

The Israeli Parliamentary Elections: A Splintering of the Arab Consensus?

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Introduction

On March 3, 2020, the leader of the Joint List, an alliance of four Arab parties in Israel, proudly declared that they had won a huge achievement in the parliamentary elections by winning 15 seats in the Knesset, a record for Arab parties in Israel. Ayman Odeh, the leader of Hadash (The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) party, urged "actual equality between Arabs and Jews and social justice for all disadvantaged persons", stating that the coalition would strengthen the cooperation between the Arabs and the underprivileged groups of Israeli society.

However, it seems that this call fell on deaf ears. Even members of the Joint List itself disappointed Odeh's call less than one year after celebrating this moment of victory. On February 4, 2021, the Joint List alliance effectively ended after Ra'am, an Islamist party led by Mansour Abbas, decided to run independently in the upcoming March elections. Although the remaining parties (Hadash, Ta'al and Balad) will maintain the

alliance, it is clear that the representation of Arab citizens of Israel has been undermined by the latest departure. Moreover, Ra'am's exit also revealed the fragility and vulnerability of this alliance, a reality that reflects internal disputes between the parties.

This info pack presents the latest situation concerning Arab political parties in Israel ahead of the March 23 elections. Despite an electoral stalemate since April 2019, elections finally resulted in the formation of a new government in April 2020, however, this government was short-lived with only 7 months in power. For this reason, Israelis consider the upcoming election as the fourth election in this current cycle, rather than a distinctly new one. As there is a new reality for the Arab parties and Arab-Israeli representation, the conditions that both engendered the emergence of the Joint List and facilitated its collapse will also be discussed. Finally, both the electoral success of the Joint List when it was founded in 2015 and its future will also be discussed.



Members of the Joint List watch Israeli general election results on a screen, in Israel's northern city of Shefa-Amr on March 2, 2020, after polls officially closed. (Anadolu Agency)



Members of Parliament from the Joint List, Ofer Cassif, Ayman Odeh, Ahmad Tibi, Heba Yazbak and Sami abu Sehade hold a press conference ahead of the general elections, in Tel Aviv, Israel on February 23, 2021. (Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency)

Historical Background

Since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the establishment of the State of Israel, the Palestinian community within the borders of the state of Israel have been actively engaged in politics. Despite being granted Israeli citizenship in 1952, Palestinians, with a [population](#) of more than 150,000 (according to the census made by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics in 1949) were isolated and exposed to discriminatory policies in education, citizenship, and economy during Israel's military rule until 1966. This double standard — along with the reality of their lands being [expropriated](#) and absorbed by the Israeli authorities through the infamous "Absentee's Property Law" — motivated the Palestinian community to further engage in politics.

In this regard, Palestinian representation was largely organised under the Israeli Communist Party (MAKI) until Rakah (New Communist List) branched off in 1965 in order to support a more pro-Palestinian agenda. During these initial years of politicisation, intellectuals such as Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Ziad, and Tawfik Toubi became the leading figures of the Palestinian political movement within Israel. Spurred on by the rise in Palestinian identity politics that occurred after the collapse of pan-Arabism following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, this political movement became so influential that Ziad was elected as mayor of Nazareth in the 1975 local elections. The movement organised a general strike and protests in Arab-populated cities in response to the Israeli government's plan to expropriate Palestinians' lands in 1976, an event still commemorated as "Land Day". Another salient development occurred when Rakah opted to receive support from the Jewish society shortly before the 1977 elections, changing the party's name to **Hadash**, which means "new" in Hebrew.

Such active political endeavours also paved way for nationalists and Islamists within the Palestinian community to organise, beginning in the 1980s. With the onset of the First Intifada and Oslo Peace Process, the Palestinian po-

litical movement shifted its focus from political matters inside Israel to the wider Palestinian cause. During these years, **Balad** (National Democratic Alliance) was formed by Azmi Bishara in 1995 and **Ta'al** (Arab Movement for Renewal) was formed by Ahmad Tibi in 1996 as secular parties with a nationalist agenda. Moreover, **Ra'am** (United Arab List), with a more Islamist orientation, was formed in 1996 after the Islamic Movement in Israel split into two factions. The southern faction, led by Abdullah Nimar Darwish, opposed the Raed Salah-led northern faction's decision to boycott the Israeli elections. In addition, Mada (Arab Democratic Party) and the Progressive National Alliance were also formed during this period. It should also be highlighted that before all these parties were founded, the Palestinian community within Israel had already been running in Knesset elections for years through satellite lists and alliances with Jewish parties.

