**Chapter 7**

**Double Agents: Good Arabs, Bad Arabs and the Economic Miracle**

‘We cannot let a dangerous Left government with Lapid, Ohdeh, Ganz and Lieberman be established next week. A secular, weak Left government that counts on the Arabs that want to exterminate us all – women, children and men – will allow Iran to annihilate us. This cannot happen! (Bibi-Bot, Likud Campaign, 2019 election day).

‘There are only two options: either a rightwing government under me, or a left government with the Arabs’ (Netanyahu, 18/9/2019)

‘Arabs, go to vote in droves’ (David Grossman, 12/9/2019)

At the height of the September Israeli election, second election in a row in 2019, Netanyahu’s campaign accused the Arab citizens of Israel of stealing the April elections by forgery and therefore attempted to change the election laws, during a government-in-transition. Netanyahu sought to equip every representative of every party, serving as a political member in all the polling stations’ committees, with cameras, to document at will within the Arab polling stations, booth excluded.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was to serve as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it is well known that the Likud’s focus groups over the last decade maintain, time and again, that the one subject which is most effective in recruiting rightwing voter to go out and vote Likud is the alert from the danger that the Arabs pose, particularly if there is a seeming tie between the Left and the Right blocs.[[2]](#footnote-2) On the other hand, the cameras at the hands of the representatives of the Likud, Yamina and Ultra-Orthodox parties, were to be posted specifically in the Arab sector,[[3]](#footnote-3) aiming to deter the Arab voters from even going to vote. The fall elections were to be determined on electoral turnout. The incitement against the Arabs was to serve both ends – send the Likud supporters, despite their dismay with Netanyahu, to go out and vote, and keep the Arab voters, who in April got a record low turnout of 49%, at home once again. Ironically, the double-edged sword worked, only to stub Netanyahu’s campaign in the back: the Likud voters saw the third elections (after 2015 and April 2019) that used the Arabs to symbolized danger to the rightwing rule as crying out ‘wolf, wolf’ while the Arab citizens were fed up with the consistent incitement of the prime minister’s campaign against them, and used his hate-speech act from the 2015 to create their own election slogan: ‘Arabs, go to vote in droves’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

But is this all campaign tactics, or is it part of a greater ideological change to the narrative of the right, part of its reinterpretation of Israel as ‘Jewish and Democratic’? In this chapter I take the relation of Netanyahu’s governments to the Arab citizens of Israel, with focus on the five election cycles, 2015-2021, as a cornerstone in the evolution of a populist national-conservative worldview, and its internal ideological tension between its neoliberal economics and national-conservative ethos. Drifting away from the traditional pillars of the Likud – National and Liberal – which in the September 2019 election were annexed by Lieberman’s Yisrael Beteinu and arguably Gantz’ Blue-White – the Likud-led government established an ethno-nationalist, anti-liberal ethos in which the concept of ‘the Arabs’ played a crucial role in the reproduction of ‘the Jewish people.’ This revised interpretation of the concept served to change the meaning of cornerstone of Israeli democracy: the rule of the people, meaning the Jewish people, distancing further the vision of a civic demos with equality to all citizens. Rather, ‘the people’ – meaning the Jewish people exclusively – became impenetrable – not a civic people of all Israeli citizens but an ethnoreligious people which non-Jews cannot join and those who vow for a civic national Israeliness are accused of being traitors. ‘The Arabs’ thus became instrumental concept of the other, with particular reference to friend and foe.

I take the Arab case to demonstrate the ideological complexity of enemy-from-within in the national-conservative outlook, drawing on the tensions between neoliberalism and neo-conservatism. The case is rooted in a paradox which ironically tilted the process against the initial intention of the government. Take for example Lieberman’s ‘No Citizenship without Loyalty’ emblem of 2009 which was discussed in chapter 4. It resulted in the changes made by the Likud government to the citizenship law in 2010 but also in changing the electoral law and raising the threshold to 3.25% under the governability act; ironically this forced the unification of the Arab parties. They thus became the third largest party in the 2015 Knesset. The two cases in this chapter rotate between incitement against the Arabs in the elections, and generous, structural economic plan for the Arab society. The first take is 2015 election, emblematized by Netanyahu’s speech on election day ‘the Arabs are coming in droves to the polls’. Netanyahu’s declaration was empirically wrong at the time. After the election, the recognition of the racist overtones of the incitement against the Arabs ironically induced the signature of Netanyahu’s government on 922 economic plan for the Arab society, producing a systemic change in the budget mechanism for the Arabs. The economic plan is the economic flip side of the conservative coin. The second such double-episode, is between the 2019-2020, with the accusation that the Arabs ‘have stolen the election’ on the one hand, and the negotiation with Ra’am. Mansur Abbas’ Islamic party which had defected from the Arab Joint List, securing formidable funds of the Arabs. The inner-tensions in the ideological construct of the right would thus be exposed, based on King’s initial tension between neoliberalism and nationalism in Thatcher’s government, but taken forward with a clearer national-conservative populist edge in Netanyahu’s 2015-9 government.[[5]](#footnote-5) Finally, the accusation that the Arabs are ‘stealing the elections’ created a surge of 10% in Arab turnout in September 2019 election and in fact ensured that Netanyahu would not have a narrow-rightwing coalition which would pass the overriding clause and the immunity law and challenge the ‘democratic’ side of the Jewish state. In the final round of election, 2021, Netanyahu has turned away from his incitement and became ‘Abu-Yair’ – offering Mansur Abbas, leader of Ra’am – to support Netanyahu’s coalition in return for economic benefits for the Arab sector. It was the racist Religious Zionism party that blocked this option, which was finally – albeit reluctantly – adopted by the Bennett-Lapid government. “Abbas tax is Hamas Tax” reiterated Netanyahu, now the chairperson of the opposition.[[6]](#footnote-6) The 30 billion shekels approved by the Bennet-Lapid government, however, was planned by Netanyahu’s previous government as program 923, the continuation of the 922 plan. Economics is posed against national-conservatism and played at will.

