

Troubles in Paradise: The New Arab Leadership in Israel and the Challenges of the Hour

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This paper examines the political leadership represented by the Joint List and its prospects for survival, given the difficult challenges before it: the internal challenges, particularly the ideological gaps between the parties; and the external challenges, chief among them, government policy and hostile nationalist discourse within the Jewish population. The article first considers the background to the establishment of the political party through three lenses – political-parliamentary, intra-Arab, and regional – and assesses the strategic significance of the party for the nature of Arab leadership and political strategy. It then surveys the severe challenges to the Joint List in light of the changes in Israel’s security situation since the fall of 2015, and examines the significance of this development both for the survival of the new leadership and its ability to continue to adhere to the social action strategy it adopted, and for the Israeli establishment and the state’s Jewish majority.

The Establishment of the Joint List

The formation in January 2015 of the Joint List, headed by Ayman Odeh of Hadash: the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, marked the beginning of a new trend in Arab politics in Israel. After many years in which the

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Arab leadership suffered from internal political divisions, a course was charted to close the ranks. It was the most notable political development of its type in Arab society since the establishment of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel in the early 1980s and the founding of Arab political parties, which replaced the affiliated Arab parties that acted under the auspices of the Mapai party. Now, more than a year since the founding of the Joint List, it seems that the events of late 2015 and early 2016 pose substantial challenges to its role and leader, and have caused the first cracks in the vision and goals of the Joint List. To understand the meaning of those challenges, it is necessary to revisit the three levels underlying the party's formation: the political-parliamentary, the intra-sectoral, and the regional Arab level, which lay in the background of the social justice movement in Israel.

The Political-Parliamentary Context: The New Electoral Threshold

Part of the political-parliamentary context behind the establishment of the Joint List was the initiative of the political party Yisrael Beiteinu, headed by Avigdor Liberman, to raise the electoral threshold in the elections for the 20th Knesset (March 2015). While the move was described as designed to enhance governance by reducing the influence of small political parties in the Knesset, it was virtually impossible to refute the charge that the bill aimed to reduce Arab representation and especially that of parties such as Balad: the National Democratic Assembly, which since the 1990s had tested the limits of democratic discourse in Israel. The bill to raise the electoral threshold was preceded by a series of legislative initiatives in the 19th Knesset aimed at excluding the Arab minority from Israel's political and cultural spheres, for example, the Law on Nationality promoted by MK Avi Dichter, then of Kadima. However, the move backfired and prompted the formation of the Joint List, which resulted in a new record: the party earned 13 seats in the 20th Knesset.

The Intra-Arab Context: The Leadership Crisis in the Arab Sector

Much has been said in recent years about the leadership crisis in the Arab society in Israel. From an Arab perspective, the source of this crisis was the under-representation of Arabs in Israeli politics and the limited ability of Arab MKs to translate their election into actual achievements, given their circumscribed access to the state's decision makers and resources. Indeed, since the establishment of the State of Israel, no Arab party has

ever been part of the government. Only once, at the end of Yitzhak Rabin's term in office, did the Arab parties provide a swing vote in the Knesset – on the Oslo Accords. The common narrative in the Jewish public sphere is that the Arab MKs prefer to focus on political issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which in turn negatively affects their ability to advance the agenda of the Arab public, which would rather promote social and civic issues over national goals.¹

Either way, the steady decline in voting rates among Arabs for the Israeli parliament in recent years (in the 1950s, some 80 percent of eligible voters participated in the electoral process, while in the 2009 election voter turnout was only 53 percent) reflects not only the distancing of the Arab population from the state and its representative institutions but also criticism of the Arab MKs. In terms of civil society, this dissatisfaction was manifested in the founding of NGOs in the Arab sector, some Jewish-Arab and some Arab only, such as Adalah: the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, Injaz, and Mossawa: the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel, all of which play an important role in the Arab community and in mediating between that community and state authorities. The culmination of this political alienation was the publication of the Arab vision statements in 2006 and 2007, when prominent NGO representatives as well as Arab intellectuals in effect replaced the veteran political parties to articulate the national demands of Israel's Arab minority. It is no wonder that one of the offshoots of the publication of those documents was the dispute between the authors and the Arab political parties over the originality and exclusivity of the ideas cited in the vision statements. In the course of the dispute, political factions in the Arab sector attempted to silence and censor the authors, and this ultimately led to the dissolution of the initiative.

