# Manal Hreib* / The Joint Arab List in 2015 Elections: Collaboration is a Necessity of the Times

The Joint List, announced by the Arab parties in Israel on January 23, 2014, has no historical precedent in Arab politics in Israel, even though calls for political unity in the Arab public are nothing new and have been heard for years. It has been argued that the Arab public's poor voting turnout in recent Knesset elections can be partially understood as an expression of protest and frustration over the divisions among the Arab parties and their leaders.

It is possible to point to four major factors that underlie the Arab parties' decision to run in the 2015 election as a joint list.

First, we cannot ignore the March 2014 amendment to the Knesset Election Law, which increased the parliamentary threshold from 2% to 3.25%. The amendment's official aim was to increase stable governance of Israeli governments, but the Arab and other small parties considered this a move designed to reduce their chances of passing the parliamentary threshold, and ultimately, to limit their chances of winning parliamentary representation. The new threshold does in fact significantly diminish the chances of each of the four Arab parties that are currently represented in the Knesset to individually gain seats in the upcoming elections. As a result, unification of the Arab parties, and an appreciation that such unification is critical, has been on the political agenda of the Arab public and the Arab parties in Israel since March 2014.

The second factor that influenced the establishment of the Joint List is the growing power of young educated Arabs. In the last two years, there has been a pronounced trend of steep growth in the civic involvement of young Arabs in political matters, on the Internet and in social networks. With the help of widespread use of Facebook, these young people have developed campaigns designed to influence public opinion, and have successfully led the Arab street in Israel and the Arab parties to large-scale demonstrations and protests over programs and laws on the public agenda in Israel, such as the Prawer Plan or the Nationality Law.

The rapid and dynamic action of these young people has created an infrastructure of civic pressure on the Arab parties, which spurred them to run as a united list. These young Arabs made audible the voice of the Arab street in Israel, which demands unity, new faces, and political representation for women and young people. The Facebook page *Arab Muttahidun* ("United Arabs") that was set up by young Arabs immediately after the decision to advance the election date, resolutely states, "We will vote only for a united list." Within days, the page accumulated thousands of "likes" that expressed support and identification with this message, and several hundred "shares." In mid-December 2014, the Facebook page published the results of a Facebook poll, which indicated that 83% of the Arabs in Israel want a united list, and only 2% want the parties to remain as they are.

The third factor that affected the Arab parties' decision to unite is the culture of contention in the Knesset and the growing chasm that divides the right-wing parties

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and the Arab parties. During the current government's administration, there was an overall sense of impending threat to the Arab parties and the Arab public in Israel, which was caused by right-wing attempts to promote laws and programs perceived by Arab citizens as detrimental to their identity and their rights as a civic, national minority in Israel. Plans such as the Prawer Plan on Bedouin Settlement (the plan was ultimately shelved), the Nationality Bill, calls to change the status quo on the Temple Mount, and encouragement of Christian Arabs to enlist in the IDF evoked strong objections. Although none of these programs were realized (with the possible exception of a rise in the enlistment rate of Christian Arabs in the IDF), they nevertheless contributed to the tension, sense of threat, and hostility between the Arab public, the Arab parties, and the government's right-wing coalition members. The measures were considered a collective menace to the future of all Arab parties and the future of the Arab public, and motivated the Arab parties to act in concert to increase their political power through a unified struggle to protect the Arab national identity, and Arab civic and national rights.

The fourth factor influencing the establishment of the Joint List was the collapse of Arab representation and party leadership in the municipal elections of 2013. The city of Nazareth is a prime example; candidate Ali Salam and his independent list "Nasrati" ("My Nazareth") defeated incumbent mayor Ramiz Jaraisy of the NDPE, a party that had been in office for 28 years. Salam also defeated MK Hanin Zoabi of the NDA who ran against him and won only 10% of the votes. Thus, Arab citizens sent a clear, determined message to party leaders: the Arab public does not trust the current parties to manage local matters. This message featured repeatedly on social networks and the media in relation to veteran politicians. Several were forced to resign, triggering a genuine revolution in the DFPE. New, young leaders emerged and forced MKs Mohammad Barakeh, Afou Agbaria, and Issam Makhoul to withdraw from the party's list for the 20th Knesset elections. The party presented voters with several new faces including Aida Toma-Suleiman and Aiman Ouda, the 40-year-old DFPE secretary general who heads the Joint List.

Reviewing the factors described above, it seems that the formation of a joint list was inevitable. In contrast to prevailing public opinion in Israel, raising the parliamentary threshold requirements was not the sole or main reason for the formation of the Joint List, it was merely a catalyst in developments that were already in motion.