1. **Arabs as the Foe and Beyond**

The Arabs are framed in the Netanyahu campaign both as the external enemy and internally with the Arab Israelis as part of the left. Rahat and Shamir analyze the 2015 election in light of the conversion of the external and internal collective identity ideological axes.[[7]](#footnote-7) The political framework of friend and foe is a classical Schmittian one, characterizing the distinction as determined "existentially": the enemy is whoever "in an especially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible”.[[8]](#footnote-8) As we have already seen, this was also the case with the illegal immigrants, the ultimate strangers. Yet the case of the Israeli-Arabs is even more indicative for the prime minister’s government, as they were used both as an internal-cum-external enemy, and as the prime way of delegitimizing his political rivals –the left (2015) and center (2019-20). In the Israeli-Arab case it is thus ‘existential’ foe in both ways: Netanyahu stressed, time and again during elections, the existential threat that the Arab world and especially Iran, ISIS, Hizbulla and Hamas put on Israel: “the biggest challenge Israel is facing in our life as citizens and a state, is the nuclear armament of Iran. They speak about the cost of living – I do not forget also life itself”.[[9]](#footnote-9) He deliberately connects the existential threat from Iran to the Arab citizens in Israel so much so that Netanyahu’s facebook page, with hundred of thousands of followers, sent a message just before the 2019 September election, after his allegations that the Arabs are stealing the elections, which read: “we cannot allow a Left government that will rely on the Arabs that want to exterminate us all and enable nuclear Iran that will annihilate us.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Yet, the former IDF chief of stuff, Gadi Eisenkot, argued that “since the 1960s Israel is an invincible state militarily”[[11]](#footnote-11): the existential threat posed by the Arabs is an ideological construct.

1. **Loyalty-cum-governability: Divide, Exclude and Jewish Rule**

Analyzing Lieberman’s ‘No Citizenship without loyalty’ in chapter four, we have so far distinguished two major national-conservative insights. First, the idea of loyalty to the State of Israel as a Jewish state, generating a thick notion of the Jewish people as ethnonational essentialist and impenetrable category. It thereby excluded an egalitarian concept of the state of Israel as a state (also) of all its citizens, the idea of the demos became unimaginable as the citizenship Law was to demand a pledge of loyalty from non-Jews to the idea that the state belongs first and foremost – and perhaps exclusively – to the Jews.[[12]](#footnote-12) Second, replacing the democratic discourse of rights with at least a republican notion of rights and obligations: one, even a native born and bred in Israel, does not have a right even to be a citizen if he is not also fulfilling his obligations – especially the obligation of being loyal to the state as a Jewish state. Thus, the republican discourse of loyalty synthesizes citizenship laws with ethno-national Basic Law and eliminates the possibility that Israel can be the nation-state of the Jewish people and also a state of all its citizens: the choice is either/or, as Lieberman and Netanyahu, publicly declared.[[13]](#footnote-13) Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people and a democracy for its citizens, who are more and more narrowly defined based on their loyalty to the Jewish state. What Lieberman saw as just the beginning in 2013, made a dramatic leap forward in 2018 with the passing of the Basic Law: Nation-State, which contains no civil equality clause at all.

The third dimension of the ideological discourse of Neoconservatism is that of governability. The context is seemingly completely different – the concept of governance was part of the change of discourse brought by the 2011 social protest and translated into institutional politics by the Trachtenberg committee and its 2013 recommendations for changing the structures of government into being more effective and more responsive; yet, governance has swiftly turned into governability under Netanyahu’s government which was determined to seek ever more power to the prime minster and his ministers, as chapter 6 demonstrated.[[14]](#footnote-14) In general, strengthening the government is needed due to the electoral system which gives excessive powers to junior coalition partners. Complementarily, the civil service was said to restrict the ministers using the rule of law, regulation and procedures which are said to hinder policy changes sought by the government. The governability act was therefore to give more power to a smaller and a more effective government. Indeed, one of the main demands made by Lieberman in 2013 in the governability act, was that of raising the threshold to 3.25%. At first sight, this indeed sounds like a minor change to reduce the number of the smaller parties and allow a more compact, efficient government. Yet, one main reason for Lieberman’s insistence on the 3.25% is that no Arab party could have reached this threshold alone, thereby hoping to eliminate, or at least sharply reduce, the representation of the Arab citizens from the Israeli Knesset.[[15]](#footnote-15) One of the trademarks of neo-conservatism – the concept of governability – was aptly tied to the mission of redefining the state of Israel not as the state of all its citizens, but as the state of its Jews. Eliminating representation of the Arabs was to go a long way towards this goal. But history has its own ways; ironically, raising the threshold produced the unification of the four Arab parties under one list, receiving 13 seats in the next Knesset and became the third largest party. The ‘threat’ of the Arab vote will be the main issue on the internal campaign of Netanyahu to his ‘base’ in 2015.

