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An Arab Party in Israel's Government: A Test for Jews and Arabs Alike

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As an ongoing political crisis in Israel precluded formation of a coalition and a government, the Arab vote became increasingly legitimate in the eyes of most Jewish parties, from both the right and the center-left. The process began in the center-left, continued as an intensive effort by Likud to attract the Arab public in order to achieve a Knesset majority, and culminated with the signing of the current coalition agreement with the Ra'am Party. The Arab parties, which for ideological reasons have consistently preferred to remain outside the coalition, now pay more attention to the expectations of their constituents, including integration into the country's decision making processes and concern for their vital needs. Furthermore, both Jewish and Arab parties weathered the challenge of the violence between the two sectors in May 2021 and maintained their political cooperation. This article considers whether there has been an essential breakthrough on the road to Jewish-Arab political partnership on a political-civic basis, beyond temporary circumstantial interests and constraints.

Keywords: Israel, Jewish-Arab relations, Arab parties, Islamic Movement, integration

Arab Deliberations on Political Partnership with Jewish Parties

Except for the northern faction of the Islamic Movement and the Abnaa el-Balad (Sons of the Village) movement, which support a comprehensive boycott of the Jewish-Zionist political system, Arab political parties contend that their Arab-Palestinian identity does not justify a boycott of the Knesset elections, and believe they should continue to represent the Arab public within the Israeli political system. However, the respective parties have different ideologies and sometimes opposing views on the question of how to cooperate with the Jewish parties and what are the options for joining a coalition.

The starting assumption of the Arab parties is that there are no material differences between the Israeli right, left, or center in terms of their discriminatory and exclusionary approach to Arab society. Consequently, the Arabs' decision to be part of the Israeli political system challenges them with the following questions: how should they balance their concern for the needs of the Arab public with their political values regarding the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and what is the correct way to maintain cooperation with the Jewish parties.

In the eyes of Hadash, the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, the Arab-Palestinians, as a native minority in Israel, should fight for a change of the state's Jewish-Zionist character as an essential condition for making it a democratic state, and remake it in a more just fashion as a state for all its citizens. Hadash traditionally stands for joint parliamentary activity of Arabs and Jews, and prefers to use its political power in the Knesset, with Arab representatives serving on the various committees, in order to promote the interests of Arab society. It sees no possibility for political cooperation with the Jewish right wing parties whose values, as they see it, reflect nationalism, national separatism, and even racism. According to Hadash, political cooperation is only possible with parties from the left and center, in order to establish a shared

Jewish-Arab future based on values of justice, equality, democracy, peace, and partnership.

Balad, the Democratic National Alliance representing the Arab-Palestinian national movement that supports Palestinian unity in one political framework, aims in the first stage for a bi-national arrangement within the state, and defines its political goal as transforming Israel into "a state for all its citizens." The party recognizes Israel as a reality and does not rule out Arab-Jewish political cooperation at a tactical level, but rejects any possibility of joining a government coalition and consistently opposes recommending any Jewish Zionist candidate for prime minister.

Although for Hadash and Balad parliamentary politics is a means for promoting their ideological goals, the Joint List, which included them as members in the elections to the 24th Knesset, committed to the Arab public to focus their activities in the Knesset on internal matters: health, education, housing, employment, the fight against violence, and crime. Ta'al, the Arab Movement for Renewal, which stands for full civic equality for Arabs and Jews, also supported this position and chose to run in the elections in the framework of the Joint List.

In contrast to Hadash, Balad, and Ta'al, which are all secular, the Islamic religious party Ra'am—the United Arab List—supports pursuit of all options for cooperation with either of the Jewish party blocs to join the government coalition. According to Ra'am, it would be naive for the Arabs in Israel to aspire to a significant change in the nature of the state or expect it to grant them full equality, and consigning themselves permanently to the opposition as long as the "Israeli occupation" continues is pointless. As they see it, the Knesset is not the place to achieve ideological goals, which should be promoted in other frameworks such as public, social, and educational activity. Rather, the Arab parties must recognize the boundaries of the political game in the Knesset, since their members have sworn loyalty to the

