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**The Arab Public and the Forthcoming Knesset Elections:  
Between Public Pragmatism and Nationalist Dogmatism**

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Most Arab citizens of Israel aspire to integrate into the fabric of Israeli society and participate in national decision making on issues of importance to them. The Joint List of Arab parties supports these aspirations but continues to emphasize nationalist issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, the Ra'am party and its leader Mansour Abbas support a more pragmatic approach and work with Zionist parties, including Likud, in order to maximize the party's impact. In addition, Ra'am seeks to leverage the protracted draw between the two main political blocs, where each side welcomes any additional votes, including from the Arab sector, in order to break the deadlock and prevail in the March elections. Hence Ra'am's pragmatic messaging, which is intended to persuade the Zionist parties that it could be a legitimate partner in a governing coalition. Meanwhile, the Joint List – of which Ra'am is still nominally a member – is struggling to maintain its unity and its relatively large representation in the Knesset, which is now expected to shrink. It is too early to predict the distribution of Arab votes and the outcome of post-election coalition negotiations. However, if the political deadlock persists after the elections, the appeal of the Arab vote might well increase and enable the Arab sector to score significant achievements, despite the prevailing exclusionary Jewish attitude toward the Arab minority.

Over the past decade, members of the Arab middle class in Israel have exhibited an unmistakable trend of striving for integration in the country's economic, social, cultural, and political arenas, despite having to contend with ongoing public, political, and cultural exclusion by large segments of Jewish society and the state itself. This exclusion was reinforced officially with the 2018 Nation-State Law and the 2020 Amendment 116 to the Building and Planning Law (which increases the penalties for illegal construction). It is also expressed in anti-Arab incitements voiced by leading politicians. Through various means, including active political participation in decision making processes, Arab citizens of Israel are striving to fundamentally improve their social status and political position in order to promote full civil rights, equality, and a more balanced distribution of public resources. The establishment of the Joint List (2015) after the electoral threshold was raised, followed by the party's dramatic accomplishment in the subsequent elections,

encouraged this trend. At the same time, the Jewish public as a whole continues to turn its back on this evolving effort. An INSS survey (November 2020) found that almost 60 percent of the Jewish public feel that a government should not be formed with the Arab parties.

Prior to the September 2019 Knesset elections, Joint List leader Ayman Odeh (Hadash) declared that Arab society is ready to play an influential role in Israeli politics. The List's leaders sought to gain the Arab public's trust by committing to focus on internal issues such as health, education, housing, employment, and eradication of violence and crime – implicitly at the expense of nationalist issues. The Arab public voted overwhelmingly for the Joint List, which won 13 seats in the 22nd Knesset and an unprecedented 15 seats in the 23rd Knesset. The Arabs' sweeping vote for the Joint List came at the expense of their vote for Jewish parties, whose support by Arabs dropped (12 percent in the 23rd Knesset compared to 28 percent in the 21st Knesset elections and 18 percent in the 22nd Knesset).

In view of the ongoing stalemate between the rival political blocs, these developments – especially the recurring elections – illustrate the significant potential of the Arab voice, raising the question of the possibility and legitimacy of integrating the Arabs into a government coalition. Thus, in the run-up to the upcoming March elections and after many years of boycott, Zionist parties on the right and left recognize that the Arab voice could serve as a legitimate component in building a government coalition.

The Arab public as well is engaged in a lively debate on this issue, seeking to recover from the disappointment of Blue and White party's refusal to rely on the support of the Joint List to form a coalition, especially since the Joint List recommended Benny Gantz as Prime Minister. Among the Joint List's factions, there is sharp disagreement over how to maximize its political power in order to advance the Arab society's vital interests. Mansour Abbas, head of Ra'am (Islamic Movement/the southern faction), is now leading a pragmatic approach, striving for political cooperation with the Zionist leadership, including its right wing, while downscaling the nationalist-Palestinian aspects. Thus Abbas called on the Joint List not to be bound by its ideological-nationalist approach, which does not allow for political flexibility. Abbas's recent moves, which are designed to promote cooperation with the Likud, should be seen in this light. They focus on practical issues, such as the struggle against violence and crime and the extension of the five-year plan for the development of Arab society (Government Decision 922, December 2015). Abbas's approach reflects the views of pragmatic Arab groups and of his Islamist party, which emphasizes religious and social aspects over nationalist issues. A similar approach is taken by the new Arab Yahad (الهاد) party. Headed by social activist Mohammad Darawshe, it does not see a contradiction between Israel being a Jewish and democratic state and its granting full equal rights to its Arab citizens in the spirit of the

Declaration of Independence. The new party intends to maintain political cooperation with mainstream Zionist parties in order to participate in the country's decision making processes.

