

## An Arab Leader in Israel: A Conversation with Mansour Abbas

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Mansour Abbas is Deputy Speaker of the Knesset and chair of the United Arab List.

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Brief Analysis

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**The head of the first Arab party to join an Israeli governing coalition answers questions about the country's domestic and foreign policies, including its approach to Palestinian issues and**

## diplomacy with Arab states.

**O**n February 10, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Israeli Knesset member Mansour Abbas, the head of the United Arab List (UAL), also known as Raam. In his first appearance before the Washington policy community, Dr. Abbas delivered opening remarks, then answered questions from David Makovsky, the Institute's Ziegler Distinguished Fellow, and Robert Satloff, the Institute's executive director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. Abbas addressed the event in Hebrew. Below are excerpts from his remarks, translated into English and edited for context, grammar, and clarity. The excerpts have also been [translated into Arabic \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/zym-rby-fy-asrayyl-hwar-m-mnswr-bas\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/zym-rby-fy-asrayyl-hwar-m-mnswr-bas).

## Watch the event with original audio

(<https://youtu.be/wTYiBXmCUkA>)

### Opening Remarks

We have many miracles that we are trying to accomplish. We are trying to create a new future, a new present, in which we will be able to overcome difficulties and challenges so we may go forward in an optimistic vein.

If we talk about racism, for instance, then it is not only in one dimension, between A and B, but it also exists between various groups. This expresses itself in a small village, but also at the level of a city, inside the various groups in Israeli society, such as Mizrahi Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardic Jews, religious Jews, secular Jews. This perspective always connects me to this humanistic approach. If we succeed in solving one problem, for instance between Jews and Arabs, then this will have implications for the entire Israeli society.

If we look at Arab politics inside the state of Israel, we have seen ourselves always as an opposition party. It doesn't matter who is in government, left or right, we have always seen ourselves in opposition. We have always said we want to see a partnership first and then we will see how to continue. We want to see the change and then we will see how we can help.

Now Raam [hereinafter UAL], my party, says the exact opposite. It says, actually, that it is impossible to proceed toward a change like this only on one side. We say that you cannot expect a change if we are always opposed to each other and if we don't talk to each other in a serious way. Now UAL says that despite these disputes, we first of all want to create a partnership and to address the points of contention within this partnership. This allows us to prepare to have relationships with the people you are in disagreement with, and this partnership creates an interest on both sides to address points of contention. The first assumption should not be that you're right, but that you want to compromise to solve a problem.

Take, for example, the Israeli citizenship law. We think it is a very difficult law that hurts the basic rights enjoyed by Arab society. It means that I, as an Israeli citizen but also as a Palestinian Arab, cannot marry an Arab Palestinian from the West Bank. That is very difficult. As soon as we addressed this inside our partnership, almost every side got what it wanted. We made sure that the rights of these families will be addressed. On the other side, the parties that support this law passed it.

It is not an ideal situation. Our ideal situation would be that there will be peace in the region in this holy land and we would be able to have relationships between all the groups. But so far we are at a transitional stage in which we are emerging from an undesirable situation to one that is desirable. This requires us to enter into compromises.

In general, people like to run back to the past. Our attitude is that you can't go back to the past, but you can look to the past to try to heal the wounds. You cannot go back to the past, but you can learn from it. You cannot do the work together and live together without being patient, willing to forgive, and flexible to overcome the pain and problems that we had in the past. That is the basis of my ideology. Ours is not just the politics of interests, of give-and-take and budgets—it is also values-based. We share values among the three religions, humanistic values, because at the end of the day we're all people who just want to live on this piece of land.

**David Makovsky:** How would you assess your role in the coalition almost eight months into the new government, and how do you assess the coalition itself? What is your proudest achievement?

**Abbas:** The thing that I'm most proud of as a member of the governing coalition is the process itself, that we were able to create this partnership. I'm very proud that we have been able to create this connection and to give people hope that Jews and Arabs can trust each other and create faith in the best possible outcome.

It's very important that we brought a lot of resources to the Arab sector, to education, to work, to high tech, and to the farmers. The place to invest in Israel today is in the Arab sector. If you invest a shekel, you'll get it right back because it's a society that wants to develop. It'll help the

Israeli economy.

We have now for the first time an Arab party in a ruling coalition. I have done politics my entire life, but for many years I didn't want to join the coalition. So we don't have the experience of what it means to be a member of a coalition or even of the government. Being in a coalition requires discipline. You have to support decisions that you don't like, but try to obtain certain concessions. Arab society is not used to this.

I have always said it is easiest just to be a member of the Knesset in the opposition. You come whenever you want. You go whenever you want. You do not have to do anything you oppose. You can stay "pure." This is my ideal. But in politics there is no such thing. The key word is compromise.

**Makovsky:** When you joined the coalition, a majority of Arab Israelis supported you and even wanted you to serve in the cabinet. Do you think the public is ahead of the politicians in the Arab community? When—and how—will that change?