State of Israel and its laws, which define Israel as a Jewish, democratic state. The demands of the Arab parties are just but ineffective if they are unable to promote them in practice, and they should therefore move from a politics of protest to practical politics. Accordingly, since in any case there is no real difference between the Jewish parties, the Arabs should seek to be part of any government, even a right wing one, to effectively promote the vital interests of Arab society, and address problems of violence, housing, employment, budgets, and more. Consequently, Ra'am chose to participate openly in the coalition talks, which focused on a civic agenda, and rose to the occasion of being in essence the political kingmaker. Following its unprecedented decision to join the government coalition, it assumes collective responsibility for government decisions, even without any ministerial positions.

The respective approaches of the Arab parties to the option of joining a coalition with Jewish parties have highlighted issues relating to the purpose and nature of their Knesset membership, and what they wish to achieve by their parliamentary activity: whether ideological goals, such as removing the definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in favor of a state for all its citizens, or civil matters vital for the development of Arab society.

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However, they expressed strong criticism of Ra'am, which ran independently and decided to depart from the traditional position of the Arab parties—no cooperation with an Israeli government while the Jewish occupation continues.

Ra'am's approach bought it a significant electoral accomplishment in the elections to the 24th Knesset. It enjoyed a high level of support in the Bedouin communities in the Negev and in the Galilee and retained its four seats. The three remaining parties of the Joint List lost representation: Hadash and Balad each lost two seats, and Ta'al lost one seat. Consequently, Hadash, which until now enjoyed political hegemony as the largest Arab party and set the agenda in the Arab sector, was relegated to a lower position.

The Rising Political Legitimacy of the Arab Parties

The elections to the 23rd Knesset and the 24th Knesset saw a rise in the political legitimacy of the Arab parties in the eyes of Jewish parties. This stemmed from both pressure on the Arab parties from Arab society to join the government coalition for pragmatic reasons, and the ongoing political crisis whereby the Jewish parties needed the Arab vote in order to form a government.

The Joint List sought to respond to public expectations by abandoning its permanent place in the opposition, in order to exert political influence through active participation in decision making processes. It was able to maximize its strength in the 23rd Knesset (15 seats), and it took the unprecedented step of advising the President to offer the mandate to form a government to Benny Gantz, head of the Blue and White party. However, the Joint List was disappointed by Blue and White's refusal to rely on it in order to form a coalition.

Before the elections to the 24th Knesset and after the disappointment from Blue and White, Mansour Abbas, the head of Ra'am, called on his colleagues in the Joint List to

decide on their willingness in principle to join any coalition that emerged, even from the right, in return for tackling the vital needs of the Arab public. He suggested that the Joint List parties respond to the pragmatic mood of the public and not remain bound by their ideological-national approach, which precludes political flexibility. Abbas began initiating moves intended to promote cooperation with the Likud on social issues such as dealing with violence and crime, and extending the five year plan for development in Arab society (Resolution 922). His approach reflected his position as a member of the Islamic Movement, which from the start has stressed religious and social aspects more than national perspectives. When the proposal to play down the nationalist-Palestinian aspect was strongly rejected by the Joint List, Ra'am demonstrated its willingness to pay the price of a split and run separately in the 24th Knesset elections.

In tandem, a new Arab list (Yahad) arose before the 24th Knesset elections. Announcing its recognition of Israel as a Jewish democratic state, it thus legitimized practical political cooperation with the Jewish parties, and increased its chances of acceptance in a government coalition. The head of the list, social activist Mohammad Darawshe, declared that he saw no conflict between Israel being a Jewish and democratic state and the provision of full equality to all its citizens in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. Yahad announced its intention of cooperating with centrist Zionist parties in order to integrate into decision making processes, yet before the elections, Yahad withdrew, estimating that it would not pass the electoral threshold.