Joint List leaders Ayman Odeh (Hadash), Mtanes Shihadeh (Balad), and Ahmad Tibi (Ta'al) view these trends with great concern. They condemned Abbas's independent moves, arguing that they could undermine the List's unity and political power in the next Knesset elections. They argue that the Joint List must continue to demand equal rights and social justice for Arab citizens without relinquishing ideological-nationalist positions on the Palestinian issue. At the same time, they strive to strengthen the Joint List by increasing Jewish representation in it while establishing a "democratic camp" as a non-parliamentary political force, which is to include Jews and Arabs who agree on four principles: end to the occupation, strengthened democracy, equality for the Arab minority, and social justice.

This approach of Hadash, Balad, and Ta'al highlights the gap between them and the pragmatic approach now prevalent in the Arab public, which expects its Knesset representatives to focus on exercising actual political influence through integration into the country's decision making processes. While a clear majority of the Arab public (69.8 percent, according to Prof. Sammy Smooha's 2019 Arab-Jewish Relations Index) is now willing to recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, the Joint List rejects this approach. This gap was also revealed by the reaction to the normalization agreements between Israel and the Gulf states: while almost two-thirds of the Arab public support these agreements (according to a December poll, 28 percent of the Arab public strongly support and 35 somewhat support, while about a third oppose), Joint List members voted against them in the Knesset, based on their position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Further evidence of this gap – perhaps also resulting from the pandemic-induced economic crisis – is this year's increase in the number of young Arabs, including Muslims, who volunteer to serve in the IDF or the national-civil service, despite the Arab political leadership's continued opposition to these forms of service.

The 2020 Democracy Index of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) concludes that only 44 percent of Arab respondents feel part of the State of Israel and its problems (compared to 84.5 percent of Jews). A more recent IDI survey (January 5, 2021) found that only 39 percent of the Arab public expect to vote in the upcoming Knesset elections. Another recent poll, by STATNET (early January 2021), also predicts a significant drop in the Arab voting rate, to 52 percent. According to this poll, if the Joint List remains unified, 69 percent of Arab voters will support it, which translates into about 10 Knesset seats. The remaining 31 percent are expected to vote for Zionist parties, including about 2 seats for the Likud, which in the last election received Arab support corresponding to less than

a third of a Knesset seat. If the Joint List is split (for example, if Hadash runs with Balad and Ra'am with Ta'al), the Arab Lists will win fewer than 11 seats, while 3.4 seats will go to Zionist parties, including 1.5 for the Likud. A low Arab turnout will likely benefit the Likud and other Zionist parties.

This background helps explain the Jewish parties' efforts to woo the Arab vote, including the Netanyahu's recent moves toward the Arab sector, which, by a large margin, perceives him as the most suitable politician to serve as prime minister. Hence the talk within Likud circles about reserving spots for Arabs on the Likud's Knesset list, about the option of appointing a Muslim Arab minister in a future government, and about a commitment to invest more in Arab education, economy, and personal security (although the government's plan to eradicate crime in Arab society is presently on hold due to the lack of a state budget). At the same time, the Likud announced recently that it would not form a government with the support of the Joint List. The question remains as to what extent such promises will affect the voting trends of the Arab public, which is highly sensitive to the prevailing exclusionary tendencies within the Jewish public and their impact on the Zionist parties.

In conclusion, it is evident that there is an ongoing expanding trend within the Arab public of the process of multidimensional "Israeliization" and of participation in the political sphere, despite this public's awareness of political manipulations by the Zionist parties. In the face of this growing attitude, the Arab parties find it hard to draft an agreed formula that will allow them to maintain political cooperation with the Zionist parties. This could harm their parliamentary and political power and reduce their capacity to serve the Arab public's essential needs.

Nonetheless, it appears that these political developments create a new level of legitimacy and recognition of the Arab voice among the Zionist parties on both the right and the left. This new situation could even help create an opportunity for a Jewish-Arab political partnership. The forthcoming elections will test the Zionist parties' readiness to accept and promote the Arab minority's most pressing civic needs.