From the 1996 general elections onwards, these various political groups within the Palestinian community ran their campaign through alliances. The most popular among them, Hadash, was under the leadership of Mohammad Barakah. Balad, led by Bishara and Jamal Zamalka, preferred to run individually in most of the elections until 2015. Tibi's Ta'al allied with other parties, namely Ra'am. However, these disjointed political efforts were insufficient in securing the representation of the Palestinian community within the Knesset. Moreover, Arab-Israeli parties had to change their political strategies after two major events: First, the Knesset voted to raise the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25% (equivalent to almost 4 seats in parliament) on March 11, 2014. This decision, which would leave almost all Arab parties out of the Knesset, pushed them to merge their efforts and run together. Second, the leadership in Hadash changed and the charismatic politician Ayman Odeh took over the party's chairmanship and took the initiative of forming the alliance known as the **Joint List**.

Rise of the Joint List

The Joint List faced several initial challenges. First, they had to re-convince their electorate to actually go to the ballot box. After the 77% Arab turnout in the 1996 elections, there was a steady [decline](#) in the next four elections until the 2009 elections yielded only a 53.4% turnout and the 2013 elections yielded 56.5%. During these years, the political activities of the Palestinian community shifted from political party struggles to the civil society sphere. For instance, a study [revealed](#) that the number of Arab non-governmental organisations (NGOs) registered in Israel increased from 1,000 in 1998 to 2,200 in 2004, and 3,000 in 2007 – 1,517 of which were classified as active in several agendas. One of the main challenges for the Joint List has been to re-channel that energy into party politics once again.

Despite the challenge of steadily declining voter turnout over the years, the Joint List succeeded in bringing Arab citizens to the ballot box in 2015 with a 63.5% turnout, seven per cent higher than the 2013 elections. With 10.98% of the total vote, the Joint List won 13 seats in the elections, [becoming](#) the third-largest party in the Knesset. This development was supported by an increased turnout in Arab regions, particularly in the so-called ‘Triangle’ and Jerusalem [regions](#). Although turnout in these regions had historically been low, the Joint List appears to have motivated a significantly higher level of voter engagement. Nevertheless, this rising profile did not prevent the alliance from remaining isolated in the Israeli political sphere, a reality primarily caused by internal disputes within the Joint List itself. For instance, during the vote-sharing agreement debate in 2015, Balad and some Islamist members within the alliance opposed cooperating with Meretz, whereas Hadash [supported](#) such an agreement.

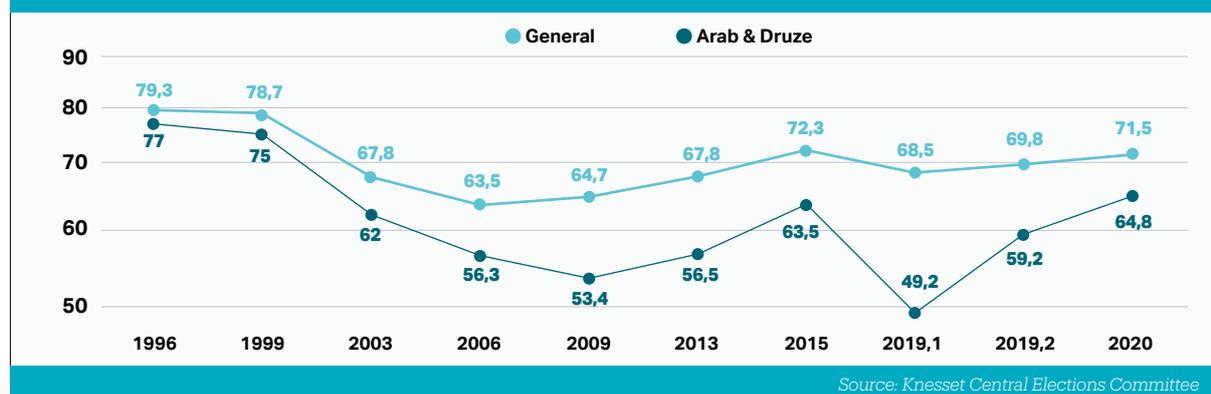
This internal dispute ended with the List entering the next elections in April 2019 as two separate ‘lists’ with Hadash-

