretz sent an urgent letter to Israel's Attorney General demanding that he instructs the opening of an investigation for incitement. Hardly any right-wing politicians bothered commenting against the video (Ibid.; Azulay 2016).

Public figures who have voiced their criticism and concern regarding the policy of Israel's right-wing government and the social trends led by it have also come under fierce denunciation and delegitimization. One example is Israeli comedian and culture icon, Orna Banai, who during the time of the 2014 Gaza War, gave an interview to a Tel-Aviv local newspaper, criticizing the nature of the Israeli public debate and the incitement characterizing it. She blamed Israel's leadership for being its instigator, expressed sympathy for the victims on both sides and wished for peace and quiet. The title of the article when published, as if meant to evoke resentment, read "I am ashamed that this is my people" (Arad 2014).

The following weekend, a facebook page was launched bearing the title (in Hebrew) "Orna Banai and anti-Israel artists to Gaza". This was only the tip of the iceberg of an amplified public debate which erupted leading to many attacks on Banai, ultimately resulting in the termination of her contract as the promotional model for an Israeli cruise line company, which succumbed to public opinion (Ibid.).

Finally, the Supreme Court of Israel, a non-majoritarian institution, is another central example of an all-in-all liberal actor which was targeted for delegitimization. At the end of the 1967 war, it was decided to allow the Palestinian inhabitants in the occupied territories to petition to the Israeli Supreme Court (Yehuda 2015). As the highest judicial authority in the occupied territories, the Israeli Supreme Court has been required to adjudicate on a range of controversial issues such as Israeli settlement, administrative

detention, and Shin Bet interrogation practices. Often, its verdicts would contradict the wishes of certain ethno-nationalist actors, making the Supreme Court a prime target of criticism (Alexandrowicz 2011).

In November 2011, a law was brought to first reading before the Knesset, aimed at canceling the restraint by which a candidate for Supreme Court President must have at least three remaining years prior to appointment. This law, which would come to be referred to as "Grunis Law", was aimed at allowing for the appointment of Asher Grunis (Azulay 2011), a conservative judge opposed to the judicial activism paradigm advocated by Aharon Barak following the 1992 constitutional revolution.

In the debate which preceded the second and third readings, after which the law ultimately passed, Livni criticized the law for being personally tailored and designated to "take-over" the Supreme Court. Ilan Gilon of Meretz claimed that Yaakov Katz, who drafted the law, aimed at "establishing an illegal outpost in the last fort guarding [Israeli] democracy". Katz, on the other hand, said: "Today, the Supreme Court has begun to return to the people" (Nahmias 2012).

Several days later an additional law was brought before the Knesset aimed at altering the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee, so as to grant the coalition members of the legislature greater power in the selection process of judges (Verter and Zarchin 2011). Likud's Yariv Levin provoked the opposition with the following words: "we want to fundamentally change the Supreme Court and rid it of the radical leftist elite that controls it, and return it to the people" (Lis 2011).

As of the time of writing, due to public pressure and opposition within the Knesset, various versions of the law have been contemplated but none has yet been passed (Nachmias 2013a; Peuterkovsky 2015). The public debate which has surrounded this controversial proposed legislation, however, has no doubt labeled the Supreme Court as a bias partner of the liberal camp and challenged its legitimacy.

In the debate which preceded these laws' first readings in the Knesset, a clear link was drawn between the court's supposed liberal agenda and Ashkenazi hegemony. Then minister of infrastructure, Uzi Landau, commented: "There is no pluralism among the judges of the supreme court, but rather Ashkenazi elitism. It is leftist, political, detached from Judaism and sometimes, reality, and allows itself to infiltrate into fields outside of its jurisdiction". Yaakov Katz, who drafted the law, joined in saying that "there are diverse groups of the people of Israel who are bothered by the fact that 12 out of 13 of the Supreme Court judges are Ashkenazi and the 13th, a Christian" (Azulay 2011).