In short, ‘loyalty in citizenship’ – pledging loyalty to Israel as the Jewish state – has turned from being a prerequisite for a handful of immigrants seeking citizenship not through the Law of Return to a guideline for determining not just who is a citizen, but who is a loyal citizen. The definition of a citizen, based on rights and obligations, moved from a civic to an ethnonational definition. This was sealed with the Basic Law: Nation-State which recognized only the Jews as the sovereign people in Israel. Thus, the concept of loyalty in citizenship led the way to building a populous-based neo-conservatism, which entailed the delegitimization of all those who are not Jewish, patriotic or rightwing. With the governability act, a threat to the very political representation of the Arab citizens of Israel was posed. Ironically, the unintended consequences of this act were the formation of a joint Arab list that became to third largest list in Israeli parliament in 2015.

1. **“The Arabs are coming in droves”: Ethnonationalism**

The rise of the joint Arab list became a pivot of the Netanyahu campaign against the Israeli Arabs in the very final days before the elections. 2015 Israeli elections were primarily on the possibility of political change, shifting the ruling power: the polls consistently gave advantage to Labor, then Zionist Camp, over its rival and ruling party – the Likud; the personal dissatisfaction from prime minister Netanyahu – the investigations, and the Yisrael Beitenu affair of systemic corruption – were expected to produce a low turnout on the right. The media concluded: a change of government may well be on its way.[[16]](#footnote-16) The reaction of Netanyahu was to go back to the basic fears of the people: while other parties talked about the economy and the cost of living, Netanyahu talked about the threat from Iran and ISIS. In the very last days before the elections, when it was clear that the right may well lose, and that even Netanyahu’s own camp is fed up with the government’s corruption and inaction, translated into low turnout, he launched a campaign which focused on the Arab vote in connection with the threat of terror and radical Islamization and their connection to the Left. On the election day Netanyahu gave a speech on his Facebook:

The rule of the right is in danger. Arab voters are streaming in droves to polling stations. Leftist NGOs are bringing them in buses. We don’t have a V-15 [activist group for the opposition], we have only a ‘Tsav 8’ [emergency military call-up]. We only have you. Go vote, bring friends and family, vote MAHAL and we’d close the gap with Labor. With your help and with God’s help we’ll establish a national government that will defend Israel.”

This was filmed on the following background:



This, coupled with more than half a million SMS messages sent to targeted Likud voters in specific neighborhoods and towns with low turnout, in the last hours of the election, all dealing exclusively with the Arabs in Israel, reading ‘turnout is three times higher in the Arab sector’ and ‘Hamas called the Israeli Palestinians to vote in the elections’ or ‘residents of Beer Shiba – the Arabs are voting in masses don’t let them determine the ministers in the next government’. The messages, that were based on fake news and were wrong, and included what some would call pure incitement against the Arabs, did the work. In the last two hours of the elections twice the number of voters went to vote, voting for the Likud.

Consider the background: Netanyahu is filmed with the map of the Middle East behind him, and the flag of Israel to his side. The image does its own work: he is talking about the Arab citizens of Israel, but invoking the Islamic world at large: Saudi with its connections to Al-Qaida, Egypt with the Arab Spring turning to Islamic revolution and the military takeover, Iran-supported Gaza with the Hamas rule, and the nuclear threat, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Syria and Iraq – two failed states with ISIS taking over parts of them. You hear about the Arabs in Israel but you imagine Islamic fundamentalism around Israel; Netanyahu in portrayed, as ever, as mister security, the sole savior of the Jewish State. Furthermore, Netanyahu erects a binary opposition – friend vs. foe, good vs. evil. On the evil side are the Arabs and V-15 – what the prime minister tags consistently as extreme leftwing organizations which are supported by foreign European governments to aid Labor. These are human rights organizations and social movements. The delegitimization process is at work – the extreme left and the Islamists threaten the national government. They are anti-Zionists, and they are evil. But who is on the other side? On the other side of the normative divide are the ‘good Jewish guys’: they don’t have V-15 they have Tsav 8 – the emergency military order: the IDF is on the good side, as is every voter going to vote for the right, as is God and Netanyahu. In his coalition – the IDF, God and the people. This is the bad vs. good, we vs. enemy.

Why are the Arab Israelis so crucial for Netanyahu’s views of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? After all, the Arab voters in Israel are a marginal force. Before 2015 the voters were always divided into three different parties with no real power to influence any legislation or policy. The data given by Netanyahu’s campaign was far from accurate: the turnout of Arab Israelis in national elections is substantially lower than the Jews. By 18.30 on the election day, after Netanyahu’s speech, the Arab turnout was identical to the 2013 elections – 56% only.[[17]](#footnote-17) In 2015 the general vote was 72.3% and the Arab vote 63.5%. So why were the Arabs the centerpiece of Netanyahu’s election day? Because in his argument they are a fifth column. They, and the left that supports them, are traitors. They rose fear and colored the whole Left block with disloyalty and anti-patriotism. This tactic has worked. The SMS messages, targeting rightwing voters in low socioeconomic and low turnout areas brought Netanyahu a resounding victory. The first-ever pure rightwing government – with no center or left party – was formed.

