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They 'forgot' one million people

By [Lily Galili](#)

One morning the heads of Kadima woke up and discovered that they were missing an Arab. That morning, incidentally, came a few days after they had presented their list of 50 candidates at a very impressive ceremony in Jerusalem. "Whoops, we goofed," they said among themselves, and confabulated to find a solution. Quickly they phoned the mayor of Al-Shagur, Ahmed Dabbah, and immediately slotted him into the 51st place on the list.

That is not exactly how it happened, however. Mainly because senior Kadima people are having a hard time explaining exactly how the chain of events developed and how it happened that about 20 percent of the citizens of the country are missing from their list, chosen very carefully to represent the entire population. And not just any citizens, but those whose camp Prime Minister Ariel Sharon personally wanted to lead before he fell ill.

But reality is even more complicated: At No. 18 on the list is the deputy minister of education, Majalli Whbee, a Druze. One could say - and there are those who do - that a Druze is also a representative of the Arab sector. There are Druze who think so and there are Arabs who see the Druze community as an integral part of the Arab entity. The problem is that the Jewish establishment throughout the generations has in fact made a distinction between Druze and Arabs, and differentiates between them in various ways. It is only when it comes to allocating places on new Knesset lists that the distinction is eradicated. After all, that establishment is a whiz at the manipulative game of the politics of identity.

As of now, the Druze Whbee is the sole representative of "e-v-e-r-y-o-n-e" in the "non-Jewish sector" in a realistic slot -and also head of Kadima's "non-Jewish" campaign headquarters. By way of comparison, the Russian-speakers, whose share in the population is similar to the Arabs', have six representatives up to the 44th place. The explanation is quite simple: Russian-speakers will vote for Kadima. The Arabs - not for sure. In any case, not in the same high percentages. Concerning the Arabs, the senior Kadima people brought to the new party something that is a legacy of former prime minister and Likud candidate MK Benjamin Netanyahu: They give -they'll get. If they give votes in the elections, they will get slots in the future. Symbolically, the party that is expected to be the ruling party, which has made it an aim to determine the permanent borders of the state of Israel, has not put an Arab in a realistic place on its list. At a symbolic level, the Arabs will not be partners to determining the country's borders.

"Usually in elections, first they give credit and then they pay cash in return," joked Jamal Khir of Abu Snan cynically. "Kadima has done it the other way around. They want the Arabs' votes in cash, and then afterward they'll give credit."

Hasty addition

Khir was one of the many representatives of the sector who came to Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's first meeting with the chiefs of Kadima branch headquarters on Sunday.

Among them were council heads, representatives of municipal councils and "field activists" who have joined Kadima. More precisely, they have joined what they expect will be the ruling party. They all sat together, in the front rows, and the absence of an Arab candidate from the list concerned them mightily.

"In my opinion, the acting prime minister missed the mark on this issue," said Salah Suleiman, the head of the Bueina-Nujidat council. "He ignored a million Arab citizens. Had there been an Arab candidate, the party would have received three Knesset seats from the sector. As it is, he will get one -maybe one and a half. This isn't smart, and I have no idea how it happened."

"It happened," said political strategist Reuven Adler ruefully, circulating in the hall that was full to capacity. "They put together the list of the 50, and when they saw that this was the situation, they immediately added an Arab candidate in 51st place. I didn't have a hand in this mishap," he added jokingly, happy to terminate the discussion to answer his mobile phone, which features the Kadima election jingle as its ring tone.

Campaign adviser Eyal Arad had a different explanation for the absence of an Arab candidate from the list, prior to the hasty addition of Dabbah. He explained to Haaretz that because people were appointed rather than elected to the list, a sensitive situation emerged: Every "appointed" Arab loses legitimacy in the Arab public, argued Arad.

A week later, at the meeting of the heads of the party's branches, election day headquarters chief Avi Dichter was in fact happy to welcome from the podium the No. 51 candidate, who was asked to stand up. "Let's work hard to make this place realistic," Dichter exhorted those present.

Dabbah himself relates that he was disappointed. He had expected to be somewhere between Nos. 11 and 20 on the list, or at least between 21 and 30. He says he was so confident that he did not even try to exert any pressure. Today he thinks that perhaps he erred. He looks left and sees three candidates from the minorities sector - a Druze, a Christian and a Muslim -among the first 21 names on the Labor Party list.

"There is anger in the sector," Dabbah explains. "Had they consulted me, I would have suggested to them that they integrate an Arab into every group of 10. But they didn't ask me, and I hope that they will correct the mistake in the future."

