



The Arab Minority in Israel and the Knesset Elections

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Brief Analysis

Israel is holding its elections for the Knesset on April 9, the 21st parliamentary poll in the country's history. Of an estimated 5.8 million citizens with voting rights, 16 percent are from Israel's Arab minority, which makes up around a fifth of Israel's total population. During the previous Knesset elections in March 2015, a broad alliance of four Arab or joint Arab-Jewish parties, the Joint List, became the primary representation of this minority. This alliance won 13 out of the Knesset's 120 seats, one of the highest levels of Arab representation in Israel's history, even with Arab turnout at 63.7 percent compared to the national average of 72.3 percent (some 76 percent of eligible Israeli Jews voted). This time around, several lists are competing to represent Arabs in the Knesset, but all signs indicate that Arab representation will be limited to the same parties that have represented them in previous parliaments. However, the fracturing of the Joint List and a growing interest in boycotting the elections suggest that upcoming Arab representation in the Knesset will likely shrink.

The announcement of early elections ahead of the expected timeline of November 2019 triggered a split within the Joint List. The Arab Movement for Renewal withdrew, and all attempts at reconciliation failed. This led to the alliance splitting into two lists, each comprising of two of the original list's four parties. The first list includes the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, which follows the ideals of the Israeli Communist Party, and the Arab Movement for Renewal. The latter is led by charismatic and well-known Arab Israeli politician Ahmad Tibi, a former advisor to late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

The second list comprises the United Arab List, the political wing of the Southern Islamic Movement (the movement's northern branch being outlawed in late 2015), and the National Democratic Assembly, which represents Arab Israeli nationalists and secularists. It wants Israel to become a country of all its citizens, rather the state of the Jews, as per the country's declaration of independence, or the nation-state of the Jewish people, as enshrined in the Nation State Law, formally known as Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, which was passed in July last year.

Despite their electoral divisions over the years, with the exception of the period between 2015 and 2018, Arab parties have fought for the same causes and struggled against the same issues that have beset Arab citizens for decades. These include unfair budget allocations (a problem affecting several sectors of Israeli society but most prominently its Arab minority), the exclusion of Arabs from various areas of public life (including representation in government in keeping with their numbers). These parties must also contend with the fact that the members of the Knesset (MKs) who belong to them are not considered natural or legitimate partners in governing coalitions—though there have been cases of individual Arab politicians elected to the Knesset as members of both Likud and Labor.

Political parties have also struggled against poor provision of services to Arab-majority municipalities, a shortage of land allocated for development, and the demolition of houses built without governmental permission due to the fact that Arab-majority municipalities often lack urban master plans. On top of this, they have worked to tackle violence, organized crime, and the prevalence of unlicensed guns in Arab communities. This is an issue that the Israeli police and governments have done little to solve, despite over-policing and the use of undue force against Arab citizens. Arab deputies have put every effort into tackling these problems and others faced by Israel's Arab citizens.

Yet in spite of these efforts, the level of Arab participation in Knesset elections has fallen markedly over the past two decades, sometimes falling 10 percent short of Jewish turnout and approximately 25 percent short of Arab turnout for local and municipal councils. During the last local elections in October 2018, over four-fifths of Arabs on most electoral rolls cast a vote. However, according to several polls published in the last month, Arab turnout in the forthcoming Knesset elections is only expected to reach around 50 percent.

In response to reports predicting low turnout in the elections along with growing talk of a boycott—encouraged by campaigns in Arab countries—the Arab parties have belatedly made efforts to encourage Arab citizens to vote. They have not, however, admitted responsibility for the low level of public trust in them or apologized for their mistakes.

Those calling for a boycott do so for four main reasons. Some do so on principle or due to ideological beliefs. Among these are members of and sympathizers with the Abnaa el-Balad (Sons of the Land) movement and the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel. They make up around a quarter of Arab Israeli voters. Both movements reject Israel's existence and call on Arabs to resist integration and boycott Knesset elections, although their followers do take part in local elections. Furthermore, the northern Islamic Movement was banned by the government in November 2015, partly due to the government's view that the group had incited demonstrations and violence centered on Jerusalem's flashpoint—the Al-Aqsa mosque compound.

Also supporting a boycott are Arab Israelis who are disaffected with the performance of Arab parties and their MKs. In a study published by Tel Aviv University in late March, 42 percent of Arab Israelis polled thought Arab MKs had performed badly, with a further 24 percent rating their performance as “very bad.”

A third group believes that Arab MKs cannot represent or secure Arab rights because these deputies are unable to influence the governmental decision-making process and how state policy is made. They see Arab MKs as politically marginalized, with little hope of joining or taking part in any governing coalition formed after elections. The vast majority of voters from these first three groups are still likely to take part in local elections, as the candidates tend to be personally known to voters—unlike most of those politicians running for Knesset seats. Furthermore, local Arab-run authorities are the primary provider of services to Arab citizens of Israel and important actors in Arab Israeli society.

However, a final group that supports a boycott is made up of those who doubt that Arab Israeli politicians truly aim to serve the interests of Arab citizens, instead representing personal or party interests. This view has grown markedly over the past two years in light of disputes between the parties that made up the Joint List over rotation of their members after Balad MK Basel Ghattas was removed from office after being indicted over a security scandal, and

leads its proponents to boycott all elections, both national and local. The crisis of rotation led to a postponement of the rotation agreement, which had been agreed upon before the 2015 elections, for more than a year. It also caused serious damage to the work of the Joint List and led to its split prior to the 2019 elections. In turn, the fragmentation crisis has decreased public confidence in political parties and their deputies and is expected to increase the number of people who intend to boycott the elections as a way of punishing Arab parties.

Given the increased inclination to boycott elections, recent polls suggest that the amount of Knesset seats held by Arab politicians will suffer accordingly. According to weekly polls conducted by eleven Israeli news outlets over the past three months, Arab parties are likely to win between ten and eleven seats in the 21st Knesset, down from the thirteen seats they won previously and representing a 15 percent drop in Arab representation. For the two lists, polls show that the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality/Arab Movement for Renewal alliance should pass the electoral threshold of 3.25%, with most predictions expecting the list to receive around seven or eight seats. Though the latest polls published before the elections indicate that the United Arab List/Balad has received only four to five seats. It may not pass the electoral threshold at all, pointing to a more limited involvement of Arab MKs in the Knesset overall.

The Arab minority's marginalization in Israeli public life is damaging not only to the minority itself, but also to the interests of Israel as a state and to broader Israeli society. The integration of Arabs into all areas of life would offer political, diplomatic, and economic benefits. As well as helping to improve the Arab minority's situation in Israel, Israel's Arabs, who are familiar with both Arab and Israeli culture, could act as a bridge for reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. They could also help nurture Israel's relations with neighboring states, strengthening peace in the Middle East and bolstering Israel's position in the region and across the world, politically, diplomatically and economically.

To this end, the Israeli leadership should stop marginalizing Arabs, beginning with their marginalization in political life. Regardless of the election results, the minority's leadership should demand political integration and use it to push for better conditions for Arab citizens of Israel, as well as presenting themselves as part of the solution rather than part of the struggle between Israel (the country of which they are citizens) and the Palestinian people (of which they are a part). The Arab leadership and public should also integrate and play a more influential role. This political integration is a fundamental step towards solving the problems of their constituencies. It is better for them to be part of the solution than part of the problem. ❖



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