



Israel's Second 2019 Elections: Shifting Perspectives on Arab Political Participation

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Israel's back-to-back elections of 2019 have ushered in a number of developments related to Arab political participation, perhaps most significantly bringing the possibility of Jewish-Arab political cooperation into mainstream discourse.

Arab-led parties, whose unified Joint List¹ split into two separate alliances early in the April elections cycle, voted with the coalition for new elections, seeing it as an opportunity [to reunite the Joint List](#), restore the faith of the Arab electorate, and recoup seats lost in the first round. The [split of the unified list, which was widely criticized within Arab society](#), is thought to have factored strongly into the lowest-ever Arab voter turnout—[less than 50%](#)²—handing Arab-led parties a weaker slate of 10 Knesset seats, after a record turnout earned them 13 seats in 2015.

But low Arab voter turnout extends to issues beyond the actions of Arab political leadership. The [Nation-State Law passed last July](#) was widely perceived within Arab society as a formalization of second-class citizenship, and reinforced a sense of frustration and powerlessness among Arab citizens from national politics. This sense deepened as [anti-Arab campaigning by right-wing parties intensified in the first 2019 elections cycle](#) and was left largely unchallenged by the opposition, with some [Arab activists calling for boycott](#).

When the dominant opposition party, Kahol Lavan, failed to unseat PM Netanyahu on April 9 by courting voters from the right (ultimately pulling votes from the left), public discourse about the significance of the Arab electorate and potential of Jewish-Arab political cooperation increased. In recent years, discussion about this possibility has grown among both Jewish and Arab civil society leaders and political activists, but was delegitimized in the political arena as part of [exclusionary discourse of the past several years](#) and specifically the [divisive campaigning in the last round of elections](#).

Formal cooperation between Arab and Jewish parties has only one precedent in Israel dating back to the Rabin government in 1992-95, when Arab parties served as an [external bloc to a minority government](#). In the ensuing years, [Jewish and Arab-led parties kept their distance with little mutual trust between parties and constituencies](#), and [varying degrees of resistance or openness to collaboration from both communities](#).

Immediately following the April election results, most talk of Jewish-Arab political cooperation focused on longer-term efforts to build a more effective opposition. A key moment in the mainstreaming of this discourse was Kahol Lavan's invitation to MK Ayman Odeh, head of Hadash-Ta'al (and former Chair of the Joint List), to speak at [the May 25th opposition rally in Tel Aviv they](#)

¹ The union of all four Arab-led parties established towards the 2015 General Elections, which [won 13 seats at the time](#) and which was [dissolved towards the April 2019 elections](#).

² In addition, 28.6% of Arab voters supported Jewish-led parties (compared with 17% of Arab voters in 2015) [See in-depth discussion of voting results, here](#).

[organized with Labor and Meretz](#)—a sea change from the list’s earlier hard line against any shared political platform or collaboration with Arab leadership.

Once new elections were announced, discussion of Jewish-Arab political cooperation became even more pronounced, if also more complicated. “In numeric terms,” says Ameer Fakhouri, director of the Research Center at Neve Shalom, Wahat al-Salam, “[it is now evident the center-left cannot beat the right without the vote of the Arab](#).” However, he continues “the way to do it is very much elusive.”

This update outlines the developments related to Arab political representation in the lead-up to the second elections, and the parallel discourse developing around potential Jewish-Arab cooperation.

NEW ELECTIONS AND JOINT LIST REUNIFICATION

On the night of May 29-30, after PM Netanyahu failed to reach an agreement with at least 61 MKs to ensure a viable government, all ten MKs from the Arab-led parties (Hadash-Ta'al and Ra'am-Balad) voted with the coalition parties in favor of new elections.³ While receiving some backlash for voting with the coalition rather than the opposition, this unprecedented turn of events is largely seen as a second chance for Arab political leadership.

[Low Arab voter turnout in the last elections](#) is attributed in part to disappointment with the split of the Joint List (the union of Arab-led parties) [in the previous elections cycle](#). Since the call for new elections, Arab party leaders have been on [a path towards reunification](#). The faster and less contentious the process of reuniting, say civil society leaders and political activists, the more likely it is to help restore Arab public interest in the political process.