'They got it wrong'

The head of the Mashad council, Hussein Suleiman, and some of his friends did indeed try to change this situation in advance. Suleiman is currently still a member of the Labor central committee, but he is already attending Kadima meetings. Upon the establishment of that party by Sharon, he went there in the wake of Shimon Peres. "He broke the psychological barrier and we followed him," he relates.

But Suleiman's group also had expectations and demands: With 30 colleagues from the Arab sector, it established a forum to bring an Arab candidate into a realistic place on the list, sent a memo to Olmert and held meetings with those who made the decisions.

"We failed," he says, summing up the move. "Maybe it was done unintentionally, maybe they based themselves on the fact that the Likud didn't get votes from the Arabs. But they got it wrong. Today the Arab population is flocking en masse to Kadima. Anyone who believes in the Zionist parties wants to get close to the ruling party to serve his public. Theoretically, Majalli could represent the sector, but it's the establishment that always divides up the minorities into communities. Those who divide should behave accordingly. I understand that internal polls were conducted in Kadima, and they showed that the party isn't going to receive so many votes from the Arabs. Maybe they thought that in light of the surveys there was no point in wasting a place on an Arab candidate. That's what I've understood."

Surveys were indeed conducted. Like all candidates, the Arab ones were also examined in the preliminary polls. None of them looked like a candidate who would sweep in the votes. Indeed, sometimes the situation seemed to be quite the opposite. Suleiman is very familiar with this reality.

"To my regret, among us, people aren't nice to each other," he says. "The appointment of Candidate X would have annoyed 50 or 500 other Arabs. In this pettiness toward each other, we play into the hands of the establishment."

The establishment really doesn't seem upset. On Wednesday Kadima launched its campaign in the Arab sector at a large event in Dir al-Assad, although in the background there was still the demand to split the campaign headquarters into separate Arab and Druze headquarters. There was even a proposal to place Peres, the most popular man in Kadima among the Arab sector, at the head of the Arab headquarters.

This is not going to happen. According to internal and other public opinion polls, Kadima is expected to win 7 to 8 percent from the "non-Jewish" sector. In absolute numbers, this is about 30,000-40,000 votes - far more than the 3,900 votes the Likud won from the Arab sector in the last elections. Despite the complaints about lack of representation, criticism of this from the Arab media, and the Balad campaign calling for Arabs not to vote for the Zionist parties, one of Kadima's election billboards says: "If you vote for an Arab party - what are you?"

Whbee's powerful 'helper'

Deputy minister Whbee hears the voices in the sector, and does not seem to be bothered by them. He draws his strength from personal ties with Sharon and likes to relate that the prime minister once said to him: "I want to be your helper in the non-Jewish sector." He dismisses the repeated criticism of the lack of an Arab candidate with a smile: "I myself am not exactly from Poland, even if I may look a little as if I am." The rationale for putting the list together seems right to him.

Whbee: "They checked the candidates who proposed themselves in the surveys, and they found that they don't bring in votes. After all, every Arab candidate they would have brought in as 'decoration' would have owed those who appointed him, and not his own public. Do you think bringing in Dabbah in 51st place didn't cause squabbles? Right away they jumped up and said - why not from the south, why not from the Triangle? I am an objective Arab candidate who can represent everyone," Whbee says of himself. "Sometimes I blush from all the compliments that are heaped on me."

On the wall of Whbee's office at the Education Ministry hang photos of him with the late King Hussein of Jordan and other great international figures, whom he met on missions on which he was sent by Sharon. But the picture that gives him the most pleasure is an old photo of Sharon with Whbee's son, who was a small boy at the time; he is now doing his military service at Army Radio.

Whbee likes to relate that Sharon got angry at him only once, when he chose to retire from the Israel Defense Forces after 19 years of service, with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Since then, he describes a long romance that was built on great trust. In one of their last conversations, he recalls, Sharon said to him: "I've done a lot for my country, but I want to leave peace for my children and grandchildren."

As headquarters chief, Whbee also has a message for the Arab sector: "If I were a voter from the Arab sector, I would have to prove my ability in partnership. If we vote for Kadima in 'a big way,' the burden of proof toward us will be on the party."

This "burden of proof" is, among other things, the appointment of an Arab minister. Sharon promised that there would be one in his government, and Whbee is convinced it will be him.

In all fairness, it must be said that there are those in the Arab sector who see no importance whatsoever in representation in the Knesset. In their opinion, integration into directorates, government companies and the civil service is more important than an Arab candidate's place on a party list.