Ta’al on one side and Ra’am-Balad on the other. Accordingly, the turnout among Palestinians in Israel [marked](#) a dramatic low, prompting the erosion of representation in the Knesset, as Hadash-Ta’al won six seats and Ra’am-Balad was only able to secure four.

In an effort to repair past political ruptures, the two lists reunited and entered the September 2019 election together. As a result, there was a sharp increase in the Arab voter turnout, from 49.20% to 59.20% in just six months. The Joint List would [gain](#) almost 100,000 more votes than the previous two lists, which corresponded to 13 seats in the Knesset. Moreover, thanks to this refreshed self-confidence regarding their significance in Israeli politics, they agreed to [endorse](#) Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz for prime minister in order to overthrow Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Three deputies from Balad did, however, abstain from voting. In came as no surprise then that prior to the September 2019 elections, Joint List leader Ayman Odeh declared that Arab society is ready to play an influential role in Israeli politics by focusing on internal issues such as health, education, housing, employment, and the eradication of violence and crime.

In the March 2020 elections, disappointed supporters of leftist parties (Labor, Gesher and Meretz) provided a [boost](#) to the Joint List with an influx of another 100,000 votes, helping to boost Arab representation in Knesset to a record 15 seats. Along with not insignificant support from Israeli-Jews, Palestinians also felt more motivated to head to the ballots. This enthusiasm resulted in a 67% turnout, the third-highest turnout since 1999. However, even this success could not prevent the Joint List’s exclusion from the governing coalition.

Voter turnout in Israeli Parliamentary elections, 1996-2020



Why did the Joint List collapse?

[According](#) to Aaron Boxerman, the Joint List's electoral achievements covered ideological disagreements within the alliance "under a thin veil of unity." Such disagreements were mostly sourced by Ra'am's differences from its partners in the Joint List in terms of political agenda.

In this regard, a clear dispute emerged in July of 2020 when the Abbas-led party [voted](#) against a bill to ban sexual orientation conversion therapy, in contrast to his partners in the alliance. The issue of secularism was also another point of conflict within the Joint List. While Hadash, Balad and Ta'al follow a more secular political line, Ra'am emerged as an opposition group within the Islamic Movement in Israel and subsequently represented a more Islamist background.

Arik Rudnitzky, a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, [believes](#) that Abbas and his party might "play the break-even role in return for benefits for Arab society," which is the main political consideration of the Islamic Movement. That explains why Abbas flirted with Netanyahu, which is [considered](#) the most apparent reason why the Joint List collapsed before the March 2021 elections. The series of events that bolstered tensions among the Joint List members started after Ra'am leader Abbas and Netanyahu [acted](#) friendly in a meeting of the Knesset Committee on Violence in the Arab Sector in November 2020. Abbas also gave an interview for pro-Netanyahu Channel 20, in which he [criticized](#) the Joint List for failure in using its parliamentary power to collaborate with Zionist parties and find solutions for the problems of the Arab sector in Israel. His alliance with Netanyahu went to the extent that he was willing to [help](#) pass the bills that could save Netanyahu from prosecution "in return for helping those relatively uncontroversial requests." Abbas and his three fellow MKs also [abstained](#) from voting to dissolve the Knesset in December 2020, after he [stated](#) in Israel Hayom newspaper that he had met with officials of the Prime Minister's Office earlier that month.