The failure of the Arab intellectual leadership to marginalize the veteran political leadership created a public vacuum that worsened the ongoing leadership crisis in the Arab sector. The parallel effort by the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement, led by Sheikh Raed Salah, to constitute a political-religious alternative had a limited effect. The strategy it pursued in recent years – a focus on the issue of the Temple Mount and other holy places, along with ongoing social action within the Arab sector (which was supposed to mobilize additional support from within the Arab population) – ran into trouble, mostly because Israel took legal steps against the movement's leader.

The trigger was an extreme speech given by Sheikh Salah in February 2007 at a demonstration against construction at the Mughrabi Ascent to the Temple Mount. The speech, in which he alluded to a blood libel against the Jewish people, led to violent riots, and Salah was jailed in 2013 for incitement to violence. After the appeals process was exhausted, Salah entered prison in May 2016 to begin serving his sentence. But the Islamic Movement sustained another blow before he was imprisoned when, in face of the wave of violence that began in the fall of 2015 and the charges that Sheikh Salah and other Movement activists were behind the attacks, the Israeli cabinet declared it an unlawful organization. Thus, the State of Israel drew clear borders for the Islamic Movement's Temple Mount strategy and forced it to reorganize. This is the background to the announcement in April 2016 of the new Islamic movement al-Wafaawa-al-Islah (Loyalty and Reform), headed by Sheikh Hosam Abu Leil. It is still too early to assess the implications of these moves for the policies and status of the religious movement in the Arab public.

The ongoing Arab leadership crisis also reflected the relative weakness of two types of discourse and political action strategies. On the one hand was the national discourse, deeply invested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and represented by the veteran Arab political parties and Arab intellectuals, with the presentation of positions, such as the Arab vision documents, that tested the limits of the Israeli consensus.² Time and again, they expressed their clear opposition to the fundamental conditions defining the relationship between the Arab minority and Jewish majority, while attempting to leverage basic changes through the model of consociationalism, such as exists in Belgium, which provides a national minority the right to veto decisions affecting it. On the other hand is the religious Islamic discourse, which challenges the existing arrangement by means of a struggle in the name of the holy sites in Jerusalem. Despite the gulf that seems to separate the political and religious discourse, they share a common denominator: both tested the limits of the Jewish consensus, heightened the sense of enmity and alienation of Jews toward Arabs, and emerged as unproductive in terms of their ability to promote the social and economic interests of the Arab public. Thus the Arab political leaders operated using tools that increasingly eroded their base of support and consequently became progressively irrelevant.

The Regional Context: In the Spirit of the Arab Spring

The events that began in late 2010, soon thereafter dubbed the Arab Spring, were significant for the Israeli Arab public, not only because they threatened to dismantle the old order of the veteran Arab regimes and establish a new order in their stead, but also because they tried to redefine the rules of the Arab political game. Tahrir Square symbolized the desire to close ranks among a range of social activist groups, each of which might represent an independent political agenda yet shared the desire for changing the social and political order. It was an expression of the longing for political and social cohesiveness, even at the expense of blurring the differences in the ideological approaches of the different political groups and at the expense of a clear vision as to the revolution's goals. The events in the Arab world presumably provided inspiration to the Arabs in Israel. The political partnership among traditionally rival parties did not blur their respective political uniqueness, yet created a political framework with a common ideological denominator on which each of the constituent factions could agree. This common denominator, based on the heightened social justice discourse, is the third context behind the formation of the Joint List.