In January 2012, Likud's Limor Livnat, then minister of Culture and Sports, called upon Tzavta Theatre to revoke the participation in a play of Mohammad Bakri, who had

directed the controversial film "Jenin, Jenin". The film, documenting the reality in Jenin's refugee camp following Israeli Operation Defensive Shield, was disqualified from screening by the ministry in 2003 but was ultimately permitted due to the Supreme Court's verdict (Balas 2012).

Livnat's successor, Miri Regev, also from Netanyahu's Likud, has built on this interventionist approach and has been far more vocal in doing so. Since heading the ministry, Regev has often declared her intention to regulate and censor artistic discourse. In January she began working to promote a law that would allow the ministry to withhold funding from cultural institutions not loyal to the state and its symbols (Griffiths 2016).

Israel's Ashkenazi-dominated cultural products - poetry, literature, cinema, and theater - often evoke moral questions concerning Israeli occupation and present the darker side of this reality without sparing self-criticism. Thus, many artists and cultural icons alongside liberal opposition members, have risen to oppose this new policy led by Regev, criticizing her for her attack on "freedom of speech" (Ibid.).

Concomitant to this contestation of the existing liberal discursive hegemony in cultural fields, Regev, Mizrahi in origin, has also infused her waged "culture war", as it has been called, with an amplified ethnic message, posing as the champion of Mizrahi culture's resurgence. Thus, for instance, Regev announced that she would change the character of the IDF radio station, Galey Tzahal, and implement more Israeli songs with an emphasis on Mizrahi music (Boker 2016). She also, arguably in a manner unfitting for a public representative, published a video in which she expressed her excitement at the forthcoming premiere of a new music talent reality show led by Eyal Golan, a popular Mizrahi singer (Dror 2016). In an interview she granted to Yisrael Hayom, the Netanyahu-supporting daily, Regev said: "my surroundings will not dictate who I am. I never read Chekhov, almost never visited the theater as a child, I listened to Joe Amar and Sephardic songs and I am no less cultural than all Western culture consumers" (Lanski 2015).

Against the background of the "culture war" Israeli film critics of Galey Tzahal, Gidi Orsher, wrote a post on his facebook page designated to "the whiners from the East". One of the several stereotypical insults in this post read: "Next time you have a heart attack, skip catheterization and use your grandmother’s remedy of putting a chicken leg on your head instead". When a commenter called his post racist, Orsher replied that it is against racism and against the few whiners from the Mizrahi spectrum who exploit Mizrahi identity for political gains. He emphasized that he himself is from a mixed family and that he says nothing about the Mizrahi public – certainly nowhere near what the

"whiners from the East" allow themselves to say about the Ashkenazi public. Despite his intention to nuance his message, so as to designate it to those seen by him as cynically utilizing Mizrahi identity to further their political agenda, rather than to the Mizrahi public as a whole, this pronouncement was widely labelled racist. Regev retaliated, calling on the chief of the military radio station to dismiss Orsher immediately, and saying that he has shown how deeply rooted is the patronization among "culture figures". Orsher was suspended and later, fired from his position at the state-funded radio station (Stern et al. 2016; Barak 2016).

As noted earlier, Regev was also the one who recorded the voice message designated to Mizrahi constituency on behalf of the Likud, associating Livni and Herzog with Yair Garbuz's supposedly ethnically condescending speech. Regev has been the flag-bearer of Mizrahi representation within the Likud party, nurturing an image of the party's *amamiyut* - the trait of being "connected to the people" through identifying with the common people's culture - opposed to the 'other' elitist Ashkenazi leftist.

Some public figures of Mizrahi origin have openly rejected Regev's vulgar style and ethnically divisive tone. Thus, several have joined to write a piece published in the liberal daily Haaretz, titled "The Culture Minister does not Represent Us" (Alon et al. 2016). These individuals, like the half Mizrahi Gidi Orsher, would be commonly viewed by the average Mizrahi of lower socio-economic means as *mishtaknezim*, and thus probably speak primarily for themselves and their likes. Regev, then, still enjoys widespread appeal among the greater Mizrahi public for her defiant tone of Ashkenazi elitism. These recent developments under Regev, then, are the culmination of a long process of cultural alienation, making anti-left, right-wing driven propaganda more credible to the aforementioned Israeli-Mizrahi identity.