1. **Arab Israelis as the Economic Miracle**

Ironically, the Joint List won 13 seats and became the third largest party in the 20th Knesset. The irony, however, did not stop there. On December 30, 2015, the new Netanyahu government approved Resolution 922, entitled “Governmental Activity for Economic Development of the Minority Populations in Israel.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The planning had begun a year earlier in a professional committee chaired by the head of the Finance Ministry’s Budgets Department, Amir Levi, who systematically analyzed the economic disparities between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, and mapped the main areas of disadvantages holding back the latter. Moshe Kahlon, leader of Kulanu and the newly appointed finance minister in 2015, approved this effort. Resolution 922 dramatically increased the budget for the Arab sector, allocating 15 billion shekels over five years. A key feature of the 922 plan was to set a standard of apportioning 20% of the annual budget of key governmental ministries – education, housing, infrastructure, transportation, etc. – for the Arab sector, which comprises approximately 20% of Israel’s citizenry. In the past, special plans for assisting the Arab sector had usually failed in the implementation stage. This time, however, the Finance Ministry worked meticulously to devise comprehensive guidelines from the planning to the implementation phases – in collaboration with top civil servants in the relevant ministries, and in partnership with the Arab local authorities and civic organizations. Furthermore, the Arab parliamentarians, who are usually very cautious about cooperating with the “Zionist regime,” were fully cooperative and worked together with the Finance Ministry to realize this plan.

What was going on? Some would say this was another case of Netanyahu’s back-and-forth behavior – inciting in the elections and apologizing the morning after.[[19]](#footnote-19) Others would suggest that the direct assault on Israeli Arabs drew such severe criticism that some step had to be taken. Yet, if we look at the deeper ideological roots, observing the two sides of the paradox, we can recognize the fingerprints of two coexisting and contradictory right-wing ideological trends: neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism. Neo-conservatism is a nationalist, xenophobic, “friend vs. foe” ideology: Arabs against Israelis, Muslims against Jews, the internal enemy, the fifth column and their leftist supporters who conspire against the state. Neo-liberalism, on the other hand, provides a rationale for supporting investment in the Arab sector: economic growth. The economic reality is that the rate of employment among Arab women in Israel is only 33%, compared to 71% of Jewish Israeli women. (The employment rate of Arab women is still higher in Israel than in Arab countries.) About 75% of Arab men in Israel are employed, compared to 81% of the general male population. Economics tells a simple story: there is tremendous potential for national economic gain by closing the gaps. Some of the gaps are due to governmental discriminatory policies and neglect, while others are attributable to the traditional Arab society’s norms and practices. Yet, from an economic growth perspective, the picture is clear. One such example of economic transformation is the Druze population. Over the last decade, the Druze community underwent nothing less than a revolution in education – moving from very low matriculation rates to joining the top ranks in Israeli society.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Druze society’s investment in education, which combined the infusion of government funds with internal change in the community, had a clear impact on a crucial factor: the birth rate dropped sharply from 7.5 children per family in the 1960s to 2.2 children.

Thus, there were two ideological streams that competed within Netanyahu’s government: Gila Gamliel, Kahlon and Deri supported Resolution 922. Levin, Elkin, Regev and Akunis opposed it. And the prime minister? While Netanyahu initiated the committee that formulated the plan, he was resentful of Resolution 922. The Finance Ministry, President Rivlin and others pushed for its approval. Given his reluctance, Netanyahu sought to link the economic program to stringent measures against illegal construction in Arab villages. Two weeks after the plan was approved, 11 houses were razed in Qalansuwa. Umm al-Hiran was slated to suffer the same fate had it not been for a policeman who was killed in the protests against the demolition of houses there. The prime minister was ultimately pushed into accepting the economic plan. In the public media, however, he emphasized law and order in the Arab villages and a halt to illegal construction as conditions for economic benefits.

Thus, politics and economics intertwined in a tense relationship in Netanyahu’s ideology. The Arabs – the “fifth column,” a non-Jewish national minority – could hold the key to economic growth in the Israeli economy. In essence, Netanyahu took his old slogan of “if they give, they’ll receive,” originally used in the context of negotiations with the Palestinians, and adopted it as the state’s attitude toward Arab citizens. Needless to say, there is no symmetry between the give (halting construction violations) and take (the economic plan). Indeed, many of the construction violations that Netanyahu tried to link to the economic plan are the result of to the fact that the Israeli government rarely authorized construction plans, much less expansion plans, for the Arab sector.

