CHAPTER ELEVEN

ETHNIC RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN ISRAEL:
THE CASE OF THE SHAS PARTY

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The Shas Movement emerged on the Israeli political scene with the 1984 Israeli parliamentary elections. The party was founded by ultra-Orthodox rabbis, second generation Jewish immigrants from the Arab countries. Its goal was to rehabilitate the population in the Israeli periphery, the majority of whom are Jewish immigrants from Arab countries. They were characterized by poor education, low income, a rejected culture, a religious lifestyle, negligible integration within the political system, and an external and stereotypical resemblance to Arabs. This occurred despite the efforts of governments from the early days of the State of Israel to blur the ethnic identity of the Jewish immigrants and aggressively oppose a religious lifestyle. This chapter will explain the reasons for the founding and success of the only ultra-Orthodox ethnic party in the Israeli political system.

The State of Israel was established in 1948 by Jewish leaders from Eastern Europe, who chose to abandon their parents’ culture and create a modern secular society in a new land. However, this ideology did not suit the Jewish immigrants who arrived from the Islamic countries during the 1950s and 1960s. This was because most of them were religiously devout and had personal and cultural characteristics that identified them as Arab. This reality divided them for many years from the group that had established the State and the other immigrants who had come from Christian countries.

The Israeli establishment’s socialization attempts to secularize these immigrants and change their personal characteristics failed. Many experienced frustration, despair and the inability to escape their culturally, religiously, politically, and economically inferior status. After around forty years, the first positive changes in their status began to take shape, as a result of an ethnic party entering the Israeli political arena—the Shas Movement, which began in 1984. The Shas Movement is a political party originating from the lower stratum of Israeli society: those Jewish immigrants from Arab countries and their children. In short, the Shas Movement’s power lies with the citizens who are culturally, religiously, politically, and economically
inferior. The Shas Movement challenges contemporary Israeli society inasmuch as it is a declared ethnic party in a society that does not consider expression of ethnicity to be politically correct. It is also an ultra-Orthodox party in a society that does not believe the religiosity of these immigrants to be correct, but rather that of the ultra-Orthodox who originated in Europe.

This study will explain the reasons for the founding and success of Israel’s only successful ethnic ultra-Orthodox party. It will describe the reasons for the political organization of second-generation immigrants from Arab countries, the great importance played by religion and the religious establishment in the party’s success, and the results of its political achievement in the rehabilitation of the lowest echelon of Israeli society.

**Political Ethnicity**

Political ethnicity has been considered a permanent and significant issue in state domestic politics in Europe since the Second World War (Said and Simmons, 1976: 10–16). However, in the State of Israel, which wished to create a new Israeli nation, ethnic parties were considered unacceptable. Israeli society related negatively to social and political phenomena emanating from the Jewish immigrants from Arab countries. Public opinion identified ethnic traits only with easily delegitimized disadvantaged groups.

Despite this, significant political use is made in Israel of the ethnic motif. The veteran Israeli parties were founded by immigrants, mostly of Eastern European origin—meaning, ethnicity did actually play a part, but not as an overt ideology. Since none of the parties represented the immigrants from the Arab countries, they initially voted for the veteran parties in which they nevertheless experienced open discrimination against themselves.

The State of Israel was established as a home for Jews from all over the world. However, up until this day, with the third or fourth generation, most of the immigrants still identify with their country of origin. Jews whose grandparents came from Germany are called “German.” Jews whose families originated from Iraq are known as “Iraqis,” and so on. Israeli society as a whole, however, also divides its Jews into only two ethnic groups: those who emigrated from Christian European countries and those who came from Moslem Arab countries. Therefore, in Israel the concept of “ethnic

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1 The non-Jewish minority in Israel is excluded from this ethnic division. This minority is divided into religious groups: Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Bedouins. These groups are not directly related to this chapter.