



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

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Elections Discourse on Arab Political Participation

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The legitimacy of Arab participation in Israeli politics has emerged as a wedge issue in this election cycle, reflected in public discourse and surveys, decisions of the Central Election Committee and Supreme Court, and in campaign slogans and statements. Early on, the potential for political partnership between Arab and Jewish parties was effectively framed as a left/right-wing choice, with most mainstream Jewish-led lists choosing to express an explicit commitment to resist or even block such partnership.

Anti-Arab sentiment has been part of previous national election campaigns, including Benjamin Netanyahu's slogan in 1999 that he was "good for the Jews;" Yisrael Beitenu Chair Avigdor Lieberman's slogan in 2009, "No Citizenship Without Loyalty;" and, most famously, Netanyahu's 2015 election-day statement that "[the Arabs are flocking to the polls](#)" in a last-minute effort to spur his supporters to vote. However, analysts and activists claim that this time around it appeared much earlier in the process, much more vocally and with more [explicit backing of mainstream leaders and parties](#).

Along with overt campaigning along Jewish/Arab lines, this issue is seen as woven through a number of aspects of this elections cycle, including PM Netanyahu and the Likud Party's support for the pairing of [Otzma Yehudit, the extreme right-wing openly anti-Arab party, with Habayit Hayehudi](#); extreme and [violent political ads](#) broadcast on television; and Prime Minister Netanyahu's Facebook statement that "[Israel is not a country of all its citizens](#)" according to the Nation-State Law in response to media personality Rotem Sela. Despite more Arab voices than ever before [calling for political cooperation](#) with alternatives to a right-wing coalition, the leaders of the main centrist Jewish-led lists have disavowed working with Arab-led parties.

The effect of these events on Arab society has been mixed. Political and civil society leaders, activists and writers are [urging Arab citizens to exercise their right to vote](#) as the best means of exerting influence over the composition of Israel's government, and thus over future government policies. However, following the [breakup of the Joint Arab List into two smaller parties](#)¹, the sustained influence of the Nation-State Law on Arab public opinion, and the strong

¹ Two Arab-led lists formed after the breakup of the Joint List that had won 13 seats in the outgoing Knesset: Hadash-Ta'al headed by MKs Ayman Odeh and Dr. Ahmed Tibi, and Ra'am-Balad headed by Dr. Mansur Abbas and Dr. Mtanesh Shehadeh.

anti-Arab campaigning, many fear [significantly lower voter turnout in this election](#) and rising [apathy and disillusionment](#) about the possibility of democratic participation.

Mainstream Campaigns on Arab Political Participation

Early in the campaign cycle, PM Netanyahu and the Likud party campaign released advertisements with the slogan, "It's Bibi or Tibi," implying that any government not led by Netanyahu would [be influenced by Arab political parties not loyal to the state](#). In response, ["across the political spectrum, there is a rush to assure Jewish Israeli voters that nobody is looking to form a government that includes Arabs."](#)

In the past, the attempt to depict Arab citizens as a political threat was less overt and [even made anonymously](#). This time, Haaretz writes, the [right wing's political strategy](#) has been ["to forestall any governing coalition that includes them"](#) by tapping into what Ameer Fakhoury describes is a ["deep and widespread sentiment \[among the Jewish majority\] that the Arab citizens are not legitimate partners to the government..."](#)

For example, when Netanyahu and the Likud party campaign stated that the centrist Kahol Lavan [planned to rely on Arab parties to form a government](#), its leader Benny Gantz – who as one of his very first political statements [promised to "fix" the controversial Nation State Law](#) – quickly stated the Arab parties ["are irrelevant"](#) and that his party [will not form a coalition with them](#) since they "go against the state of Israel."

On the left side of the political map, Labor party Chair Avi Gabbay, who [initially stated](#) he will not sit with Arab parties in a coalition, recently made [special efforts to attract Arab voters](#) to Labor and stated that if Arab parties "agree on government guidelines we can live with" they should join the coalition ([Hebrew](#)). Meretz is so far the only Jewish-led party that has openly called for Jewish-Arab political cooperation ([Hebrew](#)).

Leaders from both Arab-led lists, **Hadash-Ta'al** and **Ra'am-Balad**, have pushed back against anti-Arab campaigning, with Hadash-Ta'al using Netanyahu's Election Day statement from 2015 to create the slogan, "Flocking to the polls, ousting Netanyahu." Thabet Abu Rass, Co-Executive Director of The Abraham Initiatives, [said that while Netanyahu's tactics were not surprising](#), "the surprise for Arab voters is Gantz and the Kahol Lavan party."

