



Arab Political Participation in the 2019 Elections

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Arab voters are expected to constitute 16% of those voting in the upcoming Israeli elections, which are set to take place on April 9, 2019. Due to recent developments, namely the withdrawal of Ta'al from the Joint List, the direction of Arab political participation in the upcoming elections and in Israeli politics remains unclear. Nonetheless, as such a large portion of the voting pool, Arab voters will have a substantial influence on the outcome of the upcoming elections. Moreover, their strength within the next Knesset has the potential to influence prospects for regional peace and the achievement of a negotiated two-state solution, as well as the trajectory of democracy in Israel.

In 2015, the Israeli Knesset raised the election threshold from 2% to 3.25%. Although this move reduced the ability of any small party to enter the Knesset, it was intended to decrease Palestinian Arab representation. In the face of this calculated attempt to limit their democratic representation, the Palestinian Arab community and their political leaders rose to the occasion, uniting four parties under what has come to be referred to as the Joint List.¹ With a 7% increase in Arab voter turn-out, the Joint List won a record thirteen seats, making it the third largest political group in the Knesset. The Joint List overwhelmingly won the support of the Arab community, with some 85% of Arab voters supporting the Joint List. As the largest political group in the Knesset offering a progressive alternative to the continuation of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, the victory of the Joint List was celebrated around the world by proponents of a negotiated two-state solution. The Palestinian Authority, which itself had encouraged MK Ahmad Tibi, the head of Ta'al, to join the Joint List, was among those celebrating. Others celebrated the Joint List as a symbol of unity in an otherwise conflict-ridden Middle East. Meanwhile, the Joint List's supporters welcomed it as a harbinger for social justice, equality, and an end to the occupation.

Unfortunately, the Joint List did not usher in a new era in Israeli politics. On the contrary, the 20th Knesset intensified Israel's illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and laid siege on the rights of Israel's Arab citizens. At the initiative of the Prime Minister's coalition, the Knesset legislated a series of discriminatory and anti-democratic bills, culminating in the passage of the Jewish Nation-State Law. Outside of the Knesset, this period witnessed repeated attacks on freedom of expression, routine home demolitions in Arab communities, an escalation in police violence and repression, the persistence of egregious discrimination in the allocation and implementation of state budgets, and vicious incitement on the part of politicians, including commonplace calls for population transfers.

As a result of this reality, for which the Joint List is in no way responsible, many have lost the optimism that the political group once inspired. The community has expressed disappointment in the lack of a strategic response to the aforementioned attacks and particularly to the Jewish Nation-State Law. Some see the dissolution of the Joint List as a solution to the group's inability to develop a singular, coherent vision. This

¹ The Joint List comprises four political parties: Hadash, Balad, Ta'al, and the southern branch of the Islamic Movement. The Joint List constitutes an unprecedented cooperation between different Arab ideological movements and a unique model for the region.

line of thought suggests that the dissolution of the Joint List will energize voters that might stay at home or vote for another political group rather than vote for the Joint List again. Others, particularly members of Hadash and Balad, remain committed to unity, largely because their parties are dominant in the Joint List. Although party allegiances run deep, Arab voters tend to favor unity, including the development of a vision and strategy that could unify both the political representatives and the community. In order for Arab political participation to remain appealing and effective, both scenarios require democratic, and inclusive introspection whereby the community and its representatives develop a strategy for the future. Alternatively, political participation in Israeli politics will lose its appeal to the Arab public.

For many, political participation has already lost its appeal, or never had any in the first place. Proponents of a boycott of the elections include the secular Ibna al-Balad movement and the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, as well as non-affiliated citizens. This group generally sees Arab political participation in national Israeli politics as a means by which to white-wash an inherently undemocratic regime. They argue that Arab members of the Knesset serve as a cosmetic tool for the state to promote an image of itself as a liberal democracy through which it draws legitimacy in the eyes of its constituents and the international community. The movement to boycott the elections has a significant impact on Arab participation in Israeli elections. In 1999, voter turnout reached 75% in the Arab community, with 95% voting for Ehud Barak (Labor Party). However, just two years later, after Barak's administration violently suppressed Palestinian Arab demonstrators in 2000, which resulted in the deaths of twelve Palestinian citizens and one Palestinian from the West Bank, more than 82% of Arab citizens boycotted the following elections, resulting in the election of Ariel Sharon (Likud).

Despite the passage of the Jewish Nation-State Law in July, 2018, support for a boycott remains relatively weak. Even if minimal, low voter turnout could jeopardize the ability of Arab parties to pass the threshold for entry into the Knesset and/or could result in a decrease in the number of seats held by progressive Palestinian Arab members of the Knesset.

Several additional factors could impact the outcome of the 2019 elections as it relates to the Arab vote. Perceptions regarding the precarity of Prime Minister Netanyahu's hold on power, particularly in light of the threat posed by the investigations into him and his family, as well as the threat posed by his rising political opponent, could inspire hope in the Arab community and thereby increase voter turnout. International intervention could also influence Arab voters and the outcome of the elections more generally. International actors that are likely to influence the elections include American Jewish donors, the Palestinian Authority, and the PLO Task Force. Incitement on the part of politicians and political figures is also likely and may influence both Arab and Jewish voters, in addition to increasing tensions within Israel.

The 2019 elections could result in several different scenarios.

- 1) The Joint List could remain intact, with Ta'al returning and the parties renegotiating the leadership structure. This would not result in a major increase or decrease in the number of seats the Joint List wins. However, as a result of disillusionment in general, the Joint List may not win thirteen seats again.
- 2) Ta'al runs without the Joint List and the Joint List is comprised of Balad, Hadash, and the Islamic Movement. This scenario would result in some competition and the loss of one or two seats. Since Ta'al is allied with the Islamic Movement in many respects, this scenario might also threaten its ability to enter the Knesset.
- 3) Ta'al and the Islamic Movement run together. This scenario could result in more seats than the above scenarios, since voters might be more motivated to vote for Ta'al and the Islamic Movement than a Joint List in which they perceive as dominated by Hadash and Balad.
- 4) Ta'al runs alone and the Islamic Movement runs alone while Balad and Hadash run together. Under this scenario, Ta'al might not reach the vote threshold, precluding its entry into the Knesset. The other two political groups would enter the Knesset, but it is likely that the former parties would lose at least three of their seats.

- 5) Cooperation with Jewish parties is unlikely considering the lack of time before parties must be announced and considering the current discourse.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, the Arab community in Israel remains a powerful force for peace, human rights, and democracy. Constituting 21% of the population, the Palestinian Arab community itself has unrivaled access to both Israelis and to Palestinian communities. As a result of its physical, psychological, and linguistic access to the parties to the conflict, the Arab Palestinian minority is in a unique position to promote just and lasting peace in the region. The political representatives of the Arab community in the Knesset are an integral element in these efforts. In the 1990s, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin relied heavily on Arab votes to pass the Oslo Accords and other legislation promoting regional peace. A coordinated strategy on the part of the Arab political leadership was crucial to achieving this, as was their participation in the opposition. However, this was only possible because Prime Minister Rabin and his government saw Arab members of the Knesset as partners, as opposed to enemies. Thus, efforts must be taken by both the Arab and Jewish communities. For the Arab community and its political leadership, this necessitates democratic introspection at all levels and the development of a strategic vision through the framework of the High Follow-Up Committee as an inclusive forum for Arab political engagement.