

INSS Insight No. 1489, June 17, 2021

Ra'am Joins the Government Coalition:
Paving a Path to Jewish-Arab Political Partnership?

**Ephraim Lavie, Meir Elran, Khader Sawaed, Ilham Shahbari, and Jony
Essa**

Against the backdrop of Israel's ongoing political crisis, including the formation of a government coalition without the participation of an Arab party, the legitimacy of the Arab voice grew in the eyes of most Jewish parties, both left and right. The process began with hesitant interest on the part of the center-left bloc to include Arab representation in the coalition, continued with a vigorous attempt by Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu to draw in the Arab public in order to gain a Knesset majority, and culminated in a coalition agreement to form a government without Netanyahu. Arab parties, which over the years refused to join a coalition for ideological reasons, became more attentive to the Arab public's expectations – to integrate into the country's decision making processes and further vital Arab civic needs. Arab and Jewish parties weathered the violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in Israel during the Muslim and Jewish holidays (April-May 2021) and Operation Guardian of the Walls in Gaza (May 2021), and for the first time managed to establish practical political cooperation. This article considers whether a path has been paved for an enduring civic and political Jewish-Arab partnership, beyond momentary cooperation resulting from local circumstances and temporary political interests.

The political legitimacy of the Arab parties grew in the eyes of most Jewish parties ahead of the elections to the 23rd Knesset (March 2020) and the 24th Knesset (March 2021). This development stemmed from a combination of pressure from the Arab society on the Arab parties to pave their way to a government coalition in order to further vital Arab civic needs, and the Jewish parties' inability to form a government without the participation of an Arab party. Religious Zionist parties strongly opposed the formation of a government coalition with Arab parties, claiming that they support terrorism and refuse to recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

In an unprecedented move, the Arab Joint List (Hadash, Ta'al, Balad, Ra'am) – the third largest faction in the 23rd Knesset (15 seats) – recommended that the President grant the mandate for the formation of the new government to the head of a Jewish party, Blue and

White. Subsequently, however, the Joint List was disappointed by Blue and White's refusal to rely on it to form a coalition. In the run-up to the 24th Knesset elections, Ra'am chairman Mansour Abbas called on his Joint List colleagues to agree in principle to join any emerging coalition -- even a right wing government -- in exchange for advancing the Arab public's civic needs. He explained that the Knesset is a place where civic goals, not national Palestinian goals, can be achieved.

After the Joint List rejected Abbas's proposal to downplay the national Palestinian agenda, Ra'am ran separately in the elections for the 24th Knesset, retaining its electoral power (four seats). In contrast, the three remaining Joint List parties lost significant ground: Hadash and Balad lost two seats each, and Ta'al lost one seat. Hadash, a communist party that for many years enjoyed hegemony in the Arab political system as the largest Arab party setting the Arab agenda, lost its primacy.

Mansour Abbas's practical approach matched his membership in the Islamic Movement, emphasizing from the outset religious and social aspects over nationalist goals. Accordingly, Ra'am chose to participate openly in coalition negotiations centered on a civic agenda, take advantage of the opportunity to serve as a kingmaker, and ultimately, for the first time, join a government coalition, thus sharing in the collective responsibility for government decisions.

These developments within Israel's Arab society and its political leadership reflect a growing realism that transcends ideological considerations. For the most part, the Arab public has demonstrated its interest in promoting its integration into Israeli society in all walks of life. It gave the green light to its Knesset representatives to abandon the political opposition and join the state's leadership. Arab parties are aware of these trends in Arab society, but they have so far failed to adopt an agreed-upon stance toward political cooperation with Jewish parties based on adopting a civic agenda while postponing the discussion of national issues. They found themselves in a crisis that led to a split and a significant reduction in their parliamentary strength (a drop from 15 seats to 10).

Ra'am's pragmatic approach is inherently reversible, because it depends on a temporary circumstance and can be overturned if it fails to bear fruit. Nonetheless, the Arab parties' current pragmatism and the Jewish parties' willingness to recognize their political legitimacy are a cognitive breakthrough on both sides; this creates a chance for continuity. The Arab political leadership, which is divided in general and in particular on the issue of political integration, will need to discuss these issues both within its own ranks and with the Arab public at large. It will have to address fundamental, difficult questions regarding integration into Israeli society while maintaining national Arab identity and a balance between civic identity and ethnic-cultural identity. The challenge is

to build a new, deep, and lasting discourse within Arab society. This may lead to the formation of an updated conception – albeit not agreed upon by all parties or by the entire Arab public – of agreed-upon strategic goals that can be implemented by political and social leaders, civil society activists, intellectuals, and academics.

Over the years, Arab society has proven its loyalty to the state and to Israeli society. It has generally adopted non-violent means of expressing its national identity and grievances, and has focused on demanding a new policy toward the Arab minority in order to facilitate the processes of its integration into the fabric of Israeli society. In the violent clashes during the Muslim holidays (April-May 2021) and Operation Guardian of the Walls in Gaza (May 2021), which escalated from incidents on the Temple Mount and East Jerusalem to riots in cities with mixed Arab and Jewish populations and other communities, most of the Arab society and its leadership exercised restraint and responsibility. They refused to be dragged into the riots, which primarily involved young people from the margins of Arab society and right wing Jewish nationalist radical groups. It is too early to assess the long-term impact these challenging events will have on Jewish-Arab relations and the trend of Arab integration into the fabric of Israeli society. So far it seems that the Arab and Jewish parties have weathered the riots and have managed to maintain political cooperation. Successful operation of the new government may yet turn the crisis into a breakthrough, creating an opportunity for long-term improvement in the relations between Arabs in Israel and Jews.

The government should refrain from punishing the entire Arab society for the riots of small Arab groups and focus on exhausting the available legal tools against the rioters. The understandings reached with Ra'am during the coalition negotiations for the formation of the unity government, which included the implementation of plans addressing the needs of Arab society -- dealing with violent and criminal activities, implementing multiyear assistance and budgeting programs in the economic and social realms, and managing housing and infrastructure construction planning may yet establish and even accelerate long-term Arab integration into Israel's society and state.

The coalition talks between parties in the change bloc and the Arab parties, including the right-wing Yamina party, testify to a significant process of granting legitimacy to the Arab voice. But the unity government, which consists of right wing, centrist, and left wing parties as well as Ra'am, and is largely based on a civic agenda, will face delegitimization efforts on two fronts: from the Jewish public, most of which still opposes granting full political legitimacy to Arab society and parties, and from the right wing opposition, which will likely argue that the government does not have a Jewish majority (as was argued at the time to the second Rabin government in 1992-1995). Should the unity government be unstable or of short duration, the chances of establishing

a future government with Arab participation would diminish due to the perception of a failed precedent.

Thus, the Jewish parties have a responsibility to adopt a clear policy of recognizing the legitimacy of the Arab voice and of the parties representing it. The existing demographic and political reality requires acknowledging that the Arab citizens, who comprise more than 20 percent of Israel's population, deserve equal rights and that their representatives in the Knesset are an expression of the face of the country's society and fabric of life. Consequently, they necessarily constitute a legitimate political force with which coalition negotiations should be conducted and political partnerships formed. If such recognition takes place, expands, and becomes institutionalized, the elections to the 24th Knesset and the formation of the 36th government may be remembered as a conceptual and practical breakthrough in the validation of the Arab voice, which may lead to long term political cooperation that contributes significantly to the status of the Arab society and to Israeli society as a whole.