

Arab Society and the Elections for the 21st and 22nd Knesset

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The Arab public's disappointment with the Joint List and the dissolution of the List on the eve of the 21st Knesset elections in April 2019, as well as the campaign waged by opposition factions urging voters to boycott the elections, resulted in low voter turnout and a drop in Arab parliamentary representation, from 13 to 10 seats (Hadash-Ta'al with six seats and Ra'am-Balad with four). After the Knesset was dissolved, these parties decided to make an effort to revive the Joint List and gain the public's trust in advance of the 22nd Knesset elections, scheduled for September 2019. Their aim is to increase the number of Knesset seats and function as the kingmaker. Members of the Joint List hope to gain influence in national decisions on economic and social issues important to the Arab public and demonstrate the willingness of this sector to integrate further into Israeli society, with the primary goal of shaping the future of the Arab minority in Israel.

Keywords: Arab society, Joint List, 21st Knesset elections, 22nd Knesset elections

Political Preparations for the Next Parliamentary Elections in the Arab Sector

On the eve of the general elections for the 21st Knesset, the Joint List of Arab parties, which held 13 seats in the 20th Knesset, fell apart.¹ Internal power struggles among the leaders of the four parties that comprised the

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list made it impossible to preserve its integrity, even though it was clear that this would lead to a decrease in public representation in the Knesset. In the end, the breakup resulted in two lists running for the Knesset, earning a total of ten seats. Hadash-Ta'al won six seats, while Ra'am-Balad won four.²

The political platforms of the Arab parties published before the April elections showed no essential changes from previous familiar positions. During the election campaign, the parties tended to give preference to civil issues over national issues. Before the election, Ra'am (the southern faction of the Islamic Movement) considered presenting a new pledge supporting civil integration of Arabs in Israel, but their alignment with Balad, the Arab nationalist party, obviated this move. The election campaigns run by the Arab parties were generally lackluster, notable instead for their frustration and passivity. This was also reflected in the marginalization of two central political bodies of the Arab public, which avoided active involvement in the election: the National Council of Local Governments and the Supreme Monitoring Committee of Arab Society. Members of the Monitoring Committee could not even agree on whether to participate in the Knesset election or to boycott it.

Building on the weakness of the Arab parties, a social movement called the Popular Committee to Boycott the Zionist Knesset Election launched an energetic campaign before the elections. The committee encompassed an ad hoc coalition of social and political movements, both secular and religious, that work to encourage the Arab public to avoid participating in the Israeli political arena. Prominent among the pro-boycott coalition were the leaders of the northern faction of the Islamic Movement (which has been banned by the government), the Ibna al-Balad (Sons of the Village) movement, the Kapah (struggle) movement, which broke off from Balad because of disagreements over the Syrian civil war, and the al-Wafa wa'al-Islah (loyalty and reform) movement. These have been joined by pundits, social activists, academics, and Palestinian activists residing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in refugee camps in the Arab countries. By means of an active, well-financed campaign that included large billboards, there was an attempt to persuade the Arab public to sit out the election, while stressing the futility of Arab representation in the Knesset, which only leads to a worsening of the situation and does not attain the Arabs' political and social goals.³

Election Day: Low Voter Turnout

On April 9, 2019, voter turnout in the Arab population, including Druze, was only 49.2 percent – significantly lower than the relatively high turnout in the 20th Knesset election (64 percent), but not very different from the voting patterns for the 17th, 18th, and 19th Knessets (56.3, 53.4, and 56.5 percent, respectively). By contrast, voter turnout in the 21st Knesset election in Jewish and mixed population centers was 67 percent.⁴ The highest Arab voter turnout was in more advanced towns in northern Israel (52 percent) and the lowest among Negev Bedouins (37.5 percent; in the unrecognized villages, it was only 25.5 percent), who already suffer a lack of appropriate Knesset representation.⁵ The two lists – Hadash-Ta'al and Ra'am-Balad – gained 71.6 percent of the Arab vote, while 28.4 percent of the Arab vote went to Jewish parties, in particular Meretz (8.7 percent) and Blue and White (8.1 percent, mostly from the Druze public).⁶

Side by side with the campaign to boycott the election, which stressed ideological (i.e., national and religious) components, it was also clear that the Arab public stayed away from the polls because of a general mood of pessimism, an outgrowth of the persistent exclusion of Arabs and their political parties from Israeli politics and their inability to influence decisions and developments at the national level, including those that affect them directly. Public pronouncements by Likud and by the Blue and White alignment ruling out cooperation with Arabs in the Knesset also had a restraining impact on the Arab public. Likud announced it is not interested in including Arabs in a coalition, while Blue and White rejected the possibility of relying on an Arab “obstructive bloc.” On the other hand, the announcement of the Arab parties that they are not interested in serving in the coalition and will weigh whether or not to contribute to an “obstructive bloc” was seen by the Arab public as an a priori concession of the opportunity to influence decision making processes.

