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Institute for Israel Studies  
University of Maryland

# Moshe Kahlon and the Politics of the Mizrahi Middle Class in Israel

Nissim Leon  
Bar-Ilan University  
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Election polls in Israel reveal the great electoral potential of the new “*Kulanu*” (“All of Us”) list, just formed by former Likud Knesset Member Moshe Kahlon. Some polls predict seven seats for him in the next Knesset; others put the number as high as eleven. Either way, this high-profile party is reminiscent of the appearance of *Yesh Atid* (“There is a Future”), which emerged ahead of the 2013 general elections to become the second-largest party in the current Knesset. The same scenario may or may not repeat itself this time, but what is clear is that the Kulanu list offers another angle on the mapping of the forces of change that are at work in contemporary Israeli society, first and foremost among them the politics of the country’s increasingly diverse middle class.

## **The Politics of the Diversifying Middle Class in Israel**

The roots of the Kulanu list are firmly planted in the dramatic change that has taken place in Israeli society over the past two decades, with the diversification of the middle class and the emergence of its agenda as a prominent factor in the Israeli political system. By the term diversification I refer to the fact that while in the distant past the Israeli middle class comprised mainly Jews of Eastern and Central European descent (Ashkenazim), and its foremost representatives identified themselves with the liberal wings of both the Left and the Right, in recent decades the middle class has become more heterogeneous, both ethnically and religiously. The question of the expansion or contraction of the middle class in Israel remains an open one: like many western societies it faces pressures of globalization and threats of erosion, but there seems to be no denying the fact that it has become more diverse and currently comprises three main forces: the second generation of the older, established middle class; the new middle class among the Religious Zionist sector; and the Mizrahi middle class.

The political power of this second generation of the middle class is illuminated by the case of *Yesh Atid*, founded and headed by former media personality Yair Lapid in the elections of 2013.

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*Nissim Leon* is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

The party appealed mainly to the younger generation of the established, secular middle class - young singles and couples. The party's leadership sought to capture the political energy of the mass social protests held by this sector during the summer of 2011, against the rising cost of living and in favor of including the ultra-Orthodox within the military service draft. The placement of the party's representatives in ministerial positions with social leverage may have been forced upon them by the coalition negotiations that followed the elections, but to a large extent this placement also matched the spirit of the agenda that the party sought to advance. Thus, representatives of Yesh Atid were given ministerial positions in socio-economic spheres such as Finance, Welfare, and Health.

Among the Religious Zionist sector, too, there is evidence of the political influence of a new and diversifying middle class. The processes of socio-economic change and mobility that have taken place in Israel since the beginning of the millennium, with a transition from a modern industrial economy trading in goods to a post-industrial economy trading in knowledge, have affected the Religious Zionist sector as well. In contrast to the secluded, separatist ultra-Orthodox society in Israel, Religious Zionist society is able to integrate a modern lifestyle with religious tradition. Religious Zionist schools teach secular subjects at an advanced level, along with religious studies.

An expression of the development of the new middle class among this sector may be discerned on the communal level. A good example is the town of Givat Shmu'el, near Tel Aviv, which over the past two decades, has attracted a fairly wealthy Religious Zionist population. Newly-built-up areas have become religious neighborhoods that are part of the culture of the upper middle class. This reality is expressed in lifestyle and leisure activities of the inhabitants, religious schools offering a superior general educational, and a well-developed consumer culture. Similar processes are evident in Religious Zionist communities in new suburban towns such as Modi'in and Shoham, and in more established urban centers such as Raanana, Petah Tikvah, and Kfar Saba.

These changes within the Religious Zionist public are embodied in the person of Naftali Bennett, leader of the *Bayit Yehudi* ("Jewish Home") party; who is a well-to-do hi-tech entrepreneur and

resident of Raanana, a centrally-located city regarded as one of the strongholds of the Religious Zionist bourgeoisie. He has sought to transform the party (successor to the venerable National Religious Party or “*Mafdal*”) into an address for a wider public, transcending sectoral boundaries to become a general Jewish national party. As a first step he promoted Ayelet Shaked, a young, secular engineer who shares his political views, to the party’s top echelons.