Having said that, such flirtation ultimately pointed out the fragility of ties between factions of the Joint List and showcased how it was established based on pragmatic reasons rather than ideological purposes. In other words, the core disagreements between the four Arab political parties have [remained consistent](#) and the Joint List was more similar to a partnership under a single list rather than a unification of parties with common goals in Israeli politics. As a result, the rivalry between the parties continued in local politics. For instance, Samir Sobhi

Jabareen, an independent candidate, [won](#) the 2018 local elections in Umm al-Fahm with the support of Hadash and Balad, a site that has previously been an Islamic Movement stronghold since 1989.

Overall, there are two contrasting camps within the Joint List, which can also be seen as two "pragmatisms": One of them, led by Hadash, displays a pragmatist approach towards the Israeli political scene by trying to garner the support of the Jewish people, particularly the leftists who are gradually losing hope in the Israeli leftist parties. According to this approach, this leftist Israeli support will allow the Arabs and Palestinians to be more effective in future Israeli politics. When announcing the alliance, Hadash's leader Odeh stated that the Arab society in Israel [represents](#) a dual identity in which a civic Israeli identity is complemented with a national Palestinian one, and these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The other approach, led by Ra'am and other groups within the Islamist Movement, acts pragmatically towards the Israeli state in exchange for promoting the interests of the Arab public, while also seeing parliamentary action as an effective political forum. While Ta'al is closer to the first camp, Balad — once also seeking influence in political organizations other than the Knesset, such as the High Follow-Up Committee — has leaned more into the first camp as the years have passed.



Head of the Joint List, a combined slate of Arab parties Ayman Odeh speaks during his election campaign in Tel Aviv, Israel on February 18, 2020. (Mostafa Alkharouf - Anadolu Agency)

What's Next?

Abbas-led Ra'am's decision to leave the Joint List is expected to undermine the alliance's support among Arab-Israeli society. According to several polls conducted since December 2020, the turnout for Arab-Israelis in the next election will range between [40%](#) and [55%](#). These numbers mark a significant blow to the Joint List's achievement over the last few years. Such diminished turnout will also decrease the number of seats in the Knesset: Since Ra'am left the alliance, the expected number of seats for the Joint List has sharply decreased to between 7 and 10 from the previous high of 15.

Some experts on voting behaviour also [believe](#) that some Arab-Israelis may choose to vote for Jewish parties in the upcoming election, including Netanyahu's Likud following the PM's outreach to Arab communities. In contrast to 2015 when Netanyahu [warned](#) Israelis that Arab voters were "heading to the polling stations in droves" in an attempt to mobilise Likud's right-wing base, this time around he has attempted to gain Arab support by [playing](#) on the security concerns of Arab-majority cities, including the [increasing](#) rates of violence and organised crime. In this regard, Netanyahu [met](#) with Nazareth Mayor Ali Salam, who has [had](#) notable problems with Odeh and the Joint List. The Prime Minister managed to successfully [secure](#) the mayor's endorsement. Salam is also [expected](#) to support Ra'am in the upcoming elections, which faces the threat of not passing the electoral threshold. Given that, experts [believe](#) that Likud may gain one or two seats from the Arab-Israeli population in the upcoming elections since they feel disappointed with the failure of the Joint List experience.

The current situation, in terms of a surfaced internal dispute among the Arab parties of Israel, is similar to the events immediately prior to the April 2019 elections. However, there are two significant differences this time around. First, unlike when allied with the Balad party in 2019, Ra'am might not pass the electoral threshold. As a result, there may only be three Arab parties (Hadash, Ta'al and Balad) in the next Knesset. Netanyahu has managed to all but destroy the anti-Zionist unity of Arab parties, proving himself to be an effective external influence. Similar to the case of the Blue and White Party, which proved to be a disaster for Benny Gantz and his former allies, Netanyahu was able to effectively dissolve the already fragile unity within the Joint List.

All of these developments prove that there is a widening gap between the Arab parties and the Arab-Israeli community. While the Joint List is fighting for survival and representation of Arab and Palestinian identity, right-wing parties increasingly shape the Israeli political scene and look for channels to settle Arab-Jewish cooperation. The Arab-Israeli community has several expectations that were not satisfied with the agendas of the Arab parties that they had previously voted for, such as security and economic needs. Professor Asad Ghanem [points](#) out that Arab politics faces an unprecedented decline and a lack of leadership that requires the total reconstruction of the political arena in Arab-Israeli society. Consequently, this reality brings another debate into the political scene: whether a new Arab political party can be established in the future.