The Strategy of the New Arab Leadership

The focus on social justice in the Israeli public in the summer of 2011 – partly an echo of the Arab Spring that began late in 2010 and inspired by the global financial crisis of 2008-9 – heralded, if only temporarily, a new interest in social issues. The social discourse did not bypass Arab society, which was naturally attuned to it, given the civil problems and social inequality that divide it from the Jewish majority. The formation of the Joint List also embodied a conceptual change within at least part of the Arab leadership, manifested in the willingness to accentuate social goals and social discourse in the new agenda, without taking the national discourse off the table and without blurring the political disagreements among the different Arab parties. Placing social issues at the center has likewise not blunted the religious discourse. What is evident is the emergence of the willingness to focus the Arab public discourse on a level that allows for concurrent promotion of the public's civil and social aspirations and efforts to use it to promote political presence and influence, along with issues of broader national significance.

The appointment of Ayman Odeh at the head of the Joint List was no accident. Odeh, a lawyer by training, represents the young generation

of Hadash, which throughout its existence was able to wave two flags simultaneously (and to this day remains the secret of its political centrality): that of Arab-Palestinian national identity and that of civil and social equality for the Arabs in Israel. Hadash's political operational rationale dovetailed with the conceptual change manifested in the formation of the Joint List, and this explains Hadash's leading position as a political party and Odeh's personal leadership in this formative move. An example of the Joint List's new political strategy, which to a large extent relied on Hadash's hybrid approach, was evident in one of Odeh's first acts after the Knesset election: an initiative to resolve the status of the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev, an issue that Odeh has championed since 2009. From a Jewish perspective, the issue was seen as having national significance. For his part, Odeh attempted to connect the issue to the social justice discourse. In this sense, the social action strategy applied by the Joint List at the beginning did not represent the eclipse of previous political agendas and did not attempt to challenge them. Rather, it was an attempt to add a new, relevant ideological-political dimension that was also an outgrowth of the social discourse in the greater Israeli sphere, not to mention of that in the regional and global spheres.

From the Joint List's perspective, and especially that of its leader, the new social strategy embodied clear political and public advantages: one, the ability to offer the Arab population an agenda based on an understanding of its civil and social ills, while retaining Arab national identity; two, the ability to create a joint political reality and presence among the various forces in Arab society; three, the possibility of blurring, via the social discourse, the tensions created by the national and religious discourses between the Arab sector on the one hand, and the state authorities and the Jewish public on the other, by preferring a promotion of social and civil issues that the government and bureaucratic systems would seem – at least outwardly – to have an interest in promoting; four, strengthening the potential for connecting with the heart of the consensus of Jewish society.

The clearest manifestation of the attempt by Odeh and the Joint List to leverage the new strategy was the support for the government initiative, which passed in December 2015, to invest NIS 15 billion in the Arab sector to reduce gaps that divide it from the Israeli Jewish society.³ The funds are intended to finance a far-reaching program to overcome discrimination and reform government financial distribution mechanisms to Arab, Druze, and Circassian citizens and towns. The five-year plan has garnered enthusiastic

support from the Finance Minister and the Budget Division at the Finance Ministry, as well as from important professional and political figures, including President Reuven Rivlin.⁴ Just as important was Odeh's extensive involvement, beginning in December 2014, in the formulation of the program headed by the budget supervisor at the Finance Ministry in the context of the "The 120 Days Team."⁵ Adopting the program and integrating the Arab leadership in its formulation was a new benchmark in the updated approach that underlay the establishment of the Joint List.