**Abbas:** A political leader must lead. There is no leader who is led because such a person is not a leader, he's just a politician. This is true especially when you must bring about change and progress.

It has been my great pleasure to gain support among the Arab sector. In most public opinion polls, no less than 60 percent support what we are doing. Even among people who have not voted for UAL and voted for the other party, the Joint List, almost 45 percent of their voters support what we are doing. Many are waiting and seeing what we can do, what we can accomplish. Of course, this depends on the other side, on the Zionist parties, and whether they will give us the opportunity to succeed. If we succeed, then I have no doubt that more than 85 percent of the public in Israel will support us.

**Makovsky:** You have said, in both Hebrew and Arabic, that Israel was born a Jewish state and will remain so, and you have been praised by Israeli Jewish leaders for your bravery and leadership. Why did you say it? What did you mean? Was this merely a statement of fact or a statement of legitimacy?

**Abbas:** I think of myself as an Arab, a Palestinian, a Muslim, and a citizen of the Israeli state. These identities, the national and religious, can live together. These identities coexist within the larger envelope of values, humanism, justice, mutual support, tolerance, and acceptance of the other.

The state of Israel was born as a Jewish state. That was a decision by those who set up the state, the Jewish people. The Palestinians didn't do that. Today there is a majority of Jews in the state of Israel, and they established that identity without consulting us. Now what am I going to do about this?

There is an approach that refuses to accept this and maintains the right to fight against it. We want a state for all its citizens. I don't exactly know what they mean when they say that they want the state for all its citizens, and on the other hand that the state of Israel is a state for the Jews. Maybe the most Arabs will be able to achieve is a theoretical equality before the law but not in practice.

I have a different approach. I am saying I accept the other, I am looking forward to the future, and I am not stuck in the past. Even though we cannot change historical narratives, we want to understand the Israeli Jewish narrative and to combine it with the Arab Palestinian narrative.

There have always been wars and bloodshed. Europe went through two world wars and eventually reached the conclusion that in order to maintain a society, they had to look forward. Jews and Arabs can live together when this state incorporates the Arab minority without sacrificing our identity or forgoing the initial rights of Jews.

Many opinion pieces have asked, "What does Mansour Abbas want?" Many people in Israeli society believe what I say. But there are people who are suspicious that I am some sort of fifth column, or out to undermine the state and the Jewish identity of the state. I do not ignore these suspicions. I understand them. I am asking that we give each other a chance, to give hope a chance, to create something new, something different. Maybe in the next Knesset, even if UAL will not be the linchpin, the majority would still say it is important that one of its partners in the Knesset be an Arab party.

What I tried to say in the interview in the *Globes* newspaper is that the real discussion is not about the identity of the state that exists, but what is the place of the Arab minority inside the state of Israel. That is the question that will decide what Israel is going to be and what kind of Jewish identity the state of Israel will have. Will it have a humanistic, liberal, open Jewish identity that is accepting and democratic, or will it have a nationalistic identity?

I'm trying to show Jews and Arabs a new way to live together in which each side will realize itself as a collective and as individuals. It is our role always to emphasize the rights of the minority, but the majority has rights too, and we have to preserve them as well.

**Makovsky:** Let's turn to the events of last May. Why did the riots break out in mixed communities? Why did you decide to visit a synagogue that was burned down? What was the message?

**Abbas:** Anyone can make statements, but it is the political leader's role to go where violence is happening—not just to play with words but to put yourself there, to be there with your body, to tell people to stop. We all were astonished by what happened, especially in mixed cities where Jews and Arabs live together, not in adjoining villages. I'm talking about neighbors who live in the same building or in the same neighborhood.

We were all astonished to see that the violence was strongest in those cities.

Why did we fail in these cities? We, the government of Israel, failed because we never noticed the abyss between the two populations. All the economic and social plans that the government supposedly promoted in the past in the Arab sector missed 10 percent of the mixed population. Of course the local governments in Jaffa and Lod also did not see themselves as responsible. They did not think they had to go to the government for assistance. We are committed to bridging this gap. Of course, these events happened against the background of what was going on in al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and relationships that were already bad.

There have been great successes in the Arab cities, towns, and villages. But for some reason nobody noticed for decades the phenomenon of really poor neighborhoods.

We came to the new government and said we want an economic, social, and educational plan. We want infrastructure. We want housing in these Arab neighborhoods in the mixed cities. Again, we can continue talking about the events of May for years and do nothing. What matters is how we can improve the fabric of the relationships in the mixed cities.

**Makovsky:** Your focus has been on issues affecting the Arab community in Israel, not so much on the Palestinian issue. Why?

**Abbas:** We do want there to be peace here in the Holy Land between Jews and Arabs, and the Palestinian subject in parallel. Our main focus when we went to elections was a more specific civic agenda—I told the Arab citizens of the state of Israel that I want to address the economic, social, educational, and housing problems in their communities. So in democratic terms, I have been entrusted with a mandate to prioritize these issues.