As accounted for in the previous chapter, dubious legislation since Netanyahu's return to power has included defamation of the Arab public and contestation of its loyalty. Liberal political actors Meretz, Avoda and Livni, have sought to contain such legislation as well as other legislation termed by them as anti-democratic, as this subchapter has exemplified. Within the left-center bloc, the more radical Meretz has played a key role on two accounts: first, it has taken an emphatic anti-religious stance directed at religious Jewish groups; second, it has shown a benevolent line towards the Arab, citizen and non-citizen, population or even a full-fledged defending of their rights. Thus, for instance, while Livni and the Avoda opposed the legislation meant to label human-rights NGOs on the ground that it is anti-democratic in nature, members of Meretz expressed unequivocal support for these NGO's actions. Many Meretz potential voters have chosen to vote for

more centrist parties, wishing to see Netanyahu lose power. Therefore, despite Meretz having been a relatively small party, it surely invokes the voice of a larger portion of the Israeli public than its constituency seems to suggest. Accordingly, the agenda that is seen as attached to Meretz projects on the way in which the greater left-center bloc is viewed. Right-wing actors, on their part, have done everything in their power to bunch these together, promoting a view by which Jewish solidarity and anything that might be interpreted as promoting Arab interests, are mutually exclusive notions. Related to this, Herzog, identifying this characteristic of the left-center bloc's disputed branding, recently stated, to the discontent of many in his camp, that "we [the Avoda party, undoubtedly testifying to the whole of the left-wing camp] need to stop appearing as if we are always 'Arab-loving'" (Ben Zikri 2016).

The overall image of the left-wing is one of a political camp that is naïve about the Palestinians' true intention and thus acts as the protector of Arab interests, rather than caring for those deprived parts within its own ethno-national group. It is, therefore, depicted as traitorous, anti–Zionist and anti-Israeli, culturally condescending and resentful of its tradition and history, and is frequently blamed for undermining the righteous efforts of the IDF to defend the citizens of Israel. The view promoted by this process is one by which the left-wing rule is sure to come at the expense of Israel's national security and its Jewish character.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that the very labelling of certain actors as leftists is dubious and some actors who consider themselves centrist or seek to appear as such, would reject this title. The labelling of one as a leftist, then, in itself carries delegitimizing consequences.

Conclusion

The elite that founded the Jewish state hoped that people of vastly different cultures, linguistic background, and upbringings would get along based on their shared, yet highly ambiguous, Jewish identity. The IDF as a melting pot, mixed marriages and the expectations for modernization of Mizrahi Jews, it was thought, would ultimately yield an all-encompassing grand Israeli identity, defined by the principles of secular Ashkenazi Zionism. This vision never materialized. Rather, in the context of the Mizrahi public's intermediary position in Israel's social structure and its enduring socio-economic marginalization, political forces catered to their deprived self-esteem in order to mobilize their vote. As other political forces retaliated with simplistic stigmatization of this public an Israeli-Mizrahi was consolidated.

Since Netanyahu's return to power, with continuing violence in the background, whether in the Gaza front or "in lone-wolf" attacks on Israeli soldiers and citizens, Israeli society has been suffering from increasing polarization between right and left. Enhanced anti-Arab attitudes and the impasse in negotiations under Netanyahu's rule have attracted the vehement opposition of the left-center bloc. Consecutively, the liberal discourse as a whole has been brought under attack by the right-wing.

