



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

## **2019 Israeli General Elections Brief**

### **Arab Parties Finalize Lists Anti-Arab Discourse in Mainstream Campaigns**

March 1, 2019

The run-up to Israel's national elections, scheduled for April 9, has triggered changes to the Arab political landscape, accompanied by [an intense discourse regarding Arab political participation and representation, both within Arab society and in wider Israeli society](#). Following a period of negotiations ahead of a February 21 deadline to submit party lists to the National Elections Committee, the Joint List—while not fully dismantled as some expected—broke into [two separate alliances](#): **Hadash-Ta'al** headed by MKs Ayman Odeh and Dr. Ahmed Tibi, and **Ra'am-Balad** headed by Dr. Mansur Abbas and Dr. Mtanes Shehadeh.<sup>1</sup>

The Joint List combined—if uncomfortably—different ideological as well as pragmatic aims, and its unity was a significant achievement of Arab leadership, prompted to a large extent by the previous government's decision to raise the threshold required to attain Knesset representation from 2 to 3.25 percent of the vote. This alliance inspired higher voter participation rates and [achieved an unprecedented level of Arab Knesset representation in the 2015 general elections, as the third-largest party with 13 seats](#). Despite its ideological diversity and internal struggles for power, its dissolution has generated disappointment in the Arab public and cynicism about Arab political participation in Israel. On the other hand, there is also hope that the new parties may be able to be more effective than the single list.

The two new alliances are each expected to attain between 4-6 seats according to current polls. At the same time, with many shifts and new alliances in the wider political map in Israel, some fear that at least one of the two new parties might fail to achieve the minimum 3.25% threshold (requiring an estimated 140,000-160,000 votes, depending on overall voting rates), thus significantly weakening Arab representation in the upcoming Knesset ([Hebrew](#)). In addition to these two mostly Arab lists, a few additional Arab candidates are included on Jewish-led political party lists, though only two or three are in positions with potential to attain a seat, for an expected total of 10-13 Arab MKs in the next Knesset, if both Arab lists attain seats.

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<sup>1</sup> The Joint List, often referred to as the Joint Arab List, was an alliance of one Jewish-Arab and three Arab political parties created towards the previous national elections in 2015. MK Ayman Odeh is the Chair of Hadash - a Communist Jewish-Arab party, MK Dr. Ahmed Tibi is the Chair of Ta'al - social-democratic party, Dr. Mtanes Shehadeh is the Chair of Balad - a secular, nationalistic party, and Dr. Mansur Abbas is the Chair of Ra'am - representing the Southern Islamic Movement.

If discourse within Arab society has revolved around Arab representation and the desired extent and potential of political participation, Jewish right-wing party discourse has tapped into [anti-Arab sentiment](#) to delegitimize the Arab parties as well as center-right competitors. This has confirmed concerns within the Arab public that exclusionary discourse will again be an explicit component of this election season.

## JOINT LIST SPLIT

When the 2019 general elections were called, several Joint List MKs announced they would not run for reelection, including Balad MKs [Hanin Zoabi](#) and [Jamal Zahalka](#) and Hadash [MK Dov Khenin](#), creating vacancies in their parties. Meanwhile, the dissolution of the Knesset and upcoming elections reopened questions regarding the viability of the Joint List as well as the distribution of seats among the parties in the alliance, which have been ongoing concerns since its inception.

MK Ahmed Tibi, head of the Ta'al party, sought additional top seats for Ta'al and "[failing to reach an agreement with the other parties](#)," declared in early January the party would run independently, relying on his [popularity among many Arab](#) and [some Jewish voters](#).

In February, as each of the four parties worked to determine the order of their lists,<sup>2</sup> marathon meetings took place to prevent the Joint List from dissolving ([Hebrew](#)). There was speculation at the time whether each the Joint List parties [would run independently](#), whether [Tibi's party would run alone while the other three united](#), or whether Hadash and Balad would end up running together with each of the other two parties running separately.<sup>3</sup>

On February 18, three days before the deadline to submit lists, it was Ra'am and Balad that formed an alliance and invited the two additional parties to join them in recreating a Joint List ([Hebrew](#)). Ultimately, at the last minute on February 21, however, Hadash and Ta'al surprised many and angered some by joining forces with each other, but did not join Ra'am and Balad, [creating two separate alliances](#).

### Composition of New Alliance Lists – Top 6 Seats

	<a href="#">Hadash-Ta'al</a>	<a href="#">Ra'am-Balad</a>
1	MK Ayman Odeh (Hadash)	Dr. Mansour Abbas (Ra'am)
2	MK Dr. Ahmed Tibi (Ta'al)	Dr. Mtanes Shehadeh (Balad)
3	MK Aida Touma-Sliman (Hadash)*	MK Abed El Hakim Haj Yahya (Ra'am)
4	MK Osama Sa'adi (Ta'al)	Hiba Izbak (Balad)*
5	Dr. Ofer Kasif (Jewish candidate, Hadash)	MK Taleb Abu Arar (Ra'am)
6	MK Dr. Yousef Jabareen (Hadash).	Mazen Ghenayem (Balad)

\*women candidates

<sup>2</sup> Political parties hold primaries, or internal elections, or nomination processes whereby the party leader or leadership decide on its makeup and candidates list.