Nation-State Law Invoked

In mid-March, discourse about the legitimacy of Arab political leadership and Arab electoral participation peaked following a [tweet by well-known TV anchor and actress Rotem Sela](#) criticizing anti-Arab campaigning: "For God sake – there are also Arab citizens in this country. When the heck will someone in government say to the public that the state of Israel is the state of all its citizens, and that all human beings were born equal. And that Arabs are – god forbid – also human beings." Within a few hours, the tweet became viral, prompting a barrage of critical and supportive reactions. PM Netanyahu [responded in a Facebook post](#): "Dear Rotem, an important correction: Israel is not a country of all its citizens. According to the Nation-State Law that we passed, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish nation – and its alone."

Netanyahu's statement received wide [international coverage](#) and a wave of criticism from [journalists](#), activists and [media personalities](#). Israel's [President Reuven Rivlin rebuked Netanyahu](#), stating, "Arabs aren't 'second-class voters.'"

Central Election Committee and Supreme Court decisions

On a procedural level, the legitimacy of Arab representation *and* the legitimacy of anti-Arab discourse on the political stage were volleyed between the Central Elections Committee and the Supreme Court. The committee, a political body staffed by representatives of the Knesset's outgoing parties, [disqualified one Arab list, Ra'am-Balad, and a candidate from Hadash-Ta'al \(Ofar Kasif\) but permitted the candidacy of Otzma Yehudit](#), against the recommendations of the Attorney General. These disqualifications were then overturned by the Supreme Court.

Using a legislative amendment that [the right wing introduced during the previous Knesset](#) with the aim of disqualifying Arab parties, the Supreme Court allowed the Arab parties and candidates to run but disqualified Otzma Yehudit Chair Michael Ben Ari. This was [the first time in Israel's history that the Supreme Court disqualified a single candidate approved by the Committee](#), stating that allowing him to run "would have legitimized racism."

The Supreme Court decisions were welcomed by Arab society and by those dismayed by the reintroduction of Otzma Yehudit into the political fold, and raised ire among those who [felt Jewish and Arab parties and candidates are not held to the same standards](#). They also further intensified political debate over whether the Supreme Court was "[doing its job –protecting democracy](#)" or, as Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked suggested, that the justices "[have changed themselves into political actors](#)."

Public Discourse on Arab-Jewish Political Partnership

Chair of the Hadash-Ta'al alliance, MK Ayman Odeh, has been consistent in affirming [the need for political cooperation](#). Moreover, he said he is even "[willing to recommend \[center-right\] Gantz and Lapid to Rivlin to stop the formation of a right-wing government](#)," with conditions such as peace negotiations, equality for all citizens, and revocation of the Nation-State Law. MK Ahmad Tibi, second on the Hadash-Ta'al list, said [he will not join a center-left coalition](#) but would be willing to support it from the outside with similar preconditions.² ([Hebrew](#)).

Dr. Mansour Abbas, Chair of Ra'am (representing the Southern Islamic Movement) made similar statements about willingness to serve in an external bloc ([Hebrew](#)), while the leaders of its list partner Balad stated they will not support a center-left coalition from the outside.

Thabet Abu Rass of The Abraham Initiatives says the majority of Arab citizens want greater involvement in Israeli government decisions and are "[knocking on the doors of the political parties](#)." In this vein, a number of Arab and Jewish civil society leaders³ are arguing that "[the Jewish left and Palestinian Arabs can remake Israeli politics](#)" since only a Jewish-Arab political partnership can currently change the composition of the governing coalition. Therefore, despite significant rifts and disagreements between Jewish-led and Arab-led parties, there are voices citing enough common interests to enable "[a reasonable political partnership enabling](#)

² A situation called "an external bloc," by which a minority government of less than 61 MKs, is supported by an opposition party, and is then able to rule. The most notable precedent in Israel's history is the government formed by late Prime Minister Yizhak Rabin in 1992, which [relied on the external support of the Arab Knesset members](#).

³ For example: Ron Gerlitz of Sikkuy, The Abraham Initiatives, Ameer Fakhoury of the School for Peace Research Center at Wahat al-Salam-Neve Shalom and Mikhael Manekin of The Alliance for Israel's Future and Israel's Labor Party, and others.

[regime change.](#)" A recent survey by The Abraham Initiatives found that [if a Jewish-Arab party ran in the elections, 61% of Arab voters would vote for it.](#)

Polling of Arab society on joining a government is inconsistent: [a Tel Aviv University poll showed](#) 40% of respondents thought Arab parties should serve as external bloc while 57% opposed. A [Local Call poll](#), meanwhile, showed that 87% of Arab respondents said they would support Arab party participation in a government coalition.