In general, the Arab public seems alienated by politics. The performance of the Joint List in the 20th Knesset and the internal power struggles that led to its dissolution⁷ disappointed the Arab community. This is also true of the failure to present a united Arab political power that would represent the basic interests of the Arab public. In boycotting the election, potential voters expressed their dissatisfaction with the Arab parties and MKs for failing to give the proper weight to civilian matters, despite the importance of these issues in Arab society. The low voter turnout was also affected by the sense that voting for Zionist parties is illegitimate. Similarly, the Arab

passive mood is a response to the continued politics of exclusion of the Arab minority and the anti-Arab tendencies by the right wing governments of recent years, evident in senior politicians' statements as well as legislation (e.g., the controversial Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People). These are commonly viewed as hurtful and contrary to the Arab public's preferred trajectory of economic and social integration.

Ironically, one might claim that the voter turnout among the Arab sector in April 2019 was relatively high, given the difficult political conditions in which the election was held. Almost half of eligible Arab voters did go to the polls, thus reflecting their sense of civic duty and moral commitment to exercise the right to vote despite what they view as the harsh exclusionary message of the Nation State Law. Arabs exercised their right to vote despite their awareness of highly limited impact and political return in terms of allocation of necessary economic resources. Almost half of the Arab public did vote for the Arab parties, even though they do not trust them to represent their interests adequately.

The voter turnout among the younger, more educated generation of the Arab society was rather low. Some were voting for the first time.⁸ One can discern two contradictory trends in this important phenomenon: many of the younger generation are seemingly highly motivated to integrate into Israeli society, socially and even politically; others are opting for separatism. In general, younger members of Arab society have little trust in the Arab leadership and MKs, and do not feel represented by them. They are disappointed with the priority lent by politicians to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their inability to push the state to address local issues seriously, including the rising tide of racism and hatred of Arabs within the Jewish public, the housing shortage, home demolitions, and above all, the high rates of crime and violence in Arab society, which are of grave concern to growing parts of the Arab public.⁹

The Results of the 21st Knesset Elections

Despite the lowest voter turnout ever, the two Arab lists that did run managed to clear the electoral threshold. The overall representation of the four parties comprising the two lists was lower by three seats compared to the Arab representation in the 20th Knesset. Hadash, which has had a stable following for years, as well as Ta'al under MK Ahmad Tibi, together won six seats, partly because the Arab voters avoided voting for smaller parties whose chances of clearing the electoral threshold were low. In all, 12 Arabs

(including two from Jewish political parties) won seats in the 21st Knesset election, compared to the 2015 election, in which 18 Arabs representing diverse political parties were seated as MKs. This is a substantive loss of one third, reflecting a significant representative failure for Israel's Arab citizens.

Unlike Hadash and Ta'al, which did not face political competition, Ra'am (representing the southern faction of the Islamic Movement) and Balad (with a national Palestinian agenda) were forced to confront radical opposition factors that called on the public to boycott the election. The fact that Ra'am-Balad barely cleared the electoral threshold seems to stem from the peculiar pairing of the Islamic movement and a Palestinian national party, which also deterred Arab Christians.

Another interesting phenomenon is the relatively high vote for Zionist parties. Until the last election, the breakdown of the Arab vote was usually 80 percent going to Arab parties and 20 percent to Jewish parties. This ratio continued in the polls held before the April election.¹⁰ In fact, in that election, the rate of voters for Arab parties dropped to 72 percent (about a 10 percent loss) and the vote for Zionist parties rose to 28 percent. An interesting phenomenon aside, it is too early to suggest that this represents a resurgence of the Jewish parties in Arab polling booths. Rather, this change seems to stem from relatively widespread voting for Meretz, which ran two Arab candidates (a Muslim and a Druze) in realistic slots,¹¹ and for Blue and White, which reserved a realistic spot for a Druze woman and promised to amend the Nation State Law, thus securing relatively many votes from the Druze community. Aside from that, the number of Muslim Arabs who voted for Zionist parties was negligible.

