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Arab Society in Israel After the Elections: From Euphoria to Disenchantment?

by [Michael Milstein](#)

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Brief Analysis

The September 2019 election is viewed, with reason, as an important crossroad in the history of Arab society in Israel. This was an election in which the extent of Arab integration into the state emerged in an especially conspicuous manner. The Arab public's chosen representatives opted for precedent-setting measures, most of all their recommendation to the president to select Benny Gantz, leader of the opposition Blue/White Party, as the next prime minister. All this occurred in parallel with—and perhaps even as a consequence of—the unprecedented calls heard in Israel's political system against the Arab public, particularly from Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Likud Party. This is a period of many contradictions for the Arab citizens of Israel. Just when their aspirations for integration have reached a record level, and relations between the Arab and Jewish societies are growing ever deeper, we also see severe expressions of estrangement on the part of the governing establishment.

In this election, notably, Arab society and especially its political parties applied lessons learned from the previous election in April 2019, which was a failure from their point of view. On that occasion, only 49 percent of the eligible Arab electorate actually turned out to vote, and just 70 percent of them gave their votes to the two Arab parties set up after the breakup of the Joint List of four parties: Hadash, Ra'am, Ta'al, and Balad. As a result, Arab party representation in the Knesset dropped from 13 to 10 seats, out of the total 120. But an unprecedented second election gave voters a rare second chance this year; so it is no surprise that these Arab parties, ironically, joined Israel's right wing in voting to disband the parliament and calling for new elections.

By comparison, the September election is seen as an accomplishment for Israel's Arab society, to the point where it created an initial wave of euphoria and sense of power. Just before the election, the Joint List was reassembled, precisely because its dissolution had been one of the main reasons behind the decline in Arab electoral strength. Its leader, Ayman Odeh of the Hadash Party, sent an unprecedented signal that he would consider supporting a future governing coalition led by the Blue/White Party, provided it would meet the Arab parties' conditions. Foremost among those were the allotment of greater resources to deal with the Arab public's social and economic problems

and the advancement of political negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

This was the Joint List's response to growing demands by the Arab public that its representatives focus their efforts more on Arab citizens' own concerns, starting with the growing plague of violence and criminality. In addition, they seek a meaningful expansion of Arab influence on Israeli government decision-making, which would enable the diversion of greater resources to benefit Arab society advance its integration into all areas of activity in the country. This objective is particularly prevalent among the Arab younger generation. The assumption that Arab politicians were either not able or not interested in working toward that goal, and instead more focused on things like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was ultimately a central reason for their decline in support back in April 2019, both in overall Arab electoral turnout and votes for the Arab parties in particular.

The September 2019 election represented a completely different and more positive outcome. Arab turnout climbed to 60 percent, and the proportion who voted for the reunited Joint List rose to 80 percent. That party garnered 13 parliamentary seats, repeating its record success in 2015, right after its establishment. Alongside this came a decrease in Arab support for most of Jewish political parties. Thus, even the Democratic Union Party, which included an Arab candidate in a realistic electoral slot on its list, saw its share of the Arab vote drop from 9 percent in April to just 3 percent in September. In short, the mobilization of the Arab public in this most recent election stemmed in part from the successful combined effort to recreate the Joint List, and in part from the hints dropped by its senior officials that they would deepen their involvement in Israel's formal political arena.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that another major reason, perhaps even the most important one, for the rise in Arab voting this time was a strong collective protest against the "Camera Law" that the Likud Party tried in vain to pass a mere few weeks before the election. This new law would have set up surveillance cameras in voting stations suspected of irregularities, especially in Arab communities; and it was seen, correctly, as a discriminatory and hurtful measure aimed against the Arab public. The Arab members of the Knesset themselves acknowledged that this proposal played a considerable role in encouraging a higher Arab electoral turnout. Added to this were the sharp warnings by Likud leaders about Arabs "thronging to the voting booths," and about a potential linkage between the Blue/White Party and the Arabs that would allegedly pose a threat to Israel's national interests.

The massive vote by Arab citizens for the Joint List this time, therefore, did not necessarily derive from its actual achievements, nor from its specific vision. Rather, it was mainly an expression of protest against the Likud, along with a desire to actualize the power of the Arab population by toppling Netanyahu. And because no other primarily Jewish party besides the Democratic Union put a single Arab candidate in a realistic electoral slot on its list, Israel's Arab citizens had little meaningful room for indecision about their votes. Most of them went for the Joint List.

Yet as the cloud of post-election euphoria dissipates, it is becoming clear that the Joint List has some difficulty, or possibly a lack of interest, in promoting the change that most interests the Arab public deepening Arab integration into every sphere of activity in the country. Without detracting from the historic importance of this party's recommendation to the president on behalf of the Blue/White Party, it remains imperative to address its society's profound contemporary problems, ones that may well grow and prevent the broader transformation to which Arab society aspires. Dramatic as it was, the recommendation to the president was in the end a purely symbolic procedure, a preliminary step rather than a real response to the society's needs and demands. This was something that should already have been undertaken years ago—not just now, after Arab Knesset members felt the widening gap between themselves and the public claiming that its own economic and social problems must be the top priorities, and aspiring for deeper integration than has been demonstrated by the Arab political leadership so far.

Altogether, the Joint List's recent moves appear in large measure an attempt to project the impression of changing direction—yet without going all the way to the finish line. The Joint List is securing some allotment of resources and taking care to enhance its influence, but all without forming any political alliances for the long term. Moreover, the

obstructive position taken by one of its constituent parties, Balad, whose three Knesset members announced their refusal to take part in the recommendation of Gantz as prime minister, shows that the Joint List may indeed be “joint,” but is not truly united. It therefore takes on the aspect of a collection of separate parties, whose behavior any future prime minister would be very wary of relying upon, and certainly not of relating to as a real bloc. Even so, the desire to maintain internal consensus was previously among the defects of the List, and can be expected to generate severe internecine tensions in the future as well.

For the recent wave of optimism not to turn into disenchantment among the broader Israeli public, and dashed expectations among the Arab public in particular, the Joint List’s management must demonstrate leadership and courage—even at the price of internal cohesion, which as noted above seems quite brittle already. To turn slogans into real change, Ayman Odeh should promote measures to realize genuine integration rather than separatism in a mere cosmetic wrapping. He needs to clarify that he is prepared to take part in the government and not content himself with backing a coalition from the outside. He should also consider breakthrough steps like national service for Arab youth, and greater cooperation between Arab society and the Israeli police to fight the plague of crime and violence.

It almost goes without saying, however, that in case of a new Israeli “national unity” government including Likud, and even more so in case of a purely right-wing coalition, the entire Arab public will go back to square one. The electoral achievement that the Joint List’s leaders are currently taking pride in will revert to something of limited importance, with no power to promote their influence, increase their allotment of resources, or advance integration with the Israeli experience.

By way of conclusion, herein a reminder about the dire reality prevalent in Israel’s Arab society today, centering on the problem of crime and violence. Just since the September 17 election, at least ten Arab citizens have been murdered in the sort of violent incidents that are tearing this society apart from within. Seventy Arab citizens were murdered since the beginning of this year. In proportional terms, over the past several years, 60 percent of homicide victims have been Arabs, despite comprising just 20 percent of the total population. Unfortunately, despite its electoral comeback, the steps currently taken by the Joint List cast grave doubt on its capacity to present a real response to this most serious matter, one that undoubtedly stands at the very center of the agenda for Israel’s Arab society, and at the very top of its expectations from its leaders. ❖



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