Bennett’s consolidated position as a representative of Religious Zionism and his proven desire to remold the image of its central political leadership indicates that the center of power amongst this sector has shifted, in recent years, from the settlements of the West Bank, where the ideological-religious leadership plays a prominent role, to the urban communities in central Israel, which are regarded as maintaining a religious approach that is more moderate and open, but no less nationalistic. Thus, along with the nationalist ideology espoused by the Bayit Yehudi, its agenda also includes the cost of living and quality of life of the middle class. It is no wonder, then, that Bayit Yehudi representatives viewed such ministries as Economy and Housing as attractive political goals.

Yesh Atid and Bayit Yehudi have given voice to the new and younger middle class within their respective sectors, and are perceived by their voters as replacing the “old political order” of the older parties, such as Labor, Meretz, and Mafdal. A similar process is now being spearheaded by Moshe Kahlon among the public from which the *Likud* (“Consolidation”) party has drawn its main support for the last thirty or forty years: the Mizrahi middle class.

## **The Mizrahi Middle Class**

The term “Mizrahim” has two different meanings for Israeli sociologists. In one sense it is a categorical name for the descendants of Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, North Africa, and the Balkans. At the same time, it is also used as a fundamentally critical sociological term relating to the ethno-class experience of this group, many of whom, upon reaching Israel, found themselves relegated to peripheral regions with poor socio-economic prospects. Moreover, their cultural identity was eroded or challenged by the national “melting-pot” mechanisms such as the state education system and the army. As such, the term “Mizrahi” has come to denote a

categorical sociological perception of an ethnic Jewish group permanently located on the periphery of Israeli society.

However, in the decades following the political “upheaval” of 1977 in which the Likud party came to power for the first time, a new group – a Mizrahi middle class – began to develop. In fact, by 1985, Israeli sociologist Efraim Yaar noted that Mizrahim had consolidated routes of social mobility that bypassed higher education, by focusing on occupations in the petit-bourgeois private enterprise sector. Sociologist Beverly Mizrahi explored this phenomenon in greater depth, enlisting the tools of qualitative research to arrive at the ramifications of this process of mobility in terms of perceptions of self-identity and ethnic identity. The transition from a workers’ class to the middle class, estimated by sociologists Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Steven Sharot in the early 1990s as encompassing around a third of this sector, has continued unabated.

The class shift of Mizrahim from the periphery towards the center has turned out, over the years, to be a multi-dimensional change. It has become clear that this is not merely a broadening of the petit bourgeois stratum, but also a broadening of the academic and free professions sector. Tangible expressions of this development are to be found on the urban and academic scene in Israel. Examples include the new neighborhoods built during the 1990s in the western part of Rishon le-Tzion, in eastern Netanya, and in areas of development towns set aside for private home-building projects, all of which boast a prominent Mizrahi middle class presence.

To this we might add the veritable revolution wrought by the appearance of private and regional colleges, which have made higher education more accessible and whose student bodies include a large percentage of Mizrahim. The result is that alongside reports of a replication of ethnic gaps amongst Israeli society, there are also those who find many indications that Mizrahim are occupying higher socio-economic percentiles in proportion to their numbers, while becoming noticeably less dominant in the lower percentiles. A study by Israeli economist Momi Dahan, published in 2013, describes how the proportion of Mizrahim occupying the lower income percentiles has dropped since 1979, with a concurrent shift to the middle and upper percentiles. A large share of this change took place during the years 1989-1999, and even more significantly, between 1999-2009.

## The Politics of the Mizrahi Middle Class

The emergence of the Mizrahi middle class has not received much attention in studies of the Israeli political system. For the most part, the political story of the Mizrahim has been the story of *Shas*, the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party. Unquestionably, *Shas* is a very prominent ethnic and religious party, having grown from a marginal force in the 1990s to a major player on the political scene. However, the almost exclusive focus on the ethnic politics of *Shas* has distorted the picture. The early popularity of *Shas* and the later arresting of its growth should not be viewed independently of the development of Mizrahi middle class politics.

*Shas* succeeded, over a long period of fieldwork, in changing the religious infrastructure of Mizrahi Jewry. However, it did not bring a message of social mobility. On the contrary, while affiliation with the party might have offered spiritual reinforcement and an accentuated Mizrahi identity, voters and supporters found themselves either stuck in the Mizrahi workers' class or struggling for their identity and economic survival amongst the impoverished ultra-Orthodox scholar society.