However, 65% of Jewish respondents in the Local Call poll said it would be "unacceptable" for an Arab-led party to join a governing coalition. And while 47% of Arab respondents said they would consider voting for a Jewish-led party if it represented their views, only 4% of Jewish respondents said they would consider voting for an Arab-led party while 88% said they would not.

Arab Society Discourse on Voting

It is yet unclear whether the heated election campaigns described above, coupled by the passage of the Nation-State Law last July, [will prompt Arab citizens to vote or sit out the election.](#)

While [the community seems to be pulled in several directions](#), including efforts to get out the vote despite the rhetoric, the [issue of boycotting the elections is widely discussed in Arab society](#). Thabet Abu Rass attributes voter apathy to the current election campaigns in which ["\[e\]verybody's kicking us and neither team wants us."](#)

The [split of the Joint List into two parties](#) and dissatisfaction with Arab political leadership is seen as another factor affecting voter participation. With a relatively [high Arab voter turnout of 63.5% in the 2015 elections](#), prompted by the unprecedented union of the Arab and Jewish-Arab parties, most surveys predict a decline in voter turnout and decreased support for the smaller alliances in this cycle.⁴ [One poll found](#) that 50.5% of the respondents who intend not to vote said they have "no interest in politics," while another 19% believe that "no party represents me."

Mohammad Darawshe calls this ["a visceral response, an instinctive one, of anger, and not deep thinking about realpolitik](#). Unfortunately, the parties of the Joint List lost so much of their support because of their internal wars that today their ability to speak to the minds of the Arab public is greatly diminished."

Voter apathy, writes Sikkuy Co-Chair Ron Gerlitz, is also fueled by a misconception that Arab MKs do not work on the Arab community's behalf. Gerlitz, citing many concrete accomplishments of Arab MKs for the benefit of Arab society, wrote that public disaffection for

⁴ [A survey conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation](#) at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies [found](#) that among the younger Arab population, mostly first-time voters, only around 40% intend to vote, while among the older generations, over age 35, 60-65% said they would vote. [This survey also found](#) that 39% of the Arab vote will go to Hadash-Ta'al, 23.3% to Ra'am-Balad, and a surprising 9.6% to the Kahol Lavan list. A recent internal [survey by Hadash-Ta'al](#) found that only 50 percent of Arab voters intend to cast ballots. [A survey by the University of Maryland, on the other hand](#), predicts a dramatic rise in Arab voter participation to 73.5%, that the two Arab lists running in this election would receive 63% of the Arab vote (whereas 82% of Arab voters cast ballots for the Joint List in 2015), and that most of the remaining votes would go to "centrist and left-leaning Zionist parties, some of which have Arab candidates in relatively secure spots."

Arab parties is fueled in part by statements made by right-wing Jewish politicians disparaging the motivations and accomplishments of Arab MKs. Calling on Arab voters to come out, he stated: "The goal of these lies is to keep you in your homes on Election Day and to help the right parties to earn more seats." ([Hebrew and Arabic](#)).

There is [concern that without strong turnout](#), one of the two Arab lists might not pass the electoral threshold⁵ and Arab political leaders, civil society organizations and cultural figures have been urging citizens to vote as the only way to effect the changes they seek. Former Hadash MK Issam Makhoul said, "If we raise the percentage of our participation in the elections by 7%, then we will...open the way wide to topple the rule of Netanyahu." ([Arabic](#)) Columnist [Odeh Bisharat wrote](#) that Arab citizens cannot afford the "luxury of despair" and must vote as a way of continuing to fight for their rights. Appealing to young voters, Arab rap artist [Tamer Nafar released a music video, "Tamer Must Vote,"](#) reflecting the internal debate about voting but ultimately contending that the Arab community must get together and use their influence to make change.

Among the Druze population, where there is significant frustration over the Nation-State Law, there are voices saying they feel "knifed in the back" by the government, stating that [traditional voting patterns will be changing](#) with more Druze voting for left-wing parties rather than center and right-wing parties as in the past.

⁵ The electoral threshold was increased from 2% to 3.25% in 2015 towards the previous elections and was among the incentives for the establishment of the Joint List. In the current elections, a party would therefore need between 140,000-160,000 votes to enter the Knesset, depending on voting rates. According to the Israeli Bureau of Statistics, only 50% of Arab society is eligible to vote (compared with 68.1% of Jewish society) due to the fact that around East Jerusalem Arabs and Golan Heights Druze cannot vote in national elections, combined with the fact that Arab society is younger by average so that more of its members are below the voting age of 18 ([Hebrew](#)).