This process of delegitimization has capitalized on the abovementioned Israeli-Mizrahi identity, catering to both its ethno-nationalist orientation and to its particular ethnic identity. Effective delegitimization of the liberal discourse has alienated the political left-wing from Mizrahi Jews, leading this public to persist in its tendency to vote for the right-wing and making it instrumental in sustaining Netanyahu's rule. It can, therefore, be said that the "ethnic-split" has had considerable influence on the division of constituencies to right-wing and left-wing politics, so as to be regarded as a significant factor in determining Israeli policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To be sure, the process of delegitimization does not exclusively target the Mizrahi votes. The "Russian" public, which disintegrated in the 2015 elections has also shown a tendency to vote for the right-wing. However, considering that this is a far smaller public and that many of its voters are often secular and generally Western-minded, alienating the left-wing based on its supposedly secular elitist Ashkenazi or anti-religious nature, bears far less impact. It is primarily the link drawn between the left-wing and Arab interests, then, which still holds in keeping this public from voting for the left. Nevertheless, if we accept the premise by which the early relations between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel have provided for the *generative schemes* of the practice of the left-wing's

delegitimization, then the Russian tendency to vote right is also related to early Ashkenazi and Mizrahi relations.

As University for Peace's Sharon Komash put it, writing in 2005: "The animosity between the Mizrahim and the Avoda party – and other "liberal", "leftist" movements such as Meretz and "Shalom Achshav"[15] – still prevails. Those institutions aptly represent for many Mizrahim the patronizing Ashkenazi elite members, who occasionally let slip their scorn towards Mizrahim" (Komash 2005).

Such occasional expressions continue to appear today. For instance, after the 2015 elections, speaking in a morning talk-show, Ashkenazi Academic Amir Hetzroni was arguing that Israel had hurt itself by holding Jewish status as the sole category for permitting immigration into the country. Hetzroni was alluding to what he saw as the negative consequences of the Mizrahi public's immigration. Amidst the turbulent discussion which developed, he then told Amira Buzaglo, a Mizrahi media person, that "nothing would have happened, if [her] parents had stayed in Morocco" (Gutman and Limor 2015).

The greater liberal camp, highly aware of the tendency of Mizrahi Jews to vote right, is quick to denounce such expressions, well realizing its counter-productive effects. The right-wing, on its part, is quick to pounce on these expressions, oversimplify their content and amplify the resonance. Thus, these sort of reactions to the political situation by liberal elements reaffirms an image of an elitist, culturally condescending Ashkenazi left-wing camp, and sustain an ethnic dimension in the division between right-wing and left-wing politics.

Indeed, delegitimized left-wing parties are overwhelmingly composed of the secular Ashkenazi public. Netanyahu's Likud, however, is no different and has shown a very low record of representation of the Mizrahi public (Misgav 2016). Despite this, some right-wing actors manage to project an image of *amamiyut*, unattained by the left-wing.

Apart from Miri Regev's immense contribution to this endeavor, Netanyahu himself has dedicated efforts to nurturing this image. In December 2012, Netanyahu met with Eyal Golan, one of Mizrahi music's beloved icons, prior to the inauguration of the latter's new reality TV show (Nevo 2012). A few days later, in a Likud convention, Sarit Hadad, another famous Mizrahi female singer, stood on stage with Netanyahu and sang to him her famous song "Ata Totah" (You 'caliber') (Pontz 2012). Aviv Geffen, a popular Ashkenazi singer, strongly affiliated with the left-wing for having sung in Avoda

15 Shalom Achshav (Peace Now) is an NGO founded in 1978, aimed at ending Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories and seeking a two-state solution.

conventions for former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and widely known for not having served in the IDF by reason of pacifism, commented: "She sings for a Prime Minister and gets a fat check. When I did so he was shot" (Walla 2013). The two, Geffen and Hadad, had acted as judges and mentors in the Israeli reality TV show "The Voice". Another resonating episode between the two, certainly worth mention, took place during the audition of one Mizrahi Jew Roy Edri who, at his audition, recited a prayer into the microphone before starting to sing. While Hadad commented that she thought it was very 'moving', Geffen, the sole judge who did not grant Edri his voice, told the latter that he thought he was making "a cynical use of god". A Final example intended to better the Likud's record of being *amami,* can be seen in Netanyahu's response to Garbuz's speech prior to the 2015 elections, rhetorically asking in a ridiculing tone: What's wrong with Mezuzah kissing? (The Times of Israel 2015b).