Until about a decade ago, the Mizrahi middle class had a very clear address: the Likud party. Since the “upheaval” of 1977, the Likud Central Committee – the party’s governing body, consisting of activists in the various regions – was in fact the Mizrahi middle class’s center of political power. In order to understand this, we must take a brief pause and go back to the decade preceding the rise of the *Likud* to power for the first time, the period leading up to May, 1977.

The foundations of Likud were laid by the *Herut* (“Freedom”) party, whose membership and leaders were fighters from the rightwing underground *Etzel* (*Irgun*) and *Lehi* movements. During the decade preceding the upheaval, the composition of the Central Committee of the *Herut* party changed. Systematic review of its protocols during that period indicates three trends: the first was an influx of Mizrahi personnel into the party’s Central Committee, such that the 10% Mizrahi representation in 1966 had rocketed to 50% three months prior to the May, 1977 elections.

Secondly, the protocols reveal the role played by Yitzhak Shamir in the efforts to diversify the Central Committee and introduce Mizrahi activists into the party mechanism – despite the opposition of the party’s veteran leadership. Thirdly, we find that the Mizrahi activists who became members of the party’s various branches, and then of the Central Committee, did not come with the intention of asserting their Mizrahi identity; rather, they championed the social and national needs of the public they now represented.

For the most part, what they wanted was quite simple: not to be viewed as a sector that could be “bought” with a token show of tradition, nationalism, and fiery speeches about the “Greater Land of Israel,” but rather as a public with aspirations for national life in the form of proper education, housing, and possibilities for social mobility. As part of all this change, they also wanted something else: power and influence. Their demand for power and influence went against the party’s conventional patterns of “patronizing” political partnership – i.e., representation on an ethnic basis.

The Mizrahi activists wanted “competitive partnership” - real competition against the party veterans. They achieved this three months before the 1977 elections with the abolition of the Placements Committee that had been responsible for the ordering of the candidates for the Knesset, and the introduction of broad democratic procedures for the party’s Central Committee. For the Mizrahi activists, “politics” was not a foreign concept or dirty word; it was viewed as an appropriate tool for achieving their demands. These demands were not always acceded to, and the social energy of the Likud Central Committee often found itself in a confrontational position vis-à-vis the party leadership, but the demand was nevertheless a perennial item on the Likud agenda, and this situation came to influence other major groups, including the Labor party.

The result of all of the above was an accumulation of political power, on both the national and municipal levels, which was translated into the creation of accessible channels for higher education (the ‘Colleges Revolution’), advanced housing options and urban development (new urban neighborhoods), and – of course – conspicuous influence on the composition of the ruling party’s leadership. Alongside the former Etzel and Lehi fighters (the “fighting family”) who had formed the initial core, the party expanded over the years to include a number of Mizrahi figures such as

David Levi from Beit She'an, or – representing the younger generation - David Magen from Kiryat Gat and Meir Sheetrit from Yavneh. Over the years, these figures symbolized and advanced the ambitious social agenda of the Mizrahi middle class and the struggle against the trend towards ultra-Orthodoxy represented by Shas.

The Mizrahi middle class has not always seen its future in the Likud. In 1992, for example, many voters from this sector preferred Yitzhak Rabin, whose social agenda matched their own, and under whose leadership there was increased spending on education and the laying of the groundwork for the academic colleges. The Likud candidate for Prime Minister in 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu, had to work very hard to woo this group back to its political home in the Likud.

The increased political influence of the Mizrahi middle class carried a price in two areas. One was the process of privatization - the transfer of public capital into private hands – which had the effect of shattering the *Histadrut* (General Workers' Union) that operated under the influence of the Labor party, but also of pulling out the rug from under the Mizrahi workers' class. The Mizrahi middle class and its representatives were not overly troubled by this development; to a certain extent they even benefitted from it. The other price was the biting criticism, from within and without, of the new “bosses” of the party. It was difficult to throw off the stereotypes that adhered to Mizrahi origins and the arrogant attitude towards Mizrahi activists and politicians. In my view, to this day the language used in discourse with and about this group is influenced by a whole collection of stereotypes, to which its representatives often contribute.