Voting in favor of new elections

Arab politicians have been under some criticism from their constituencies for voting with the coalition and against the opposition (Kahol Lavan, Labor and Meretz voted against dissolving the Knesset). Leading Arab politicians, including MKs [Ayman Odeh](#), Aida Touma-Sliman and [Ofar Kasif](#) (Hadash) and [Ahmed Tibi](#) (Ta'al), justified their decision by saying that, beyond a [second chance](#) to increase Arab voter turnout and therefore Arab influence in the next Knesset, voting for new elections served additional purposes. These include (i) postponing the next government which Arab MKs say would have been the worst in Israeli history for Arab society due to its extreme right-wing members; (ii) putting [controversial legislation on hold](#) (i.e. annexing parts of the West Bank, bills granting immunity from prosecution to PM Netanyahu, and bills weakening the legal system); and (iii) postponing or weakening the likelihood of the American “Deal of the Century,” which they feared would end the dream of Palestinian statehood. [Recent reports that Arab MKs voted for new elections as part of a deal with PM Netanyahu](#) have been labeled political fodder and vehemently denied.

Reunification of the Joint List

After the Knesset dissolved and new elections were called, social media and Arabic language media in Israel were filled with demands to re-create the Joint List. The four Arab-led parties immediately began [informal talks about reuniting](#), due to significant pressure from constituents, as well as recognition that [numerous mistakes made since the Joint List was created in 2015](#) and

³ According to Israeli law, in case the deadline for announcing a coalition government has passed (maximum 42 days after national elections are held) but no coalition has been established, the President should give this mandate to a different MK, unless new elections are called.

the [ugly breakup of the Joint List in early 2019 were major causes of the extremely low turnout of Arab voters in the April elections.](#)

Leaders of all the Arab-led parties voiced their support of such reunification. MK Ayman Odeh, Chair of Hadash, posted a video on Facebook ([Arabic](#)) stating "everywhere I went over the last few days, people stopped me and asked to rebuild the Joint List." MK Mansour Abbas, Chair of Ra'am, wrote on the Arabic-language news portal Bokra that talks to re-form the Joint List were imperative to developing "a collective and comprehensive program of the most important issues that concern the Arab community and the interest of our people." ([Arabic](#)) MK Ahmed Tibi (Chair of Ta'al), who [withdrew from the Joint List](#) towards the previous elections, also said in an interview to Israeli Channel 11 ([Hebrew](#)) that he supports its re-establishment.

On June 20, all four parties issued a joint statement that [they have agreed to reestablish the Joint List](#), adding: "Most of the Arab citizens want a Joint List. As such, we have put in the effort to come together as one party instead of splitting into two (lists)."

In parallel, intense discussions are taking place as to the order of candidates within the new Joint List, and share of seats per party -- a root cause behind its dissolution earlier this year. Currently, it appears that all four parties agree to divide the list according to recent election results, in which Hadash-Ta'al received six seats, while Ra'am-Balad received four.

Disagreements remain regarding which candidates will be placed beyond the first 10 slots. According to Jack Khoury in Haaretz, "[each party is seeking to increase its representation on the slate by one seat,](#)" while additional considerations include ensuring representation to Negev Bedouins, more women and possibly also independent activists or academics who could act as a draw to the Arab public.

Fresh Faces

The idea of [bringing in new leaders who are not necessarily identified with traditional party politics](#) has gained momentum in Arab society. Political activist Samah Salame writes that "external experts [on issues such as urban planning, Bedouin development, fighting violence] tasked with neutralizing the partisan poison that has paralyzed the work of the Joint List" would strengthen the party. ([Hebrew](#)) However, this pressure has met with severe resistance from the existing four parties and their activists.

Parallel attempts are therefore continuing to form one or more new Arab lists, one of them reportedly including well-known academic Prof. As'ad Ghanem ([Hebrew](#)), although some activists claim this would splinter the Arab vote (three new Arab-led parties registered before the previous elections received together over 4,000 votes).

Party lists must be presented to the Central Elections Committee by August 2 to be eligible to run in the elections.

JEWISH-ARAB POLITICAL COOPERATION

Partnership between Arab-led and Jewish-led political parties, and the legitimacy of Arab political participation in Israel, is a long-standing and controversial issue in Israeli national politics. The late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, remembered predominantly for the Oslo accords, was also the [only Prime Minister to rely on Arab parties as an external bloc](#) to sustain a minority government—a level of cooperation that [was used to delegitimize his policies](#), and has yet to be repeated.

In recent years, discussion about the possibility and viability of Jewish-Arab political cooperation in the national arena has resurfaced. In part, as a result of Arab citizens' [growing participation in Israel's socio-economic spheres](#), there is greater [interest in being part of government decision-making circles](#). Such cooperation is more fundamentally viewed by shared society proponents as a [necessary component of economic advancement contributing to Israel's democratic strength and social cohesion](#).