Polls: Expected Number of Joint List Knesset Seats in the March 2021 Election

Date	Poll	Seats	Date	Poll	Seats
02.03.2021	Channel 12	9	15.02.2021	Channel 13	8
02.03.2021	Channel 20	10	14.02.2021	103fm	9
02.03.2021	Channel 13	8	11.02.2021	Maariv	8
25.02.2021	Maariv	9	10.02.2021	Channel 12	9
25.02.2021	Channel 13	8	09.02.2021	Kan 11	9
23.02.2021	Kan 11	9	08.02.2021	Channel 20	10
23.02.2021	103fm	9	07.02.2021	103fm	8
23.02.2021	Channel 12	9	05.02.2021	Channel 13	7
18.02.2021	Maariv	9	05.02.2021	Channel 12	9
16.02.2021	Channel 12	9	04.02.2021	Maariv	10

Source: TRT World Research Centre

Hadash

Emerged as a coalition of Israeli left/far-left groups and Arab Israeli political groups in 1977. The party was previously led by a number of prominent Arab-Israeli politicians such as Tawfiq Ziad, Tawfik Toubi and Mohammad Barakah. Having hosted several Jewish deputies, Hadash is known for its socialist/Marxist and anti-Zionist agenda through promoting social justice issues and building a bi-national society with Jews and Arabs. It also demands a two-state solution based on 1967 borders and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli state. Until now, the party has supported only one Israeli government in 1992, led by Itzhak Rabin.

It is currently led by Ayman Odeh (since 2015) and had 5 seats in the last Knesset.

Balad

Established in 1996, the party was previously led by Palestinian politicians Azmi Bishara and Jamal Zamalka. Known for its Palestinian nationalist agenda, Balad advocates for the full withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967 and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and the right of return to Palestinian refugees. While promoting Arab-Jewish cooperation in society and equal citizenship like Hadash, Balad has a more nationalist inclination for its objectives.

It is currently led by Sami Abou Shahadeh (since January 2021) and had 3 seats in the last Knesset.

Ta'al

Since it was established in 1996, the party has been led by Ahmed Tibi. Following a Palestinian nationalist agenda, the party aims to achieve civil equality for Arab citizens of Israel and supports a two-state solution. Ta'al is claimed to be more prone to parliamentary politics with civic methods, unlike the Balad party, which shares a similar agenda for the Palestinians but is believed to be more radical and supported in platforms outside the parliament. This difference eventually caused Ta'al to disrupt the Joint List before the April 2019 elections and ally with Hadash.

The party had 3 seats in the last Knesset.

Ra'am

Ra'am is affiliated with the southern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel after breaking from the northern branch over the question of political participation in the Knesset in 1996. Having a more conservative/Islamist position, which has occasionally stirred up issues with other Arab parties, the party has a pragmatic view towards parliamentary politics. The party decided to separate from the Joint List before the March 2021 elections.

Ra'am is currently led by Mansour Abbas (since 2019) and had 4 seats in the last Knesset.

PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

CANDIDATE LISTS

Joint List

1. Ayman Odeh (*Hadash*)
2. Ahmad Tibi (*Ta'al*)
3. Sami Abu Shehadeh (*Balad*)
4. Aida Touma-Suleiman (*Hadash*)
5. Osama Saadi (*Ta'al*)
6. Ofer Cassif (*Hadash*)
7. Heba Yazbak (*Balad*)
8. Yousef Jabareen (*Hadash*)
9. Juma Azbarga (*Balad*)
10. Sondos Saleh (*Ta'al*)
11. Jabar Asakla (*Hadash*)
12. Youssef Atauna (*Hadash*)

Ra'am

1. Mansour Abbas
2. Mazen Ghanaim
3. Walid Taha
4. Said al-Harumi
5. Iman Khatib-Yasin

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