Difficulties in Promoting the Social Vision in Light of the Security Situation

The changes of the past ten months in the political and security situation in Israel posed immediate challenges to the Joint List strategy. The current Palestinian wave of terrorism, which erupted in the fall of 2015, generated fundamental changes in the Israeli political climate. Public attention was again drawn to the security issue. The fact that the violence also created aftershocks in the Israeli Arab sector, in the form of demonstrations in Arab towns in October-November and the few cases of terrorists who were Israeli citizens, rebranded the Arab population in Jewish public opinion and politics in the familiar category of "an extension of the hostile Palestinian sphere." The January 6, 2016 attack in Tel Aviv by Nasat Malhem, a resident of Arara, highlighted the separatist national discourse at the expense of the inclusive social discourse. This was made clear in various political statements to the effect that the five-year program for the Arab sector must be made contingent on collecting all firearms from Arab towns and villages, increasing police enforcement, and increasing enforcement of construction laws.⁶

The changes in security resulted not only in increased hostility toward the Arab minority and its political representatives, but also in the Joint List's difficulties in maintaining its strategy. From the outset, the composition of the list represented a limited degree of agreement among the constituent political parties. The return of the national discourse in the Arab and Jewish publics returned some of the Arab parties – especially Balad – to the familiar platform of support for the Palestinian struggle against Israel, even the violent struggle. One of the prominent manifestations of this was the visit on April 2, 2016 by MKs Hanin Zoabi, Jamal Zahalka, and Basel Ghattas, all of Balad, to the Palestinian families in Ramallah whose sons were killed following the attacks they perpetrated in Jerusalem. This and similar actions also posed a problem for the head of the Joint List, who

since the start of the current wave of violence had worked to deescalate the radicalization trend and restore the discourse to the pragmatic civil setting. This tempered policy was likewise evident in the fall of 2015, when Odeh successfully blocked other Arab politicians from ascending the Temple Mount, a move that might have greatly exacerbated tensions with the Jewish public.

It is doubtful, however, if these efforts changed the negative trend of mutual hostility. Expressions by senior politicians and exclusionary legislative initiatives aimed at reducing the sphere of Arab representation in Israeli politics continue. Especially prominent is the law passed on July 20, 2016 allowing the Knesset, with a vote of 90 MKs, to dismiss an MK for actions or statements that identify with acts of terrorism. While Balad continues to be the most radical wing championing the national discourse, even Hadash, representing the central and most moderate axis in the Joint List, joined in the public denunciation of Saudi Arabia for having defined Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.⁷

The Significance of the Challenges: The Arab and Jewish Political Perspectives

The deterioration in the security situation and the ensuing political and social changes appear to challenge the delicate balance the Joint List has attempted to strike between the different strands and discourses in Arab Israeli politics. They also continue to hamper Odeh's drive to give preference to his social strategy and to realize its full potential. This evolving reality, including the establishment of a broader right wing government in Israel and the addition of Yisrael Beiteinu as a senior coalition partner, raises questions about the Joint List's ability to continue to offer a diverse, multifaceted political menu that has characterized its conceptual basis. The Joint List's political agenda will presumably continue to prevail, if only by virtue of the political need to preserve its standing in parliament. The political and security situations, which reduce its ability to promote its socio-economic agenda, paradoxically serve as the glue that holds the parties together through the basic common denominator of national Arab solidarity.

But the possibility – or even expectation – that the Joint List might be swept toward the national discourse pole might greatly reduce its ability to promote the social agenda and make positive changes regarding the issues that are of primary concern to the majority of the Arab public in Israel. In such a scenario, its political status in the Arab public could be weakened

and the Joint List might be marginalized to the point of political irrelevance, which was the fate of Arab parties before the List's formation. The extreme scenario in such a process could include a widespread popular boycott of the elections and a consequent decrease in Arab representation in the Knesset. On the other hand, a reduction in terrorist acts will help Odeh preserve the relevance of the civil action strategy at the heart of the List's founding, and could even create a renewed impetus in the government's flagship program of bolstering the socio-economic basis of the Israeli Arab sector.