We have many challenges inside our Arab communities. We suffer from lots of crime—there are criminal organizations who take over our lives, our economy, even part of the local municipalities in Arab towns. You can't try to change the world when you can't even protect your own community. Ethically, I cannot deal with all the problems of the world and forget the local issues or leave them bleeding. So we took a local approach, and we still maintain that outlook.

I carry on my shoulders this responsibility because I was elected for this agenda. If I want a different agenda, I would have to go back to the public that chose me and tell them, "I'm picking a different agenda now. If that's okay with you, okay. But if not, then you can decide at the next election."

We have a very special status—on one hand, we are part of the Palestinian people, and on the other hand, many of us are also citizens of the state of Israel who have to balance these two identities. This special situation provides hope that if Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel can live and develop together, create a partnership, and work together in peace and security, then the wider Arab and Jewish peoples can do so as well.

**Makovsky:** What do you think of the Abraham Accords? How does this phenomenon affect Arab Israelis?

**Abbas:** I have to be honest and open about the period when the Israeli government signed the Abraham Accords and the peace agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. During this period, my UAL party was in a different partnership with all the other Arab parties—namely, the Joint List, which also included a communist party, an Arab nationalist party, and a half-nationalist party. They decided not to support those agreements, and because UAL was aligned with them at the time, it went along with this decision publicly, much like we are now part of the current governing coalition and strive to align ourselves with its decisions.

I did say to my Arab colleagues at the time that we cannot just vote against these agreements, but my view was not accepted. So I told myself and others who agreed with my stance that if we want to make a change, we cannot do so when we are limited, when we are unable to express the things we believe in.

Therefore, I can openly say to you today that it was a mistake not to vote for those agreements, and I see them positively. The relationships that came out of those accords are developing, and we are slowly trying to find our place in this system. I try to stay away from the very complex international scene as much as I can because I have a different set of priorities, mostly locally focused. But we still aim to see how we can contribute to tightening these links, while of course bringing our beliefs to the table. And if new agreements emerge, we will certainly support them.

**Robert Satloff:** Dr. Mansour, thank you. Before we finish, I have one last question. In your remarks and your conversation with David, for an hour, we didn't hear the word "apartheid." How do you feel when you hear the word "apartheid" to describe the situation between Arabs and Jews inside Israel?

**Abbas:** I would not call it apartheid—actually, I am within the coalition, and if I want to be inside the government I could be in government too. My approach brings me back to a more general answer: I try not to judge a given phenomenon, instead I prefer to describe reality in objective ways. If there is discrimination in a certain field, then we say that there is discrimination in that specific field.

For instance, we point out that there are gaps between Arab students and Jewish students and the budgets they are allocated, and we know there are gaps inside Jewish society and education as well. Everybody agrees about such discrepancies, and you will find objective descriptions of them in government documents—reports from the state controller or ombudsman. But everybody will then jump to using their own terminology when discussing them.

I usually try not to be judgmental. I try not to say things like “you’re racist” or “the state is racist” or “this is an apartheid state” or “this is not apartheid.” What I’m saying is that my role as a political leader is to try to bridge the gaps, improve the distortions, and create a better and more just society—not only between Jews and Arabs, but also among Arabs and among Jews.

There are people who say that I am so gentle, that I’m not saying things loudly enough, that I’m not stating clear positions. But my position is that when I look at my neighborhood and my family, I see that the problem is not simple. So if you want to talk about racism, let’s talk about racism between neighborhoods, between towns, between nations, and see how things change.

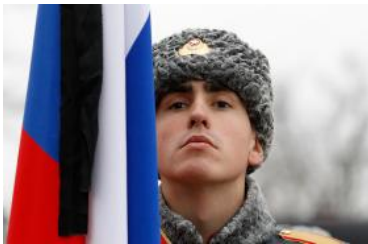
My basic education is medical, and the first phase is always to provide a good solution based on a good diagnosis. It does not help us to judge. I say again that I’m not looking for guilty people, I’m looking for partners—for a chance to do it together. If you focus on the people who live among us here in this country—Jews and Arabs and Christians and et cetera—I believe we have a very good system of values that we can use as a basis for building something better.

I will conclude with one point that I have told my personal friends and my friends in the leadership of the other coalition parties: I am not proposing to disregard what is being published in Amnesty International documents, OECD reports, other international reports, or even Israeli reports. This is an opportunity for us to look at what is happening, to be introspective, to see what we can fix and what we can change. This is of course on both the intra-Israeli level and the broader Palestinian-Israeli level. What is true in my view is not to say what is right or not right, but to do whatever is useful. That’s how I see myself. I do not have the right to judge people; I have the desire to accomplish this change together with them. I will change, and you will change. It is not that I am the absolutely good one and you are the absolutely bad one. Our fate is to live together, and we can decide how we want to live together. We can counter conflicts and hatred with the values that I have already offered: peace, security, tolerance. When we look inside ourselves, I think we all know what the answer is.

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