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Opportunities Presented by the New Arab Politics

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The March 2015 election campaign in Israel was significant for its influence on Arab politics. The familiar talk among Arab politicians about the need for unity in order to realize the electoral potential of Arab voters was translated into reality when for the first time a joint list of the main Arab parties took part in the elections. The formation of the Joint List was a function of internal political constraints, caused by the higher electoral threshold required under new legislation for Knesset representation. The rise in the electoral threshold reflected an unspoken sentiment in the Israeli establishment toward the Arab minority, designed to drive the Arab minority out of the national political arena while simultaneously attempting to integrate it in the national economy as part of the government effort to increase the GDP.

The initiative to raise the electoral threshold was based on the latent assumption that the respective elements in Arab politics would be hard pressed to achieve any real cooperation. Events proved otherwise. The Joint Arab List won 13 Knesset seats, making it the third largest faction in the Knesset. Its leader, Ayman Odeh, from the Hadash (an acronym for the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) Party, established his standing throughout the election campaign as a rising star and fluent representative of the Arab cause. Yet while the expectations about the unlikelihood of a union of the Arab parties proved wrong, the anticipated improvement in the status of the Arabs in the Knesset also failed to materialize. The Arab politicians expected a return to the situation during the second Rabin government (in the 1990s), when the Arabs became part of the governing party's obstructive bloc. In actuality, the Arab Knesset members were left politically excluded, in part due to the profound social processes among the Israeli Jewish population in recent decades.

The election results landed the Joint List in a complex situation. On the one hand, despite the joining of the lists, the political status of the Arab Knesset members did not become stronger, and the Arab minority remains underrepresented. On the other hand, the expectations aroused among the Arab public by the formation of the Joint Arab List did not change, and it therefore represents an important development in Arab politics in

Israel. Indeed, the March 2015 election results constitute a watershed event, second in importance only to the founding of the Arab political parties and the representatives bodies of the Arab public, including the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel. For this reason, the period after the elections poses a new challenge to Arab politics, originating in the gap between the failure to achieve any of the anticipated political change and the hope of the Arab public to see the ability by the Arab leadership to advance internal economic and social issues.

An examination of the policy of the Joint Arab List since the elections shows that its leaders are well aware of the difficult political situation that has emerged. The response of Ayman Odeh is an attempt to devise a new political strategy, based on the social discourse that could have been expected to penetrate deep into Israeli politics under the inspiration of the Arab Spring and the social protest in Israel in the summer of 2011. The appeal to social discourse is designed to enable Odeh to emphasize the common denominator between the Arab sector and those parts of the Jewish society giving priority to the social agenda, led by issues of housing, cost of living, and management of the Israeli economy. Such a strategy is also designed to help promote subjects at the heart of the Arab public's agenda, including those of national significance, but in a way that blurs the fault lines between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority.

One example of this strategy is the steps taken by Odeh to promote government recognition of unrecognized villages in the Negev, reflected in the march from the Negev to the president's house in Jerusalem. It is very difficult, however, to blur the fact that the Joint List's first political initiative involved one of the key bones of contention between the government and the Arab population, given the hitherto unsuccessful attempts to promote the Praver Plan to reach a solution for the Bedouin community in the Negev. It is, however, an interesting political choice, which indicates Odeh's aim of leveraging the social discourse for the purpose of promoting the goals of the Arab population.

The Joint List's social strategy is emerging as a significant revision of the two underlying approaches prevalent in Arab politics in recent decades, which have largely proved a major failure in their inability to advance the public's agenda. One is the nationalist approach of the Arab intellectuals and the members of Balad (the National Democratic Alliance); the second is the religious approach, led by the northern branch of the Islamic Movement. These two approaches have had a substantial influence on how the Arab leadership has attempted to alter the exclusionary status quo characteristic of the relations between the Arab public and the Israeli establishment and Jewish majority alike. The religious movement put Jerusalem and the Temple Mount at the head of its agenda, while the national movement sought a change in the foundations of the regime in Israel through the Future Vision documents. These two initiatives were perceived by the Israeli establishment as a challenge to the state's identity, and were therefore in practice

neutralized. Raed Salah, the leader of the Islamic movement, was sentenced to another prison term for his incitement in Jerusalem, and given a lack of willingness on the part of the establishment and the Jewish public discuss the Future Vision documents, the enterprise has in effect remained dormant.

What appears to be the first sign of a new strategy is therefore likely to be a possible change in approach on the part of the new Arab leadership, based on the lessons of the past. From the government's perspective, this might be an important opportunity to redesign the establishment's policy towards the Arab public, marked by the start of a dialogue between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. The key to such a policy lies in the government's ability to utilize the Joint List's social strategy to make the content of this discourse consistent with its goals for broader inclusion of the Arabs in the national economy. This action requires a government initiative to define the social agenda pertaining to the Arab minority and the issues to be addressed. A necessary condition for this policy is that such an agenda foster funded initiatives and plans to reduce social and economic discrimination against the Arab minority.

In order to facilitate this bilateral measure – an Arab focus on constructive social dialogue and a government initiative to narrow the socioeconomic gap between the majority and the minority – the current government will have to change direction, and as part of this change, blunt anti-Arab political activism. The Arab public perceives this activism as empowering the concept of deliberate exclusion, and it therefore has the effect of intensifying the national fault lines dividing the two sides. Such a policy also limits the possibility of inducing the Arab leadership to lower nationalistic emphases and emphasize civil and social matters. Restraint and moderation is required from both sides. More than ever, the Arab leadership must curb statements and initiatives of a provocative nationalistic character. Such moderation may enable the government to press ahead with socioeconomic plans that have a vital contribution to the approach of integration. It is important that a dialogue take place between the Arab leadership and the government; the results are likely to be reflected in an integrative national-social agenda that will serve the interests of both the majority and the minority.