But a change in the public discourse was also underway: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was hardly part of the debate in the 2015 elections, re-entered through the back door of the right-left argument. The external enemy was internalized as the enemy from within. This change in discourse was powerful in delegitimizing Netanyahu’s center-left rivals – and had less of an impact on the Arabs themselves. The ultimate neo-conservative argument was that Arabs are the people that (leftist) civil rights organizations want to aid. It is a battle of their rights versus Jewish national collective rights. Thus posed, the sides are clear: The national camp stands for Jewish national rights, while the unpatriotic (and even traitorous) left stands with the Arabs. The political axis was being transformed into a collective identity axis; the 2015 elections were actually fought on this axis of collective identity.

1. **“Weak. Left. Government with the Arabs”: From Threat to Reality**

Netanyahu decided to call for early elections in 2019 in a last-ditch attempt to stymie the criminal proceedings through a political referendum.[[21]](#footnote-21) His plan was as follows: Netanyahu wins the 2019 April elections with an overwhelming majority, well before his court hearing. The people have voted for Bibi, so the argument becomes that the people have democratically chosen Netanyahu, but the judicial system, the unelected elites of the left, are trying to oust the elected prime minister by using state mechanisms of unelected bureaucrats, undermining the will of the people. The second phase of this plan would be for Netanyahu to build an extreme right-wing coalition that includes the Likud, the ultra-Orthodox parties and the national religious parties. (It is noteworthy that a senior Likud minister and the party’s coalition chief were being investigated for suspected corruption, as were the leaders of the two ultra-Orthodox parties.) In the coalition agreement, the parties would commit to enacting the override clause and an immunity law. The Knesset committee in charge of parliamentary immunity would rule that Netanyahu and his ministers could not be prosecuted, and any attempt by the Supreme Court to strike down the committee’s decision would be rejected by the Knesset through the new override clause. (The override clause would state that even if the Supreme Court rules legislation unconstitutional, the Knesset is entitled to reject the court’s decision with a regular majority and maintain the unconstitutional legislation.)

This classic deep-state argument was the discourse that Netanyahu and his advisors cultivated throughout the 20th Knesset, repeatedly accusing the gatekeepers of being disloyal to the government in general and to the prime minister in particular. Ironically, most of the gatekeepers had been personally appointed by Netanyahu as his loyalists: the inspector general, the attorney general, the state comptroller – all of whom came under fierce attack by Netanyahu’s ministers and campaign managers, and, of course, by Netanyahu himself. In order to secure a personal victory by the people against “deep-state” mechanisms, Netanyahu had to create the image that the newcomer of Israeli politics – Gantz’s centrist Blue-White party – was really part of the left-wing bloc. “Gantz will form a government with the Arab MKs,” warned the Likud campaign.[[22]](#footnote-22) “Gantz. Left. Weak.” became Bibi’s election slogan, pushing the center-right Blue-White party into the left-wing camp in the mind of voters, creating an impression of parity between the two blocs in order to ensure that the turnout of right-wing voters would be high enough to bring victory and allow a narrow coalition supporting the override clause and immunity law. This scenario materialized almost in full: Netanyahu and his natural partners received 65 seats, and negotiations on the override clause and the immunity law began immediately after the April election. The association of Blue-White with the left and with the Arabs proved effective. However, Lieberman upset this scenario by jumping ship – from the nationalist left-right axis to the state-religion axis. Netanyahu could not cobble together a government and, for the first time in Israeli history, there would be two back-to-back elections. This time, it was a struggle for the judicial and political life of Netanyahu, who was scheduled to appear in court two weeks after the elections. Netanyahu had to win. The new weapon in his campaign arsenal was the charge that the Arabs had stolen the April elections and would also steal the September elections unless an amendment allowing cameras at polling stations was added to the election law.

Thus, the foundations of the neo-conservative government – republican obligations and a discourse of rights, the notion of the will of the (Jewish) people and governability based on ideological and personal loyalty – were now mobilized for a fierce attack that aimed to delegitimize the center-left. The public media, judicial system, civil service and the police were identified as enemies of the will of the people, and by extension – as enemies of Netanyahu.

1. ***An Anti-Arab and Pro-Republican Ethos***

Before pushing the deep-state argument to its limit with the allegations that the Arabs had stolen the April elections with the help of the Central Elections Committee, it is crucial to understand that the right-wing anti-Arab campaign was succeeding. Blue-White – a party built on the broad Israeli consensus of nationalism-liberalism (the Likud’s original ideology), and whose leadership included such former Likudniks as Moshe Ya’alon, Zvi Hauser, and Yoaz Hendel – was denounced by Netanyahu as “leftist.” Under normal circumstances, the Likud and Blue-White could have governed together as a coalition of center-right parties; yet under the special conditions of Netanyahu’s trial and Blue-White’s sincere belief that a prime minister indicted on corruption charges should resign, this was impossible. However, the April elections demonstrated how dominant Netanyahu’s neo-conservatism had become. Rather than proposing an ideology different from that of the Likud, especially on issues related to the Arabs, Blue-White consistently followed in Bibi’s footsteps. For example, the party released a campaign ad highlighting the number of Arabs killed in Operation Protective Edge, when Gantz was serving as the IDF chief-of-staff. Gantz declares in the video: “Only the strong are victorious.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Time and again, the four leaders of Blue-White stated they would form only a Zionist government. When asked whether the ultra-Orthodox parties were therefore excluded from their government, they responded that all Jewish parties were welcome at the negotiation table. It was clear in the April 2019 elections, that Blue-White was excluding only the Arab parties. Netanyahu’s discourse had penetrated the alternative centrist party, which blatantly marginalized the Arabs. The one area in which the two parties differed was in Blue-White’s commitment to amend the Nation-State Law by adding an equality clause – out of solidarity with the Druze soldiers in the IDF. Thus, the anti-Arab ethos pervaded the entire party system and not only the hard right. Moreover, the arguments used by Blue-White to support the Druze reflected a republican ethos of rights and obligations. That is, the Nation-State Law was discriminating against the Druze, who had earned their rights by fulfilling the obligation to serve in the IDF. Muslim Arabs, on the other hand, could be denied these same rights because they had not served in the IDF. Both the anti-Arab sentiment and the rights-and-obligations ethos dominated Blue-White, the main rival of the right-wing parties, in the April 2019 elections.