Failure on this level bodes ill for Israel. A retreat by the Arab leadership from the social strategy and a return to the familiar national discourse will only aggravate tensions between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, to the point that the government program intended to narrow gaps and benefit the Arab population might be revoked. Such an unfortunate forecast demands that the government halt the slide down the slippery slope in Jewish-Arab relations, already in motion in light of the Palestinian violence and the Arab-Jewish tension. Stopping the dangerous trend first requires the understanding that the Joint List, under the leadership of Ayman Odeh and with its social action strategy, represents an important opportunity to shape Jewish-Arab relations on the basis of shared interests. This understanding could help both sides form a foundation for co-existence, especially with integration of the Arab minority in the national economy. This concept has become a part of the government's platform in recent years, as an important part of an overall approach that favors a strategic effort to reduce the economic dependence of the weak sectors – the Arabs and ultra-Orthodox – on the state's coffers. Pursuit of this path justifies a pragmatic policy designed to reverse the growing anti-Arab sentiment and incitement, which some of the nation's senior leaders are responsible for creating. It also justifies a restraint in the radicalized national discourse in the Arab sector, which affects even the moderates in the camp.⁸

The leaders on both sides have a decisive role to play in this process, particularly through restraining the hostile nationalistic discourse. But the role of the government is most significant. To restore the discourse to the civil action issues, the government must moderate legislative initiatives aimed against the Arab public and its elected representatives, and in particular, accelerate the implementation in full of the five-year program for economic assistance to the Arab sector. This should be done together with the active involvement of the Arab leaders (such as the Follow-Up Committee) and especially that of Ayman Odeh. The alternative to such

a policy is liable to accelerate a steep plunge into the extreme nationalist discourse, threatening the critical interests of both the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, as well as national stability as a whole.

NOTES

- 1 This is clearly manifested in public opinion polls conducted in Arab society. Of 700 respondents polled by the StatNet Research Institute in December 2014 for INSS, 48 percent felt that the Arab MKs had done very little or little to promote the interests of the Arab public – i.e., a high degree of dissatisfaction with the representatives of this population. When respondents were asked what they thought was the most important issue for Israel’s Arab population, 70 percent said it was improving the sector’s socioeconomic status, while only 30 percent said it was resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These findings are to a large extent congruent with the concerns of Israel’s Jewish citizens, most of whom emphasize economic issues over the peace process when voting. For example, a January 2015 survey by BizPortal found that 36.1 percent of the Jewish population noted the cost of living as the most important issue of the election campaign in 2014, with only 13.1 percent mentioning the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as the most important issue.
- 2 For the vision statement of the Committee of Local Council Leaders, see <http://www.netanya.ac.il/Lib/Documents/tasawor-mostaqbali.pdf>.
- 3 See reports in the financial press, such as Motti Basuk and Tali Haruti-Sover, “Government Approves Large Plan for Arab Sector: Cost is 15 Billion NIS,” *TheMarker*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.themarker.com/news/macro/1.2810489>.
- 4 See the President’s statement on the topic at the *Calcalist* convention that took place in December 2015, <http://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3677269,00.html>.
- 5 See report on the acceptance of the team’s recommendation at the Prime Minister’s Office website, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/Secretary/GovDecisions/2015/Pages/dec208.aspx>.
- 6 See, e.g., the call of MK Issawi Frej of Meretz to establish a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the issue of illegal firearms in Arab population centers after the attack in Tel Aviv, <http://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-520384>.
- 7 Jack Khoury, “Hadash and Balad Condemned Announcement of Hezbollah as Terrorist Organization,” *Haaretz*, March 7, 2016, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2875301>.
- 8 In this context, see Zouheir Bahloul’s statement on the Palestinian stabber in Hebron in an interview with the IDF radio station, in Moran Azoulay, “The Zouheir Bahloul Storm: ‘The Stabber from Hebron is Not a Terrorist,’” *Ynet*, April 7, 2016, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4788747,00.html>.