Aside from the progressive social-democratic party Meretz, left and center-left Jewish-led political parties in Israel have been reluctant to [become associated with Arab politicians](#), much less find common ground towards formal cooperation. Arab and Jewish parties' political priorities and preconditions [for formal cooperation can present a mutual challenge for party leaders and their constituencies](#). However, on numerous occasions Jewish and Arab MKs cooperate tactically on a variety of issues and common interests, and most non-Haredi Jewish parties have made sure to include an Arab or Druze representative in their party lists.

Among Arab leadership, ideological differences among the four parties, Balad, Hadash, Ra'am and Ta'al, have affected their ability to speak and [act in unison on the issue](#), but more have been vocal about the potential of working together with Jewish parties to effect meaningful change in the government. [Public opinion polls in recent years have consistently shown](#) interest within Arab society to be part of Israel's governing mainstream.

Changes Motivated by 2019 National Elections

In the wake of [divisive April election campaigns](#), in which the legitimacy of Arab political participation and Jewish-Arab cooperation became a wedge issue and the center-left was unable to defeat the incumbent government by attracting voters from the right, the [significance and potential of Jewish-Arab cooperation has gained urgency and momentum](#). Many civil society leaders, intellectuals, and political activists lamented the lost potential of the Arab vote and have been arguing [more emphatically that Jewish-Arab cooperation is key to strengthening the left](#).

Only days before new elections were called, the [participation of MK Ayman Odeh in a massive opposition rally in Tel Aviv](#) indicated a shift in both center-left and Arab leadership approaches to these issues. While both Benny Gantz, head of Kahol Lavan, and MK Odeh, Chair of Hadash-Ta'al and former Chair of the Joint List, faced internal challenges over this cooperation (including [disagreements among Arab leadership](#), and [two top Kahol Lavan MKs boycotting the event](#)), both set the tone intended "[to continue this successful experiment](#)."

Since new elections were announced, discussion towards such cooperation has become more pronounced, if also more complicated. Political leaders initially spoke of [possible mergers, new Jewish-Arab lists](#), and a brief effort within Meretz [towards joint Jewish/Arab leadership](#) after the party won 8.7% of the Arab vote (a larger share of the Arab vote than any other Jewish party, accounting for almost one-quarter of all votes cast for Meretz). Ultimately, Arab-led parties chose to re-form the Joint List, [ruling out the possibility of any other alliance](#), and Meretz leadership [rejected the co-leadership](#) proposal. But for both Arab and left-wing parties, the possibility of working together to increase the overall left-wing vote towards a future governing coalition or opposition remains a central focus.

Civil Society Efforts

What such cooperation might look like, and how Arab and Jewish political leaders can bridge the large ideological and confidence gaps between them, is not yet clear. Towards that end, beyond the tactical discussions taking place within parties focused on the September 17 vote, civil society

leaders and political activists have been working to advance substantive dialogues and grassroots actions on these issues through leadership conferences, roundtables and political organizing. A few recent examples include:

- On May 31, a day after new elections were called, the [Berl Katznelson Center](#) held a conference bringing together left and center-left Jewish and Arab leadership for discussion about working together to build their 'camp.'
- On June 23, the [Israel Democracy Institute](#) brought together representatives from the opposition parties to discuss Arab parties and voters in the upcoming elections and visions for full parliamentary cooperation between Arabs and Jews.
- [Zazim](#) and [Standing Together](#) are building grassroots movements to combat divisive discourse in elections and motivate political participation among Arab citizens towards greater cooperation in the national political arena.

These events build on renewed research and publications on the subject, such as the 2018 publications of [Attainable Alliances](#), by the Research Center at Wahat al-Salam – Neve Shalom; [Political Aspects of the Lives of Arab Citizens in Israel](#), by the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, inclusion of these issues in the Israel Democracy Institute's [annual surveys of Jewish-Arab relations](#), a poll of [related public attitudes by Local Call](#), and [articles promoting such partnership in the new magazine "Telem" issued by the Berl Katznelson center \(Hebrew\)](#).

In addition, a number of Jewish and Arab shared society leaders have written articles making the case for political cooperation, including Mikhael Manekin and Ameer Fakhoury in [Foreign Policy Magazine](#), Ron Gerlitz from Sikkuy, [\(Hebrew\)](#), Mohammed Darwashe [\(Hebrew\)](#) and Yaniv Sagee [\(Hebrew\)](#) from Givat Haviva, the [co-directors of Standing Together](#) and the [co-directors of the Abraham Initiatives](#).