1. ***The Man from Nokdim versus the Man from Caesarea***

After the April election results were tallied, everything changed. The right-wing bloc, with a 65-seat majority, quickly began coalition negotiations on the override clause and immunity law, while Blue-White called for a mass demonstration against Netanyahu. Ayman Odeh, the head of the six-seat Hadash-Ta’al party, agreed to speak at the rally. Blue-White had first opposed his participation, but then Gantz telephoned Odeh and invited him to join the anti-Netanyahu rally; Odeh accepted the invitation and delivered a speech at the demonstration. This caused a change of in the tide: the greater the post-election incitement from the Netanyahu camp against the Arabs, the more open Blue-White became vis-à-vis the Arab parties. This new attitude was also expressed by an unexpected source: Natan Eshel, Netanyahu’s chief coalition negotiator, wrote an article calling for the right-wing bloc to form an alliance with the Arabs, the majority of whom just want better education, economic conditions and security, he argued.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The question of collaboration with the Arab parties figured prominently in the tense bitter dispute between Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman after the latter declared he would not join a narrow religious-right government. Netanyahu responded: “Lieberman is now part of the left”[[25]](#footnote-25) and Likud ministers suggested that Lieberman was keen to join forces with the Joint List. Lieberman forcefully responded by reminding everyone how Bibi had collaborated with the Arabs parties to call for new elections instead of returning the mandate to the president after failing to create a government, and how he had won approval for his appointee as state comptroller with the votes of Arab MKs. (Once approved, the new state comptroller promptly dismissed the committee investigating corruption in the government, and thus allowed Netanyahu to have his legal expenses paid by a friend, contrary to the committee’s ruling. The man from Caesarea [Netanyahu], who voted for the disengagement from Gaza, would not teach the man from Nokdim [Lieberman], who voted against it, what it means to be a right-winger, Lieberman concluded.[[26]](#footnote-26)

All this did not deter Netanyahu’s September 2019 campaign from alleging that the Arabs had stolen the April elections and proposing that cameras be given to each party representative at polling stations in the Arab sector. Lieberman held the pivotal vote on this proposal, and its right-wing proponents hoped that his traditional anti-Arab stance would secure his support of permitting cameras at the polling stations. However, their hopes were dashed: Lieberman claimed that the proposed camera law was intended to “disrupt” and “steal” the elections.[[27]](#footnote-27) First, the facts. There were allegations that voting fraud in the September elections had allowed the Balad-Ra’am list to pass the 3.25% threshold, with just under 4% of the vote, and that the Central Elections Committee did not investigate the alleged voting fraud; the suggestion was that the committee bureaucrats and judges were trying to oust Netanyahu. However, in the two polling stations that were in fact investigated, the voting fraud in the Arab sector actually favored the Likud party and its ultra-Orthodox partner United Torah Judaism. Second, the Likud called for investigating the Arab vote even before the election results were published; this was part of the party’s camera initiative, aimed at inciting against the Arabs. Third, it became clear that Netanyahu wanted to taint the elections so he could later claim they were unlawful.

In the end, rather than deterring the Arabs from voting in the September election, Netanyahu’s campaign achieved the opposite: Arab politicians urged their constituents to vote in droves to topple Netanyahu’s regime. The turnout from the Arab sector rose from 49% in April 2019 to 60% five months later. Furthermore, the Joint List decided to recommend to the president that Gantz be awarded the mandate to form a coalition. Odeh even said that the list would consider joining the Gantz coalition.[[28]](#footnote-28) The 13 MKs of the Joint List gave the center-left a two-seat edge over the right, and thus prevented Netanyahu from forming a narrow right-wing government and passing the override clause and the immunity law.