These developments in the Arab political system coincided with the ongoing crisis paralyzing the rival Jewish blocs of right and center-left as they tried to form a coalition. The repeated inconclusive elections demonstrated the critical potential of the Arab vote. In order to tip the scales in their direction, both blocs began to court the votes of the Arab public with

moderate messages, including the possible inclusion of Arab parties in the governing coalition and promises to deal with issues vital to the Arab public, such as education, the economy, and internal security.

And so, as the elections to the 24th Knesset approached, after many years, the Jewish parties began to recognize their need for the Arab vote, even if that meant a coalition with Arab representatives in the Knesset. Among the center-left parties there was a growing understanding and acceptance of the fact that they were completely dependent on the Arab parties to form a coalition. The center current within the right wing bloc (Likud and the ultra-Orthodox) also realized the need under the circumstances for the support of an Arab party to form a coalition, and thus gave significant although limited legitimacy to this option.

By contrast, the religious Zionist parties expressed vehement objections to a government coalition supported by an Arab party. They maintained that Arab members of the Knesset support terror and do not recognize Israel as a Jewish state, and cannot therefore be legitimate political partners. As they see it, Ra'am is a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood that denies Israel's right to exist, and therefore cannot be deemed a legitimate member of a government coalition, even if the right wing parties face a political crisis and could lose power. In their view, cooperation with Ra'am means crossing a red line and returning to the situation of the second Rabin government, which relied on an "obstructive bloc" of Arab parties and led to the Oslo Accords.

Breakthrough or a Passing Episode?

For the first time the question of the legitimacy of Arab parties has become a central issue on Israel's national agenda. The Jewish parties have been forced to address this question, adopt a position, and explain it. This ends the long boycott against inclusion of the Arab parties in coalition talks and their traditional—if also self-imposed—political isolation. The Arab parties

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However, this increasing legitimacy was not the maturation of a long, natural process. It was a response to an unprecedented crisis around the continuing rule of the Prime Minister, leader of the Likud, which made it impossible for either the right or the center-left to form a government after four rounds of elections. In other words, the political legitimacy of the Arab vote is fragile and not independently viable, since once there is internal reconciliation among the parties of the right, they will no longer need the Arab parties to form a coalition. This applies even if a government is formed with Jewish parties from right and center. In this situation, the legitimacy of the Arab parties will likely erode and could even disappear. Likewise in this situation, the legitimacy of the Arab parties in the eyes of the Jewish parties will presumably be fairly limited. And from the viewpoint of the Arab parties themselves, they will be supporting the coalition from the outside, even if that only means abstaining from voting, and will not share the collective responsibility for government decisions or ministerial roles.

The Arab parties currently elected to the Knesset do not recognize Israel as a Jewish state and do not deny their ties to the Palestinian people, who are considered an enemy by most Israeli Jews. Moreover, Israeli Jews continue to rebuff the notion of granting political legitimacy to Arab society. A survey by the Institute for National Security Studies (November 2020) found that almost 60 percent of the Jewish public agree that a government should not

include the Arab parties, and a survey by the Israel Democracy Institute (May 2021) found that only 30 percent of the Jewish public supported a government including the Arab parties. It can therefore be assumed that parties from the right wing bloc would prefer not to include Arab parties in their coalition and reject Arab political pragmatism, even if they are prepared to meet most of Arab society's civil-public demands.

Pragmatism, Legitimacy, and Arab-Jewish Political Partnership: A Look to the Future

Developments within Arab society in Israel and its political leadership show how realism has taken precedence over ideological or ethical considerations. This approach is naturally unstable, because it depends on the context and can be abandoned if it fails to bring results. Its roots lie in the external support for the second Rabin government following the Oslo Accords, and the split within the Islamic Movement in 1996, when the southern faction decided to run in the Knesset elections. The pragmatism of the Arab parties today, coupled with the willingness of Jewish parties to recognize their political legitimacy, amounts to a breakthrough on both sides, which might possibly continue. For its part, the Palestinian Authority has not criticized or decried Arab society in Israel for focusing on its life in the State of Israel and its basic existential needs.

