



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

## Government Dissolution and Perspectives on the Jewish-Arab Political ‘Experiment’

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Knesset members Mansour Abbas and Yitzhak Ze'ev Pindros. Photo Credit: Knesset Press Office

On June 30, Israel’s 24th Knesset voted to dissolve, plunging the country into its fifth elections in 3.5 years, scheduled for November 1, 2022. Last June, the “change coalition”, led by Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid) and Naftali Bennett (Yamina), brought eight ideologically diverse parties together in an unlikely coalition that was able to unseat the incumbent prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The coalition included an [Arab party, Ra’am or UAL, for the first time in Israel’s history](#), along with parties spanning left, center-left, and right-wing political platforms.

With its slim 61/120 seat majority, Ra’am’s four seats were key to the coalition’s formation, giving its chair, Mansour Abbas, unprecedented leverage. At the same time, this narrow margin made the coalition’s internal diversity a main vulnerability.

One outcome is that Arab citizens’ social and economic concerns received unprecedented visibility in Israeli public discourse and policy. Another is that the most sensitive issues Jewish-Arab relations became more of a political lightning rod—subject to, and the source of, intense polarization. A wave of terror attacks, [tense Spring holidays](#) with Temple Mount clashes, and the death of Palestinian journalist are just some of the events that put ideological differences and political identity front and center.

“Disputes over national issues only grew more pronounced after the UAL (Ra’am) entered the coalition,” [writes Hanin Majadli](#). “The party’s inclusion compelled the Arab voter to confront fundamental issues: the character of the country, control over Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the extension of the [emergency regulations in the settlements](#) – which also led to the government’s downfall.” These developments pressed Arab MKs in the coalition: vote with the coalition and against their constituents’ views, or vote with their beliefs and risk government dissolution?

Ra’am’s inclusion in a governing coalition is widely viewed as an “experiment” in Jewish-Arab political cooperation. With the coalition’s demise, emerging analyses and speculations differ regarding the degree to which the experiment succeeded, whether it should even be [considered an experiment](#), and what it means for the future of Arab participation in Israel’s national political stage.

### **Arab Society Disappointment**

Ra’am’s focus on a pragmatic agenda, including the successful passage of NIS 30 billion socio-economic development package for Arab citizens, focus on crime reduction, and the experience of Arab representation in a governing coalition, held promise for tangible gains and [a new era of Israeli democracy](#).

On the other hand, in the wake of the coalition’s dissolution, Israeli media is rife with Arab voices saying the experiment has failed ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). A prevalent view among Arab citizens is that Ra’am’s pragmatic efforts amounted to too little in a coalition that was not [genuinely interested in Arab issues](#) (just their four Knesset seats).

There is similarly growing skepticism and frustration over when and how much of the approved economic development [budgets will actually reach the ground](#). Today there is sense that any economic development gains will be overshadowed by Ra’am’s ideological concessions that [played into Jewish right-wing](#) interests.

“It is assumed that the thing we won was to get Netanyahu out of the government and somewhat in the case of fighting crime, but the price we paid was high,” explains political scientist [Dr. Salim Brik in an interview in Arab48](#) (Arabic). “Our representation fell from 15 Knesset members [via the [Joint List](#)] to 10 in addition to division and ceding fundamental issues affecting the core of our presence in this country.”

Arab citizens are not only disappointed that Ra’am had little influence on hot-button issues such as the [status quo on the Al Aqsa mosque](#), renewal of the [Citizenship Law](#), and Israeli [activities in the West Bank](#). Rather, perceptions are that right-wing parties took advantage of Ra’am’s presence to exacerbate conditions for [Bedouin in the Negev](#), for [Palestinians in West Bank](#) and in [East Jerusalem](#).

## Jewish-Arab Political Cooperation

On the table is not only a referendum on Ra'am or the recent coalition, but on the legitimacy and feasibility of Arab participation in an Israeli government at all. In Arab society, aspiration for political influence at Israel's highest national level has been a growing priority over the last decade, [promoted first by Joint List chair, Ayman Odeh](#). One view in Arab society is that the experiment as implemented by Ra'am proved that "the Israeli political system will not accept that an Arab party, even if it is aligned with it, can determine fateful decisions concerning Israel." Political scientist, [Dr. Muhannad Mustafa](#) (Arabic), elaborates:

*"What more does the Israeli political system needed from an Arab list than recognizing the Jewish state, considering our cause only a civil issue, ignoring what is happening in the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem and al-Aqsa. It was only missing Mansour Abbas to declare his conversion to Zionism, yet the Israeli political system did not accept it and its list and did not understand when one of its members voted against a particular law [the extension of Israeli regulations in the West Bank] that is blatantly contrary to his beliefs"*

Others, like political Sociologist, Ameer Fakhoury, however, see Jewish-Arab political cooperation as an in-depth and protracted process. This year pushed large parts of the Jewish public to more deeply consider Jewish-Arab political cooperation and interests, he shared with IATF. Likewise, the Arab public experienced the stark contrast between campaigning for political influence and the reality of functioning as one of many parties within Israel's multiparty system.