1. ***The Liberal-National Front and Anti-Zionists: Jeopardizing a Minority Government without Netanyahu***

The March 2020 election results offered an alternative: For the first time in over a decade, there was a chance to form a government without Netanyahu and his “natural partners.” With the Joint List’s support of a minority government led by Blue-White, the end to Netanyahu’s rule was imminent. Yet this was not to be – because of two right-wingers who were once among Netanyahu’s closest confidantes: his former cabinet secretary, Zvi Hauser, and his former director of communications and public diplomacy, Yoaz Hendel. The two had forwarded a sexual harassment complaint against Netanyahu’s right-hand man, Natan Eshel, to the attorney general. To their amazement, instead of being commended for helping the female civil servant lodge her harassment complaint, they were fired by Netanyahu. Hauser and Hendel joined Blue-White and became the right-wing fig leaf for the centrist would-be ruling party led by Gantz. However, at the crucial moment, when they could have helped to create a minority government and oust Netanyahu, they refused to support a minority government based on a vote of confidence that included anti-Zionists – the Joint List. They did not disqualify the ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist parties, for they were Jewish. But they disqualified the representatives of the Arab citizens of Israel, the Joint List, claiming that the Arab parliamentarians publicly supported terrorism.[[29]](#footnote-29) Hendel stressed that the Joint List opposed Israel’s dual Jewish-democratic essence and was anti-Zionist: “I prefer a government with Zionists only,” he said, reiterating that he had always belonged to the liberal statehood camp of the modern right.[[30]](#footnote-30) The identification of the liberal-national camp with the disqualification of Arab MKs, representing over 20% of the population, demonstrates the anomaly of Israeli politics. Deri, the minister of interior, acting on Netanyahu’s behalf, pressed all of the MKs in the right-wing bloc to pledge not to sit in a government supported by the Arab MKs. This pledge of loyalty to Netanyahu stated: “We strongly object to a minority government supported by MKs who support terror and object to the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The requirement for Arab MKs to be Zionists and to be loyal to Israel as a Jewish state reflected the radicalization of the public discourse led by Netanyahu’s government and his “natural partners.” Their concept of ethno-religious national identity left no room for non-Jews.

1. ***Mansour Abbas: An Islamist Party Transforming the Discourse of Citizenship***

A surprising shift from this view was led by none other than Netanyahu himself. Two years after the event, Abbas disclosed that Natan Eshel’s op-ed in *Haaretz* had been coordinated with him. In 2019, Eshel was working as the Netanyahu family’s liaison after being forced to resign his official role in the Prime Minister’s Office in the wake of the sexual harassment scandal. His opinion article in *Haaretz* called for cooperation with the Arab MKs who advocate civic aspects of politics for the Arab-Israeli society.[[32]](#footnote-32) The Eshel op-ed, it turned out, was part of the trust-building efforts agreed upon by Netanyahu and Abbas. Netanyahu’s cabinet secretary, Tzahi Braverman, and the director-general of the Prime Minister’s Office, Yoav Horowitz, also began a series of personal meetings and negotiations with Abbas in April 2019.[[33]](#footnote-33) At the time, Netanyahu had only 60 MKs in his bloc and he wanted Ra’am, which was not part of the Joint List at the time, to support the option of direct elections for the prime minister. Direct elections would have given Netanyahu, so he estimated, a clear victory and de facto immunity from his trial. Netanyahu terminated the negotiations after becoming convinced that he could win a safe majority in new Knesset elections. He dissolved the Knesset and new elections were scheduled for September 2019.

Netanyahu, so it seems, was also instrumental in Abbas’s decision to take a big risk and run alone, not partnering with another Arab party. After terminating the talks with Abbas in 2019, Netanyahu resumed negotiations with him after the March 2020 elections; he hoped to establish a right-wing coalition with the support of Ra’am. This time, it was Netanyahu himself who personally negotiated with Abbas. One of his promises was to revoke the Kaminetz Law, which was designed to accelerate the demolition of homes built without construction permits. According to Abbas, Netanyahu declared, “Only I can revoke the Kaminetz Law.” [[34]](#footnote-35) Abbas said many times that he believed Netanyahu and preferred him to any other partner. Netanyahu had the complete loyalty of his partners, with no dissent in his coalition, Abbas explained. The idea was to be part of the coalition, but not to serve as ministers in the government.

Netanyahu, so it seems, had been instrumental in Abbas’ decision to take a huge gamble and run independently in the March 2021 elections. (Ra’am had rejoined the Joint List in the previous two election rounds after running with Balad in the April 2019 elections.) The pre-election polling had predicted that Ra’am would not pass the 3.25% threshold for entering the Knesset. This, of course, would serve Netanyahu’s bloc. However, Abbas’ party did succeed in garnering over 3.25% of the vote and won four seats in the Knesset, giving the party a pivotal role in post-election coalition talks. Ra’am had broken new ground in advocating participation in the governing coalition in order to make a real difference for the Arabs in Israel from within the corridors of power.

The intensive, discreet negotiations that Netanyahu and his men had conducted with Abbas since April 2019 did not lead to a deal after the March 2021 elections. In the end, after the extremist Religious Zionism party refused to allow Ra’am to join Netanyahu’s coalition, Bennett and Lapid offered Abbas the same deal – and won a political partner in return. Hauser and Hendel made a distinction between an anti-Zionist party like the Joint List, and a party like Ra’am that was striving to influence the civic life of the Arab citizens – and did not object.