Toward the 22nd Knesset Elections

After it became clear that Blue and White would be unable to form a coalition, the Arab parties joined the majority and voted to dissolve the Knesset and hold new parliamentary elections.¹² Based on the election results, party leaders understood they would benefit by reuniting as the Joint List, and on this basis encourage the Arab public to vote in September.¹³ To reconstitute the list, the party leaders confronted several challenges, including an agreement on party representation in the list, the formulation of a shared platform, a response to the public's demand to include independent candidates (e.g., academics), and an attempt to increase flexibility on the issue of unanimity regarding their decision making process.¹⁴ Once

overcoming these obstacles, the Joint List, if revived, might hope for the public's trust – if as MKs they commit to focus on internal civic issues (healthcare, education, housing, employment, crime, and law enforcement), underscoring that only increased Arab representation in the Knesset can ensure the political necessary impact on decision making in these central spheres.

Statements by the heads of the Arab political system after the 21st Knesset elections on their willingness to examine ways to unite forces and/or increase cooperation with left wing and centrist Zionist parties are a change compared to the past.¹⁵ Hadash Chairman Ayman Odeh declared that Arab society has reached the point where it can be an influential actor in the Israeli political arena and make its own particular contribution toward establishment of a governing alternative to the right wing bloc and protection of Israel's democratic values and achievements. He expressed publicly his hope that the centrist and left wing parties would be ready for such political cooperation with Arabs.¹⁶ But even if the Joint List is revived, the possibility of creating a Jewish-Arab political bloc is at present less than realistic.¹⁷

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Before the 21st Knesset elections, the Arab parties declared they would be willing to serve as an “obstructive bloc” only after talks with the center-left bloc. This position, too, is a significant change in the Arab parties' traditional stance, but it was never put to the test. MK Ayman Odeh, who will head the Joint List in the September election, declared that if the List can tip the scales, it will cooperate with Blue and White and recommend to the President that its head be given the mandate to form a government.

On the eve of the 21st Knesset elections, the leadership of the Palestinian Authority tried to promote moves that would lead to the formulation of a prominent Jewish-Arab political camp supporting the end of the occupation. The dismantling of the Joint List derailed the idea and led to a long estrangement between the PA chairman and the Arab party leaders.

Odeh recently noted that while Israel's Arab society is part of the Palestinian Arab people and is fully committed to ending the occupation and establishing

a Palestinian state alongside Israel, the Arab parties are independent and free to determine their own political paths.¹⁸

Conclusion and Assessment

The relatively low voter turnout among Israel's Arab citizens in the 21st Knesset elections, whether for ideological reasons or out of frustration and a sense of exclusion, reflected a measure of protest by the Arab public against both the Jewish and the Arab political systems. The decrease in Knesset voting rates would seem to indicate that part of the Arab public feels alienated from Israeli politics and perhaps even tends toward separatism. A large part of the Arab public has hoped for political representation that would generate real change in its dire situation. After all, on the eve of the 20th Knesset elections, the community had achieved historic political unity in the form of the Joint List, to become the third largest political party in the Knesset. But the hope was dashed because the Joint List had a minor practical political impact, even though it partnered with the government in promoting the important Government Resolution 922 in December 2015 on the five-year plan for the Arab sector. The fairly large representation in the 20th Knesset was not enough to successfully confront the government's exclusionary policies, such as the passing of the Nation State Bill. Political exclusion, disappointment with the Joint List's performance, and dissolution of the List on the eve of the April elections provided a tailwind for the religious and nationalist factions that do not identify with national institutions, some of which even deny the state's right to exist. The election boycott campaign conducted by these factions was also a factor in the low voter turnout.

Diverse factors will affect Arab representation in the 22nd Knesset, first and foremost the nature of the discourse within Arab society, including the strengthening of the trend that has emerged in the last decade, especially among the young and the educated, toward further social and political integration. Support for this trend is increasing in the Arab sector, where a majority want the Arab parties to participate directly or indirectly in the coalition. These segments see participation in the election as beneficial, despite the sense that Israel is conducting an exclusionary campaign against Arab society. These sectors would like to maximize the electoral strength of the Arab sector in the September elections.¹⁹ Reconstituting the Joint List and adopting a civil socioeconomic agenda consistent with what the Arab public wants and needs, as well as running candidates who can address

social segments, especially the young, and win their trust may more fully realize Arab society's electoral potential.