Many Arab and Jewish commentators, analysts, and activists are also taking the long view that this experiment is the first of many to come ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Practically, they argue that Arab citizens' socio-economic needs [must be on Israel's political map](#) and ideologically, that Jewish-Arab cooperation must become part of Israel's [social and political capacities and norms](#).

"The expected drop in voter turnout among Arab citizens and, accordingly, in their representation in Knesset, regardless of who wins or loses these elections, poses a real threat to the political system as a whole," [warns political scientist and activist Muhammed Khalaily](#). "Low voter turnout, combined with declarations that the Arab public has no place among Israel's decision-makers, is liable to create a fertile political climate for populist and racist legislation. This will not only be a major step backward in the status of Arab citizens, but it may also deal a blow to Israel's Jewish citizens."

For most Jewish Israelis, cooperation with an Arab party was a by-product rather than a goal of this coalition. Though some Jewish shared society leaders have long advocated for Jewish-Arab political partnership as a [democratic necessity](#), most of the Jewish public did not view this as a real viability until PM Netanyahu made overtures to MK Mansour Abbas in late 2020. Data [by the aChord](#)

[Center](#) shows that Jewish receptivity to political cooperation with Arab parties has grown over this time, with clear majority support among the center and left-wing.<sup>1</sup>

Fakhoury believes the experience has both normalized the concept among a significant swath of the Jewish public, while at the same time crystallizing the position for a vocal opposition who believe [political partnership with Arabs in a Jewish state is an impossibility](#). What is needed, he argues, is a political framework that can accommodate the Arab minority's pragmatic needs and positions on Palestinian issues as well as culture narratives that frames this development as non-threatening to the majority.

"A Jewish-Arab partnership in a coalition is not a one-time event. It's a spiral. The first experiment may not have been successful, but that does not mean that the concept failed." [Ghaida Rinawie-Zoabi, who struggled as an MK of the progressive left-wing party Meretz, reflected](#). "For the first time, we tried something new, completely different, but we didn't give it the conditions to succeed."

## November Elections

Today, projections for Arab voting rates in November are very low. "Just 40 percent of Arab Israelis plan to vote in the coming election, a 4.6-point drop from last year's elections and a 25-point drop compared to 2020," explained pollster [Yousef Makladah to the Times of Israel](#).

"The disdain for the political system among Israel's Arabs, and especially the youth, is growing," [writes Jack Khoury](#). "That public, which aspires to influence and create change, understands that the experiment has failed, both for the Joint List with its 15 Knesset seats and for United Arab List (Ra'am) in the coalition."

Across Jewish and Arab discourse, there is an expectation that this [election season will be ugly](#). The Joint List is expected to lean into a more nationalist agenda and attack Ra'am for its concessions and limited gains—internal discord that will [likely negatively affect Arab voter participation](#). "Arab voter behavior is influenced first and foremost by inter-party and intra-party politics in the Arab sector," [explains Muhammad Khalaily](#).

Ra'am is committed to continuing its [pursuit of pragmatic partnership](#) with any party open to real cooperation. While there is indication that Jewish leaders on both the left and right are open to this, there is also indication that hardline right-wing campaigning will aim to stymie any

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<sup>1</sup> "We found that amongst Israeli Jews support moved from a state of almost total opposition on the right, a majority opposed among the centre and majority support amongst the left (in February 2020), to the following situation (in March 2022): within the centre there is now a clear majority supporting political cooperation with Arab parties (42 percent support, 30 percent object, 28 per cent undecided); within the left this is now an almost consensus issue (80 percent support); a large majority of centre left voters (over 60 percent) support political partnership with all the Arab parties; on the right meanwhile there is almost 25 per cent support." Gerlitz, Ron. ["Arabs sharing government power with Jews in Israel is the new normal. It works, and there is no turning back"](#) *Fathom Journal*, June 2022.

such possibility. Most recently, outspoken [MK David Amsalem publicly said Ra'am would be welcome](#) in a Likud coalition as long as they would not make or break a 61-seat majority. PM Netanyahu's response, framing the idea as 'crazy' and Amsalem as a loose cannon, suggest Likud's branding of Mansour Abbas as a ['terrorist' and 'anti-semite'](#) will be threaded into to its campaign.

That said, campaign season has just begun and Israeli politics has been nothing if not surprising. Newly [emerging Arab parties](#), while raising concerns over further splitting the electorate, also suggest that energy for political participation in Arab society remains and the story will continue to unfold.

**Further reading:**

["Why is Israel having a fifth election in three years?"](#) Alison Kaplan Sommer, Haaretz, June 29, 2022

["As elections loom, Arabs take stock of Ra'am's year-long experiment in government"](#) Aaron Boxerman, Times of Israel, June 24, 2022

["Mansour Abbas' Political Gambit"](#) Ruth Marks Eglash, Jewish Insider, July 1, 2022

["Israel Election: We must restore hope to Israel's Arab citizens"](#) Muhammad Khalaily, Jerusalem Post, July 4, 2022

["Israeli Arab Muslim party aspires to be part of the next new coalition"](#) Afif Abu Much, Al Monitor, July 4, 2022