The political energy of the Mizrahi middle class within the Likud Central Committee sat well with the social message that the party leaders sought to depict. The Likud came across as a down-to-earth party connected to the social message of its activists, although in practice it became increasingly difficult to point to social achievements in a market exposed to processes of economic globalization and subject to the rigid policy of economic stabilization adhered to by party leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu or Silvan Shalom. In recent years, the political energy of the Mizrahi middle class has sought a way of out of the Likud Central Committee towards an independent political path.



Of course, one of the reasons for this is the personal struggles within the upper echelons of the party. As strange as it seems, the party that gained so much from Mizrahi votes has never yet placed a Mizrahi figure at its head, and senior Mizrahi figures - David Levi, Yitzhak Mordechai, Shaul Mofaz, and, two years ago, Moshe Kahlon - have slowly trickled out of the Likud. Of course, each case is different, but there is no denying this gradual exodus.

It must be remembered that the term “Mizrahi” here likewise does not necessarily mean a label of ethnic origin, but rather the representation of a story of struggle and a transition from a location on the margins to a location at the center, which resounds with a large percentage of the Israeli public – the second and third generation descendants of the great wave of immigration from the Muslim countries. What became clear over the course of this process was the difficulty of the second-generation Mizrahi middle class in coping with the rising cost of living and thereby bolstering the quiet status revolution that took place over recent decades.

While the social protest movement in 2011 was depicted in public discourse as a mainly Ashkenazi phenomenon, Mizrahim were certainly partners to it, seeking a role in the setting down of a new contract between society and the state. To this we must add the changes and schisms within the Likud Central Committee itself, such as the increasing competition, with new centers of power finding their place within this body (such as the settlers), as well as the brief episode of the establishment of the *Kadima* ("Forward") party by Ariel Sharon in late 2005, who drew a significant number of central Likud figures and activists along with him. In addition there was the departure of major Likud figures to embark on their independent political paths – an example being Avigdor Lieberman. All this laid the foundations for the political conditions whose benefits are now apparently being reaped – at least in the polls – by Moshe Kahlon.

## **The Political Hero of the Mizrahi Middle Class**

Over the years, the Mizrahi middle class has brought different figures to the fore of the political stage in Israel, spanning the Left-Right political divide. These have included Meir Sheerit, Silvan Shalom, Benjamin (Fuad) Ben-Eliezer, Amir Peretz, Rafi Aloul, Shaul Mofaz, Gila Gamliel, and Orli Levi, along with many other relatively unknown names who are active in the municipal, economic, business, and academic spheres. They are perceived by the broader Israeli public as

being somewhat obscure, too involved in making deals and not clear enough in their ideology. It is therefore not surprising that the up-and-coming hero of the Mizrahi middle class is someone who grew within the Likud ranks and attained widespread popularity in the public at large.

Moshe Kahlon was born in 1960, in a depressed neighborhood of Hadera, to a large family that had its origins in Tripoli, Libya. He performed his military service in the IDF Ordnance Corps, where he also served in the permanent ranks. Those familiar with the IDF will know that this environment comprised mostly Mizrahim serving in “military blue collar” positions, as it were. After his discharge he worked in the importation of vehicle accessories, while at the same time engaging in local political activity within the Likud. Over time he became a member of the Likud Central Committee, and a prominent figure within that body.

He served as an MK representing the Likud in three Knessets. As part of his party activity, he was chosen, with the support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as head of the party’s Central Committee. On the eve of the 2009 elections, he took first place in the party primaries, and this helped him to achieve a ministerial position in the government. As Minister of Communications he made a name for himself within the broader Israeli public with a comprehensive reform in the realm of mobile telephones, leading to a significant drop in costs to consumers. This significant accomplishment turned Kahlon into the symbol of a reformer who had succeeded in overpowering major corporate forces in the Israeli economy. Netanyahu himself asked his ministers to “be Kahlons and find solutions.” However, in October, 2012, at the height of his success in the Likud government, he decided to leave the Likud. On the eve of the 2015 elections he established his own list – Kulanu.

A few years ago Kahlon completed a law degree at the Netanya Academic College – a local private institution offering mainly social science and law degrees. After leaving the Likud, he joined the College and was placed at the head of its Center for Reform and Leadership. Within the framework of this Center he engaged in the early organization of the political infrastructure that he would need for the Knesset list that he was going to establish, as well as the theoretical foundations for the reforms that he will be seeking to bring about by means of that list.