Abbas disclosed his series of talks with Netanyahu only after the latter accused Ra’am of funneling funds to Hamas. Netanyahu made this accusation after Abbas had entered into a coalition agreement with the Bennett-Lapid coalition, based on the same terms Netanyahu had discussed personally with Abbas at the Prime Minister’s Residence on Balfour Street. In November 2021, citing the alleged Hamas-Ra’am connection, Netanyahu’s loyalists called the government’s proposed budget “a budget with blood on its hands.” They organized a demonstration at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, but referred to the site as the Kings of Israel Square – its name prior to the assassination of Rabin there.[[35]](#footnote-36) Abbas explained that the reason for the delegitimization of Ra’am and incitement against it was that Netanyahu feared that passage of the national budget would secure Bennett’s government for two years. The budget indeed passed in November 2021, greatly increasing the chances of the government’s survival – with the support of the Islamist party, Ra’am.

1. **Populist Neo-Conservatism Versus Liberal Democracy?**

The incitement against the Arab citizens of Israel was not merely a campaign tactic. It was a core concept reflecting the transformation of the Likud-led government from national liberalism to populist neo-conservatism. Starting with speeches by Lieberman and Netanyahu on the Citizenship Law in 2010, the choice was between Israel as the Jewish state and Israel as a state of all its citizens. Both leaders chose the former. By changing the Citizenship Law to require every non-Jew who seeks Israeli citizenship to declare loyalty to the Jewish state, by raising the electoral threshold to prevent the Arab lists from entering the Knesset, and by enacting Basic Law: Israel – The Nation-State of the Jewish People without an equality clause, “the Jewish people” became a firmly entrenched ethno-national concept. This notion of the Jewish people entailed a different reading of democracy, emphasizing the rule of the (Jewish) people, stressing collective national rights and countering the rights discourse with a republican interpretation of rights as emanating from obligations. Military or national service was set as a condition for receiving rights, once again denying Arabs equal citizenship in the Jewish state. Loyalty to the Jewish people became an essential condition for being an Israeli. The populace, the quintessential concept of populism, was thus redefined.

Israel’s Declaration of Independence told the history of the Jewish people, yet also envisioned a democratic state with equal civic, political and social rights for all its citizens. In contrast, the populist neo-conservative narrative cultivated by the Netanyahu governments for over a decade emphasized the dichotomy between Israel as the state of all its citizens and the Jewish state. A Jewish ethno-national-religious narrative replaced the Israeli story that promised both civic equality and national Jewish rights.

The portrayal of “the Arabs” also exposed the core concepts of this burgeoning populist neo-conservative ideology. The neo-conservative concept of the Jewish people led to a different interpretation of “rule by the people” in the Israeli democracy and of majoritarian rule – by the Jewish majority. The core concept of liberal democracy – rights – was modified to include both rights and obligations. The obligations were framed, first and foremost, as a demand for loyalty to Israel as the Jewish state. This loyalty was expressed in military or national service, and thus excluded Arab citizens. Loyalty also became a way to distinguish the patriots from the enemies of the state and their supporters. “The Arabs” were a negligible force in the 2015 elections, but they facilitated the delegitimization of the left – the human rights organizations and the left-wing parties that supported them, which were denounced as “anti-Zionist” for advocating equal rights and peace. Loyalty also become the key concept of governability. Those who criticized or placed restrictions on government ministers (who were ostensibly the chosen representatives of “the people,” but were ultimately loyal to the prime minister who appointed them) were defined as enemies of the rule of the people. The “leftist” civil servants, the public media and the “unelected” judiciary, along with the Arabs, of course, were designated as traitors. In this deep-state scheme, the state’s apparatus was seen as liberal and therefore hostile to the conservative prime minister and his government.

However, our Schmittian analysis of the constructions of “the Arabs” as an existential foe and fifth column is only half of the story. Already in 2014, Netanyahu authorized the Finance Ministry to work on an ambitious economic program for the Arabs. It was approved by the most extreme right-wing government in Israel’s history – Netanyahu’s 2015–2019 government. The economic program changed the budgeting system and brought Arab representatives – mayors, civil society organizations and Arab MKs from the Joint List – into the process of planning and implementing policy. This had a transformational impact on Arab politicians (certainly Mansour Abbas, but also Ayman Odeh), encouraging them to consider new ways of representing Israeli Arabs. However, Resolution 922, approved by a national-conservative government, was conditioned upon a right-wing ethos: placing police stations within Arab towns, demolishing illegally built Arab houses, and fighting crime in the Arab society.

Another round of incitement followed the April 2019 elections, when the Arabs were accused of stealing the elections. The threat of Arab voting fraud was also a recurrent theme in Netanyahu’s campaign prior to the next round of elections, in September 2019. In this way, the election results were delegitimized in advance – as an excuse for losing, if this occurred. However, even as he continued to incite against the Arabs, Netanyahu was negotiating with Abbas. For the first time, Netanyahu invited an Islamist party to become a coalition partner and promised substantial economic programs aimed at transforming the infrastructure of the Arab Israeli society. What prevented this plan from materializing was what Netanyahu did with his other hand: legitimizing the racist Jewish Power party and pressuring its neo-Kahanist leader, Itamar Ben-Gvir, to unite with his rival, Bezalel Smotrich to form the Religious Zionism party. It was this extremist party that denied Netanyahu his coalition with Ra’am. Netanyahu’s twofold deal won in the end, albeit for his opposition: Bennett and Lapid offered Abbas a full partnership in the coalition (without ministerial positions, which Ra’am declined) and a transformative ten-year economic plan worth a total of 30 billion shekels. In the end, economics triumphed.

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