<sup>3</sup> [Arab Political Participation in the 2019 Elections](#), Mosawa Center, February 7, 2019.

## Related Discourse

Internal Arab discussion over the split is mixed. When it gradually became clear that MK Tibi's move was not just a maneuver for greater power within the Joint List but a real intention to split, many activists and intellectuals voiced harsh criticism stating "whoever does not work to negotiate towards a Joint List in good faith, will be blamed for its dissolution and [dire] consequences" ([Hebrew](#)).

Despite [various levels of dissatisfaction with the Joint List](#), many in Arab society still felt the split would be a loss for Arab society and voiced frustrations about the [lack of Arab political capacities](#) to maintain the union for Arab society's common causes. Arab [columnists](#), activists and mayors pushed for the Joint List to remain united. Numerous op-eds were published,<sup>4</sup> substantial efforts were made by the Council of Arabs Mayors and the Arab Follow Up Committee,<sup>5</sup> and petitions were filed for reunification.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, other Arab analysts wrote that Tibi's move would enhance Arab participation in the elections, rejuvenate the "stale apparatuses" of the veteran parties and bring about "a true alliance with the simple people" rather than "an elitist agenda" ([Hebrew](#)), ultimately leading to greater Arab representation in the next Knesset ([Hebrew](#)).<sup>7</sup>

After the lists closed, controversy continued. Hadash and Ta'al's union was met with substantial cynicism in light of MK Tibi's numerous public statements that [he planned to run alone](#) and warnings by MK Odeh that dissolving the Joint List "[is what Netanyahu is after](#)." However, many [Arab citizens also believe the Joint List was ineffective](#) over the last term in overcoming internal divisions and in [representing their interests](#), and regard the split as a renewed possibility for achieving engagement and influence.

According to [Forum for Regional Thinking Researcher Marzouq Al-Halabi](#), while "the big ideologies have died" and are significantly less of a factor in Arab politics, the two alliances fall along opposing political trends within Arab society: Hadash-Ta'al represents a willingness to promote possible political cooperation with Jewish-Zionist parties, and the parties in this alliance are more acceptable to the Jewish public. Ra'am-Balad represents the more ideological and separatist trend in Arab society, which opposes cooperation with Zionist parties and includes voices calling to boycott the elections altogether ([Hebrew](#)). A number of Arab writers and intellectuals continue to call for a total boycott of the elections so that the Arab parties do not "continue to serve" as "a fig leaf for the Israeli democracy" ([Hebrew](#)) and in order to "focus internally" to strengthen Arab society's "social resilience" ([Hebrew](#)).

On another level, some lament the "ugliness we have seen" ([Hebrew](#)) in the process and the damage they believe it has caused for the ability of Arab political leadership to "[regain the](#)

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Haaretz Columnist Odeh Bisharat wrote [Trust the Arabs to Splinter Politically](#) and Samah Salaime, a well-known activist and blogger, wrote [The Joint List Did Not Present A Vision But That Doesn't Mean We Don't Need It](#), Local Call, February 20, 2019 (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> A number of meetings between representatives of the four parties were held under the auspices of the Council of Arab Mayors and its newly elected head, Muder Younis, and the Council issued a formal statement urging all sides "to work for joint action", lauding the good work over the last Knesset term between the Council and the Joint List "especially in regards to Government Resolution 922" ([Hebrew translation](#)).

<sup>6</sup> The news outlet [Bokra.net](#) initiated an online petition for the reunification of the Joint List ([Arabic](#)).

<sup>7</sup> Mohammed Darawshe, [Fewer Sushi Eaters](#), Haaretz, February 6, 2019 ([Hebrew](#)), and Sundus Salah, [Bisharat, we need more seats](#), Haaretz, February 7, 2019 (Hebrew).

[trust](#)" of the Arab voters, fearing that the collapse of the Joint List and "ego battles" might lead to low election turnout. Ra'am Chair, Dr. Mansour Abbas, wrote in a Facebook post that Tibi and Odeh "now call for higher voting rates after they have themselves obliterated the single most important element that raised voting rates in Arab society and enhanced the representation of all parties representing the Arab public." ([Hebrew](#))

Meanwhile, Arab feminist groups are critical of the low level of representation of women in the Arab lists, demanding enhanced representation of both women candidates and the issue of women's rights, as well as the commitment of the parties to ensure their candidates will not include men who in their actions "demean women" such as "via polygamic marriage or sexual harassment scandals."<sup>8</sup>

### ARAB CANDIDATES ON JEWISH-LED PARTIES

Following primaries and nominations processes, below are the names and positions of Arab candidates (including Muslims, Druze and Christians) who have a realistic chance of attaining a Knesset seat as part of the major Jewish-led lists, based on recent polls:

- **Likud:** None. MK Ayoub Kara, a Druze who served in the outgoing government as Minister of Communication, was not guaranteed a slot under the definition of "minority candidate" in the Likud primaries as he was in 2015, and was elected in the 40<sup>th</sup> position.
- **Kahol Lavan:** (Blue and White, the union of Benny Gantz's party Hosen L'Yisrael and MK Yair Lapid's party Yesh Atid): Probably one. [Ghadir Kamal Meriah](#), a Druze journalist and anchorwoman, was nominated to the 25<sup>th</sup> position.
- **Labor:** None. MK Saleh Sa'ad, a Druze, was elected in the unrealistic 17<sup>th</sup> position in the Labor primaries. In the outgoing Knesset, two Arab MKs served under Labor within the Zionist Camp<sup>9</sup>, Sa'ad, who entered the Knesset in October 2017, and Zohair Bahaloul, a Muslim, who [resigned in July 2018](#) following the acceptance of the Nation State Basic Law.
- **Kulanu:** Probably none. MK Akram Hasson, a Druze who served in the outgoing Knesset, was nominated to the 7<sup>th</sup> position, which according to recent polls is borderline for attaining a seat.
- **Meretz:** One or two. MK Issawi Friej, a Muslim who served as Meretz representative since 2013, was elected to the 4<sup>th</sup> position in Meretz primaries, and Ali Salalha, the Druze principal of the award-winning [Beit Jan high school](#), was elected to the 5<sup>th</sup> position, which is borderline for attaining a seat according to recent polls.
- **Israel Beitenu:** Probably none. MK Hamed Amer, a Druze who served in the outgoing Knesset, was nominated to the 6<sup>th</sup> position, borderline for attaining a seat according to recent polls.

In sum, approximately 10-13 Arab MKs are likely to serve in the next Knesset<sup>10</sup>, as opposed to 16 Arab MKs sworn in when the outgoing Knesset was established in 2015.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sawsan Tomah-Shikha, Women Against Violence interview in Halah TV ([Arabic with Hebrew subtitles](#)).

<sup>9</sup> The Union of Labor with MK Tzipi Livni's Hatnu'a Party.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Liss, [Fewer Women, More Generals: What Israel's Next Knesset is Expected to Look Like](#), *Haaretz*, February 25, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> [Israel's Arab Citizens and the 2015 General Elections: Post-Election Review](#), Task Force Briefing Paper, April 2015.

## MAINSTREAM CAMPAIGN DISCOURSE

As parties finalized their lists, anti-Arab statements began to emerge in the political campaigns of right and center-right parties. Notably, PM Netanyahu has tapped into anti-Arab sentiment in political attack his election rivals. Following the announcement of the new Kahol Lavan alliance between Benny Gantz's Hosen L'Yisrael and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid parties, which is currently ahead of Likud in the polls, Netanyahu stated that they are "[relying on Arab parties intent on destroying Israel.](#)"

Netanyahu also responded to criticism of his recent controversial alliance with the extreme right by stating that "[the left has acted to put extreme Islamists into the Knesset.](#)" In mid-February, [Netanyahu arranged a merger](#) of the right-wing Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home) Party with [Otzma Yehudit](#) (Jewish Power), whose members follow the [anti-Arab, Jewish-supremacist](#), some say [openly racist](#), agenda of the Kach party, led in the 1980s by Rabbi Meir Kahane and outlawed since in Israel. The Prime Minister's push for this merger was [harshly criticized](#) in Israel, and was [condemned by major Jewish American groups](#) such as the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the [Anti-Defamation League](#), [AIPAC and the American Jewish Committee](#), organizations that rarely weigh in on Israeli politics.

Leaders in Arab society as well as [Jewish politicians](#), activists<sup>12</sup> and even [religious leaders](#) have criticized this discourse, with Arab leaders declaring their commitment to exercise their democratic rights. Former Supreme Court Justice Salim Joubran said that Netanyahu's statements are "[unnecessary, wretched, and an insult to all the Arab citizens in the country.](#)" Odeh Bisharat wrote, "[The Arabs in Israel have for years been waging a democratic parliamentary struggle. Only a twisted mind can conjoin this with a wish to destroy Israel.](#)" Ron Gerlitz, co-executive director of Sikkuy, wrote that this anti-Arab sentiment is a dangerous [backlash against increased Arab integration and socio economic advancement](#), as well as a preemptive step to delegitimize possible Jewish-Arab political partnerships that may challenge a right-wing coalition.

Lastly, the issue of ensuring access to relevant information and voting stations has been raised by rights groups. For example, Adallah – the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights, warned that [thousands of Bedouin citizens might be unable to vote](#) due to the absence of polling stations in unrecognized villages. [Sikkuy – The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality](#) wrote a letter to the National Elections Committee, criticizing the fact that the information on the Committee's official Arabic-language website is from the previous elections of 2015 and has not been updated since ([Hebrew](#)).

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Roi Barak of Globes recently wrote these attacks are "A Praxis of Blood Libels" ([Hebrew](#)).