The Arab public has shown that it wants to integrate into various aspects of Israeli society. Some have given the green light to its Knesset representatives to abandon the opposition benches and become an essential part of the state leadership. The Arab parties are aware of this public mood, but they are also aware of political manipulations by Jewish parties and are sensitive to any damage to their public status or their continued exclusion. So far they have struggled to find an agreed formula for political cooperation with the Jewish parties, and fell into a crisis that caused a split and considerable damage to their parliamentary

strength (dropping from 15 seats to 10) and their ability to assure the Arab public that they can promote their vital interests.

The Arab political leadership, divided in general, and over the issues of political integration in particular, must discuss these issues with their public and clarify questions regarding integration into Israeli society while retaining their national identity and the correct balance between citizenship and ethno-cultural identity. Arab society must construct a new, deep, and continuing internal dialogue, which should lead to the formulation of a vision with agreed strategic objectives that can be achieved with a pool of political and social leaders, together with civil society activists, intellectuals, and academicians. Such a dialogue, which would restore trust in the political system and in the state and its institutions, could stem the steady decline in voter turnout for Knesset elections among Arabs and help them realize their potential electoral strength. At that point, the participation of Arab parties in the government could be accepted as legitimate, and not the outcome of transient circumstances and political interests.

Arab society today participates in all areas of life in the country. The contribution of Arab medical and healthcare workers alongside their Jewish counterparts in the struggle against COVID-19 was striking. Demonstrations of solidarity and willingness to help the Jewish public after the Mount Meron tragedy and in other cases are sincere and admirable. Therefore, neither racism nor any kind of exclusion—social, economic, or political—of the Arab public should be tolerated, and it is important to nurture solidarity and equality. Jewish and Arab leaders and public figures must condemn expressions of hatred and racism loudly and clearly, and incorporate programs to counter them effectively into the education system.

Arab society has shown its loyalty to Israel and its society over the years. It has adopted non-violent methods to express its national

identity, or to demand policy changes that affect it, and thus eased its path toward integration. During the violent events of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr (April-May 2021), which spread from incidents on the Temple Mount and in East Jerusalem to the cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations, most of Arab society and its political leaders showed restraint and responsibility. They were not drawn into riots involving young men from the fringes of Arab society and extremist groups from the Jewish right. Ra'am chairman Abbas even visited a burned synagogue in Lod and offered to help repair the damage to the torched houses of worship.

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It is too early to assess the long-term impact of these events on Jewish-Arab relations and the integration of Arabs in the fabric of Israeli society. At the same time, it currently seems that both Arab and Jewish parties managed to weather the challenge of the riots and continue political collaboration. The success of the new government might contribute to the joint capacity of Jews and Arabs in Israel to overcome the crisis and relate to it as an opportunity to progress. Accordingly, the government must refrain from any intention to punish Arab society for these disturbances, which is distinct from using all possible means to enforce the law against the rioters.

The new coalition agreement, which includes an article on the implementation of plans and projects designed to reduce violence and crime in the Arab sector and further social and economic as well as housing projects, is expected to expedite the processes of integration

of Arabs in Israeli society and the state. The coalition talks between parties from the “change bloc,” including Yamina, and the Arab parties after the 24th Knesset elections were evidence of a significant process of legitimization of the Arab vote. However, the coalition remains vulnerable to delegitimization from the right, arguing that they do not have a Jewish majority (as in the second Rabin government, in 1992-1995). If over time such a government proves to be unstable, this will make the formation of a future government with Arab support more difficult.

Jewish parties of the right, left, and center have the responsibility to adopt a clear policy of recognizing the legitimacy of the Arab vote and the parties that represent it. There is no option but to recognize that the demographic and political reality demands acceptance of the Arabs and their Knesset representatives as an integral part of Israeli society and the fabric of life in the country, and therefore a legitimate political force that can be part of the coalition and political action. If such recognition occurs, the most recent elections could be remembered as a practical breakthrough in terms of awareness and approval of the Arab vote, leading to real partnership and changing the status of Arab society for the good of Israel and its society as a whole.

This article is based, *inter alia*, on insights that emerged in a discussion held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) on April 24, 2021, with the participation of researchers from INSS and elsewhere.

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