Notes

- 1 The article is based in part on a panel discussion held at Tel Aviv University on May 1, 2019, on "Arab Society and the 21st Knesset Election," sponsored by the Institute for National Security Studies and the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research. Participants included Prof. Moti Tamarkin, Dr. Meir Elran, Prof. Sammy Smooha, MK Dr. Mansour Abba, Prof. Yitzhak Shneel, Henry Fishman, Arik Rudnitzky, Hadar Souad, former Ambassador Mike Harari, Michael Milstein, Ayman Safady, and Dr. Ephraim Lavie. Documentation of the panel may be found at the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research.
- 2 Before the election, some Hadash voices were calling for dissolving the Joint List and merging with Meretz as part of a desire to establish the Democratic Camp, but the idea was not realized. Jaafer Farrah, "How the Arabs will Vote," *Hamakom Hakhi Ham Begehinom*, January 21, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2M6hEBQ> [in Hebrew].
- 3 The head of Ra'am, Dr. Mansour Abbas, admits that his list did not provide an appropriate response to the religious rulings calling for a boycott of the election, based on the erroneous assessment that the boycott campaign would not affect the Arab public.
- 4 For the sake of comparison, the voter turnout in the local government elections held in October 2018 was above 80 percent.
- 5 In the unrecognized Bedouin settlements in the Negev, some 60,000 Bedouins – half of them young – have the right to vote, but it is hard for most of them to realize their right because of the large distances from the polling stations.
- 6 Arik Rudnitzky, "The 2019 Election in the Eyes of the Arab Public," Israel Democracy Institute, April 18, 2019, <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/26599> [in Hebrew].
- 7 It seems that the dissolution of the Joint List as well as the odd pairing of Ra'am/the Islamic Movement with Balad and Hadash's decision to run with Ta'al created a problem for Arab voters who may have wanted to vote for one of the parties on the list but not the other.
- 8 According to a survey conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Program, most young people under age 35 (close to 60 percent) did not vote. See Arik Rudnitzky, "The Arab Vote in the 21st Knesset Election," *Bayan: Rivon Hahevra Ha'aravit*, ed. Arik Rudnitzky, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies 17 (May 2019): 3-13, <https://dayan.org/he/content/5345> [in Hebrew].
- 9 Michael Milstein, "The Arab Public's Dirty Laundry," *Ynet*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5493413,00.html> [in Hebrew].

- 10 Rudnitzky, "The Arab Vote in the 21st Knesset Election."
- 11 Dr. Mursi Abu Mokh also feels that the estimates disseminated before the election whereby Ra'am-Balad's chances of crossing the electoral threshold were nonexistent and the Arab public's disappointment with the Arab political parties encouraged Arab voters to vote for Meretz.
- 12 Lior Kudner, "Ayman Odeh: If We're the Deciding Factor against Netanyahu, We'll Cooperate with Gantz," *Haaretz*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/digital/podcast/.premium-1.7331147> [in Hebrew].
- 13 In MK Ayman Odeh's opinion, after the reconstitution of the Joint List, the number of Arab Meretz voters will drop; *ibid*.
- 14 Interview with MK Mansour Abbas on Radio Kan B's "Marhabeit" (Hebrew/Arabic) program, June 2, 2019.
- 15 Just before the 20th Knesset election, the Joint List's leaders announced that they would not be willing to sit in a government headed by the Zionist Union, refusing even to sign a surplus vote agreement with Meretz, which could have given the Joint List another Knesset seat. See Yehuda Ben Meir, "Israel: The 2015 Elections," *INSS Insight* No. 678, March 29, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2y4jxqB>.
- 16 MK Ayman Odeh speaking at a symposium sponsored by the Walter Libach Institute, held at Tel Aviv University on May 21, 2019.
- 17 MK Odeh explains that, ideologically, he continues to support this, but it cannot be done within the limited amount of time until the election for the 22nd Knesset. See note 12.
- 18 Jacky Khoury, "PA Promoting Political Alliance between Arabs and Jews before Elections," *Haaretz*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/elections/.premium-1.7345747> [in Hebrew].
- 19 In this context, the call by Natan Eshel, a close associate of Prime Minister Netanyahu, to the Israeli right to forge a closer relationship with the Arab public and afford it economic and social welfare based on full cooperation, including partnership in leading the country, is especially interesting. Natan Eshel, "Stop Splitting, Turn to Arabs," *Haaretz*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/.premium-1.7373460> [in Hebrew].