Likewise, Naftali Bennet, who is also Ashkenazi, but bears well-established religious credentials as a *yamaka* wearing Jew alongside his credentials as an esteemed warrior in an elite military unit, has become known for his frequent use of the word *ahi* (my brother) to refer to his interlocutors. Bennet, thus, managed to enhance his party's *amamiyut* and to obscure its sectorial appearance as a representative of the religious nationalist public. This allowed it to increase its share of votes in 2013, also in DTs.

Amamyiut, which I have termed as the trait of being "connected to the people" through identifying with the common popular culture, contains within it the valuing of the Jewish component of Israeli citizenship as a basis for solidarity in its own right. Conversely, as we have seen, the left-wing, is seen as having undermined this basic Jewish solidarity. Instead, it would be aligned on many issues with the Arabs, citizens and non-citizens, as their end goals of promoting a two-state solution and general equality for both peoples within or outside the Jewish state, corresponded. This approach is epitomized by the words of Israeli left-wing politician Avraham Burg in his piece in Haaretz, titled "I'm an Israeli Leftist and I'm Not Afraid": "I do not feel automatic blood and racial solidarity with any Jew, but rather with ideas and values. There are wonderful Arabs and terrible Jews and vice versa" (Burg 2015).

The presumed neglect, ridiculing and resentment of the Mizrahi population by the left-wing, its seemingly benevolent approach towards the Arab population and its supposedly condescending approach towards the role of religion in the lives of individuals, has alienated Mizrahi constituency.

Though we cannot say for certain if Netanyahu and Shas had indeed conspired to depose Livni in 2009, this option must be contemplated. Considering that her failure to put

together a new governing coalition upon replacing Olmert was key in enabling Netanyahu's return to power, we may point to the option that for Shas, Livni was just too leftist.

Furthermore, given the defamed left-wing "brand", new emerging politicians have sought to distance themselves from this image. Moshe Kachlon, for instance, presumed to be in principle in favor of a two-state solution, has focused his attention on his socio-economic agenda and has given little to no attention to the two aforementioned divisive issues – religion and state and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We may also see Lapid's refusal to join hands with the left-wing and the Arab factions in order to thwart Netanyahu's ability to form a coalition in light of his desire to avoid the left-wing brand.

In September 2016, in accordance with his earnestly declared aspirations, Lapid has come to appear as a viable contender for the position of Prime Minister, beating Netanyahu's Likud by two seats according to one poll (Caspit 2016). Lapid has been selectively employing elements of both discourses. For instance, on the one hand, he has joined the coalitions' attack on left-wing NGO's (Nachmias 2015). On the other, he has been criticizing the coalitions' attempt to pass a legislation that will regulate the status of Amona, an illegal outpost in the West Bank, arguing that it has no legal validity and is only meant to delegitimize the Supreme Court, which will be forced to revoke the law (Baruch 2016). Importantly, Lapid has also significantly moderated his combative message against the *haredim*. Instead, he has been evoking Jewish symbols and solidarity utilizing much of the same rhetoric and pathos used by Netanyahu through the years. Most centrally, Lapid has been speaking of the retention of Jerusalem as part of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thus distinguishing himself from the left-wing (Caspit 2016; Sherki 2016)

Lapid is surely far from attaining the image of *amamiyut* and, therefore, the wide-spread appeal among the Mizrahi public enjoyed by the Likud. Nevertheless, his stance seems to pose a real threat to Netanyahu's rule who will find it difficult to label Lapid as an illegitimate leftist "Arab lover". It remains to be seen if Netanyahu's appeal will survive this challenge and if Lapid will demonstrate the right blend of attitudes in order to draw enough votes from the right, Mizrahi or not while maintaining support from the left-center bloc. Lapid's election, if it were to occur, would signal a deviation from the politics of identity, characterizing the right-left polarity and could perhaps generate a more unifying tone in Israeli politics.

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