Political commentators in Israel maintain that Kahlon focuses on two main topics that are likely to be central issues in the coming elections: housing and the cost of living. The jump in housing costs in Israel over the last five years has become a problem that impacts the stability of the political system. Likewise, the cost of living, and the comparison in this regard between Israel and other countries, has become a high-priority item on the public agenda.

As things appear right now, Kahlon's approach matches the thinking that led to the political breakthrough for the Mizrahi middle class: a demand for competitive partnership, and in this case an outlook that connects social benevolence to an increase of free competition in the Israeli economy. This in itself is enough to mark Kahlon as pursuing a different approach from the one that Mizrahi politics seemed to be associated with in the past. A closing of social gaps will not be achieved through a quest for economic equality, but rather by increasing competition. In this sense Kahlon is not a "black panther" but rather a neo-liberal tiger who seeks a balance in the regulation of the free market.

Kahlon's choice to work out of the Netanya Academic College, rather than in one of the modern office buildings preferred by most politicians seeking a new path in the political realm, is no incidental matter. The institution is in some ways a symbol of the story of the Mizrahi middle class. The connection between political capital and academic capital - with the knowledge and status that the latter entails - is what makes the Mizrahi middle class a social force with presence and cumulative influence on Israeli society. The Mizrahi middle class is not a group that emerges from within the world of the research universities, but rather from within the practical academic tracks offered by the private and public colleges.

These institutions, as noted above, played a role in making higher education accessible to the broader public in outlying regions as well as in the center of the country, but also – and no less importantly – in sketching the desired route of social mobility for different groups seeking to enhance their status; not via the fortresses of knowledge of the veteran middle class, at the research universities situated in the major cities, but rather via the local outposts of knowledge associated with the Israeli middle class that are closer to the scenery of their own lives. Among these groups we might include the Religious Zionist sector, which discovered the Ariel University Center of

Samaria (which became Ariel University about five years ago), and the Muslim Arabs who form a major portion of the student body in Western Galilee College and in Sapir College in the south of the country. In addition, there are the ultra-Orthodox colleges in Bnei Brak and Jerusalem, oriented to the ultra-Orthodox public that seeks to integrate into advanced employment possibilities and to join the Israeli middle class.

In other words, going beyond Kahlon's political and ideological approach, attention should be paid to the symbolic effect that accompanies his personal story and exerts its presence in the background articles that have been flooding the media discourse in Israel for some time already. On the structural level it appears that while Shas tried to build a society of religious scholars (around institutions of religious studies) that preserves its ethnic identity, Mizrahi middle-class political entrepreneurs of Kahlon's type try to portray themselves as being committed to the development of an academic society (colleges and universities) that has not forsaken the memory of the Mizrahi experience in Israel, but at the same time seeks to mold a future for the broader Israeli public.

In addition, there is the personal dimension. Kahlon's story is the story of a Mizrahi middle class hero: a formerly unremarkable Likud Central Committee activist, with a working-class background, who rose to prominence in Israeli public life. His personal journey from a depressed neighborhood full of families of former immigrants from Arab and North African countries, to an influential position on the political scene, inspires tens of thousands of youth and families in the midst of a similar climb towards the Mizrahi middle class.

From this perspective it would not be an exaggeration to argue that Moshe Kahlon may be perceived less as a real personality engaged in political initiative, and more as a symbolic figure associated with the desire to break out of the economic periphery – not via a position of power that relies on an electoral reservoir that defines itself in terms of its ethnic identity, but rather out of a quest for a change in class status.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the commentaries covering Kahlon's emerging party prefer to deal with the personal background to his initiative and less with its social background. Experienced political commentators view Kulanu as a skeleton party that is organizing itself around personal needs,

while others view it as just one more “atmosphere” party. However, even “skeleton” and “atmosphere” parties do not draw their power *ex nihilo*. The fact that Kahlon’s initiative is viewed as relevant in the eyes of the public is due to the energy of the politics of the diversifying Israeli middle class – in this instance, the Mizrahi middle class. This public has for some time been seeking an up-to-date political address that could formulate its agenda and create an operative plan for social and economic change in Israel. This appears to be the proper perspective for the study of Kahlon’s party and the political potential that it will either realize or waste in the future.

***For further reading:***

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