

Last update - 10:16 19/06/2005

Arabs for hire

By [Gideon Levy](#)

The Labor Party is on its way to victory. Its courageous, stubborn struggle to establish a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians, against the brutal use of violence, against the occupation and for equality, is bearing fruit.

Israel's Arabs are no doubt impressed by the resolved, uncompromising struggle of the party that never renounced its principles for a cabinet seat, because tens of thousands of them are signing up as members.

Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, the former defense minister, who ordered the mass assassinations and the closure, is enrolling thousands of members. The popularity of Matan Vilnai, former OC Southern Command, who conducted the occupation in Gaza, is also on the rise among the Arabs. Shimon Peres, one of the fathers of the settlement project in the territories, and Amir Peretz, who did not lift a finger for the hundreds of thousands of unemployed Palestinian laborers, are leading the polls in the Arab community. Even Ehud Barak, during whose government 13 Arab demonstrators were shot dead, has his Arabs.

Some 25,000 Arabs have already enrolled in the largest bi-national party, a quarter of its total members. In Tira the number of people who registered for Labor is six times higher than the number of residents. The number of those who signed up in Kafr Qasem is five times higher than the number of residents, and in Taibeh four times higher. Could there be better news than this for the seekers of justice and peace?

"The Israeli Arabs' joining the party indicates that they are becoming more moderate," boasts Interior Minister Ophir Pines-Paz in an article in Maariv. But the Israeli Arabs' registering to the party signifies nothing but opportunism of the worst kind. Doubling the Arab support for a party that joined Ariel Sharon's government and is responsible historically for most of the ills of discrimination and occupation, portrays them in a wretched light and only perpetuates the humiliating treatment to which they are subjected.

People who present themselves so pitifully should not expect fairer treatment. Their support for Labor is not much different than their vote for MK Ayoub Kara of the Likud.

Who said there were no principles in politics? Israel's Arabs have proved that there is one principle that does not change in our political culture - Arabs can be bought, cheaply. The price has not risen since

Yisrael Koenig, the Interior Ministry official in charge of the Northern District, bought Arab votes for the National Religious Party with licenses for hunting rifles, or since Shas bought Arab votes for building permits. The Arabs have displayed neither political maturity nor national awareness, solidarity with their Palestinian brethren or a struggle against the discrimination. Only petty wheeling and dealing, which characterizes the political conduct of those who join the Labor party.

These people are disgracing their nation and politics. It is no coincidence that about half of those who enrolled in Labor, and are also members of another party, are Arabs. Functionary Iyad Mansour, of Tira, a former Peres supporter, collected no less than 5,000 votes for Ben-Eliezer. "Fuad is the new hope of the Arab community, he is the one who can help us," he says. Fuad? The new hope?

The distorted relations between the Arabs and Labor have been going on for years - the former sell themselves for peanuts and the latter buys them for peanuts. In the early days of the state it may have been hard to criticize the Arabs for this. They were, after all, living under a military regime and were stunned by the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of their brethren and the wiping out of more than 400 of their villages in 1948. Now it is harder to find an explanation for their conduct.

For decades, Labor governments have perpetuated the deprivation of Israel's Arabs and the erasure of their national memory, but the Arabs still voted for them. The most they got in return was all kinds of paltry scraps. In the '80s, when Peres wanted to impress his guests from the Socialist International, he would invite Arabs to the meetings with them, preferably in traditional costume. "It would be good for them to see a few kaffiyehs in the audience," he used to tell his aides. Labor leaders thought they could buy the Arabs for a few mutters of "shukran, shukran," sipping bitter coffee and nibbling sweet baklava. They were not far off the mark.

It is no accident that an Arab leadership worthy of its name never developed in Labor. Its Arab Knesset members were always dull functionaries, bordering on caricatures, from Seif-el-Din el-Zubi and Jabr Moade to Saleh Tarif and Raleb Majadele. Meretz, too, failed to present a more impressive gallery. Between Hussein Faris and Hussniya Jabara, its Arab MKs sank into oblivion.

Israel's Arabs deserve a better leadership. It exists, but not in Labor. The community's outstanding MKs were never Labor members, they were all members of the Arab parties. Figures like Ahmed Tibi, Azmi Bishara and Mohammed Barakeh, who represent their voters' interests courageously and resolutely, even if many Israelis do not like it, could not have grown in Labor's "Arab department" headed by the Jew Ra'anan Cohen.

Everything could have been different. If only Labor were a party that fought for peace, equality and justice, and if its Arab members had conditioned their support on upholding these values, it would have

become a model of morality. The significance of Labor's betrayal and the deceit of its Arab supporters therefore goes far beyond the party's electoral future. In the present situation, in which Labor is a party with no ideological spine, and the Israeli Arabs supporting it give opportunism a bad reputation, speaking about a just, joint life is meaningless. Exactly like the enlistment of the functionary Ayad Mansour to help the sector's new hope, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer.

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