Arab Public Discourse

The most vocal Arab political leader speaking about this issue has been Hadash Chair Ayman Odeh who on numerous occasions has spoken about the need to attract Jewish voters to the Joint List and to cooperate with Jewish-led parties. In a recent Haaretz podcast [\(Hebrew\)](#), MK Odeh said that if the Arab parties become the ones that could make or break a center-left government, they "need to act smart and ensure influence" and would thus cooperate with Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan Party.

More recently, additional voices from within the Arab political leadership are making similar statements, and even MK Mansour Abbas, chair of the Ra'am party, representing the Southern Islamic Movement, wrote on Facebook that Arab leadership must "act outside the box" in regards to the general Israeli politics, to "understand the other Israeli discourse...and find ways to work in relations and together with it," lamenting that Arab leadership is in a "status quo of no influence" [over general Israeli politics] since the Oslo period" ([Arabic](#) and [Hebrew](#)).

In parallel, a variety of Arab activists and journalists are calling for such cooperation. [Haaretz journalist Jack Khoury](#) wrote that "new elections are the golden opportunity for Arab parties," but that "if they don't band with Jewish parties to present an alternative to Netanyahu, they can forget about change." This sentiment was echoed by others in Arab society, including [columnist and activist, Odeh Bisharat, who wrote that](#) finally, "Arabs and democratic Jewish elements are learning that we must join hands with those who until yesterday were on the other side of the divide...The challenge ahead is to turn the decree of Arab-Jewish cooperation into a win-win situation."

Activist and writer Afif Abu Moch emphasized the current opportunity for such partnership: "The center-left parties have now realized that only the Arab citizens can bring about a political turnover in this country," and how every opposition party "all of a sudden do not dismiss the Arab citizens and even begin to talk in favor of adding an Arab candidate to their list." ([Hebrew](#))

Speaking about the interests of the younger Arab generation, [Mohammed Kaabia, a media consultant](#), said "We want to integrate...Young Arabs don't want their representatives spending all their time focusing on the Palestinians. There are plenty of educated young people who are waiting for the day an Arab is appointed Minister of Health."

Jewish Public Discourse

In Jewish society, many voices are urging the left and center-left (and even [right wing](#)) to figure out how to effectively partner with Arab society, though there is still significant hesitation especially regarding the more [hard-line Balad party, which was and is expected to again be part of](#) the Joint List.

The most explicit expression of willingness to partner with Arab parties came from the newest center-left party. Former general [Yair Golan, number 2 on former Prime Minister's Ehud Barak's newly announced list](#), openly expressed not only his willingness to consider including Arab parties in a governing coalition, but the importance of legitimizing Arab political participation in an interview on Israel's Kann Bet radio: "Anyone who believes in a Jewish and democratic state that accepts minorities with kindness we don't reject him, we reject only those who reject the very existence of the State." He went on to say, if given the opportunity, the new list will "invite anyone who agrees with the principles I spoke about, including Ayman Odeh. There are twenty percent Arab residents here, do we want to disqualify them? Look at the approach of Ben-Gurion and Eshkol and Rabin and Begin to the Arab population. They had a welcoming attitude. I don't understand why we should take twenty percent of the residents of Israel and make them illegitimate."

This follows increasing numbers of Jewish politicians, military personnel, journalists and activists publicly making the case for such cooperation. Politicians, military personnel, journalists and activists are also weighing in on the possibility. [Former minister, politician and diplomat Yossi Beilin](#), writing about the second chance that new elections afford Kahol Lavan, underscored that "a willingness to have a dialogue and cooperate with those Arab lawmakers open to engaging is a prerequisite, even if ultimately insufficient, for the party to rise to power." [Former politician Uzi Baram urged](#) a "clear alliance of interests between the Arab community and opponents of the right [that] can bring about a change in government"

When discussing the low Arab voter turnout in April, former Hadash MK Dov Khenin [stressed the importance of direct communication between Kahol Lavan leadership and the Arab public](#), saying: "I believe that if Kahol Lavan displays a willingness to confront the crucial national issues of the Arab public, voter turnout in Arab communities could be raised to 65% in order to defeat the right. They [the Kahol Lavan leaders] must tell [the Arab public] that they are citizens with equal rights and that this is their state as much as it is the state of its Jewish citizens." In Labor, more and more voices are mentioning this issue as primaries for party chair approach (scheduled for July 2) while in Meretz this has become a central emphasis of the party's recent discourse. Other voices are calling for the establishment of a new Jewish-Arab party (e.g. renowned writer David Grossman – [Hebrew](#)).