



Israel's Arab Citizens and the Upcoming General Elections

Update from Israel

The Israeli general elections to the 19th Knesset are scheduled for January 22nd, 2013. This briefing presents key statistics regarding Arab voters in Israel, the position of each of the major parties towards the Arab minority and Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, and a summary of recent rulings on election related issues in Israel, as well as media publications for further details.

I. The Arab Vote

The Arab population in Israel makes up 20.6% of the total population, or approximately 1.6 million people.¹ However, according to recent data, Arab voters comprise only 15% of all eligible voters in Israel due to the lower average age of the Arab population² and the fact that Arab East Jerusalem and Golan Heights residents do not vote in the general elections.³ In the past decade there has been a dramatic decline in participation of Arab voters in the general elections. Throughout the 80's and 90's Arab voter turnout was consistently around 70-75%, while in the last three elections – 2003, 2006 and 2009, these numbers dropped to 62%, 56% and 53% respectively.⁴

Several recent studies identified a number of reasons for this decline. Among them are the widely held belief among Arab citizens that they are powerless to affect decision making circles; attitudes of separatism that call for Arab citizens to ban the elections and disassociate from Israel's governmental system; disenchantment with current Arab MKs who are perceived by the Arab population as ineffective and inhibiting the formation of a larger and more influential Arab bloc due to personal motives; and an act of protest against the "discrimination, inequality, and the disregard of the needs and demands of the Arab public, as well as against the actions of the defense establishment against Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories".⁵

¹ Source: Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics http://www.cbs.gov.il/www/yarhon/b1_h.htm

² The Arab population is at average younger than the Jewish one, so a smaller percent is over 18 years old, which is the voting age in Israel.

³ Around 280,000 Arabs living in East Jerusalem and around 20,000 Druze living in the Golan Heights are included in this statistics, and while they carry an Israeli ID, they are defined as permanent residents rather than citizens and can thus vote in the local elections but not in the general elections.

⁴ Source: The Abraham Fund Initiatives paper "[Voting in Arab Society: A Call for Action](#)", 2012 (Hebrew and Arabic). For further reading on public attitudes see a recent Israeli Democracy Institutes poll: <http://www.peaceindex.org/defaultEng.aspx>

⁵ *ibid.* The Abraham Fund Initiatives paper "[Voting in Arab Society: A Call for Action](#)".

II. Political Party Platforms

Reference to Arab citizens and Jewish Arab relations in parties' platforms

Listed below are the 12 most prominent parties running in the coming elections, along with the references to Israel's Arab citizens and Jewish-Arab relations in each of their platforms.⁶ Parties are listed roughly according to size, large to small, based on the number of seats they are projected to win as of this paper's publication.

1) **Likud-Beiteinu** <http://halikud-beytenu.org.il/Default.aspx>

Likud-Beiteinu is an electoral alliance between Benjamin Netanyahu's incumbent party, Likud, and Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu. The alliance was formed in 2012 in advance of the January 2013 elections. There is no party platform listed in the official alliance website.

- **Likud (Benjamin Netanyahu):** <https://www.likud.org.il>
The Likud Party has no platform in its official website.
- **Yisrael Beiteinu (Avigdor Liberman):** <http://www.beytenu.org.il>
 - Suggests that anyone applying for Israeli citizenship should be obligated to declare loyalty "to the state as a Jewish state, its symbols and sovereignty, and to the declaration of independence" and must accept the obligation to serve in the IDF or national civilian service.
 - Offers that Veterans' Benefits will include "affirmative action in university admission and tuition relief; land allocations in areas of national priority and grants for settling in the Periphery."
 - Calls to "Get Tough on Sedition" including "suspending state payments and benefits to current and former elected officials, such as Azmi Bishara, who are suspected of a serious offense against state security. Upon conviction, they will lose such benefits."

2) **Labor Party (Shely Yehimovitch):** <http://www.havoda.org.il>

- Quotes Israel's Declaration of Independence calling for "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex".
- States that the labor party "is the party of Jews, Arabs, Druze and Circassian." Promises to create a comprehensive policy to close current socio-economic gaps, through (a) equal distribution of resources; (b) strengthening democracy and implementing the Or Committee recommendations; (c) strengthening local government; (d) state-led policy for education towards equality, peace, inter-ethnic tolerance and equality between the sexes. (e) realization of the right to full work and employment; (f) solving land shortages for the Arab public; (g) enhancing voluntary civil service.

3) **HaBayit HaYehudi (Naftali Bennet):** <http://www.baityehudi.org.il>

- Defines Israel as "a Jewish state governed by democracy."
- Promises to "act to strengthen the Jewish nature of the state" and "fight against those who attempt to transform Israel into 'a state of its citizens'" while "upholding the rights of Israel's minorities, among them the Arab minority."

⁶ For reasons of space we have made very brief summaries of major issues mentioned in the political platforms published on the parties' formal websites. Where websites or platforms exist only in Hebrew, translation is ours.

- Claims that "Israel currently makes a double mistake. It overlooks the incitement of Arab factors who seek the destruction of Israel, and it discriminates against the Arabs who wish to be a part of Israeli society", while promising to "act in exactly the opposite way..."

4) SHAS (Eli Yishay): <http://www.shas.org.il>

The party platform makes no specific mention of the Arab minority except in the following way:

- Believes in "the existence of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, based on democratic values according to the Torah."
- Believes in "tolerance in the relations between the segments of the Israeli society... peace starts within ourselves, in solidarity between the different groups in the society, in relations of equality and in respect for the rights of other religious groups."

5) Hatnua (Zipi Livni): <http://www.hatnua.org.il/>

- States its major aim is "to ensure the grounding of the State of Israel as the national home of the Jewish people, and a democratic state in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence".
- Defines that "every citizen has the right...to participate in the socio-economic fabric of Israeli society, independent of origin, gender, faith or place of residence...The right and obligation of each citizen is to contribute to this fabric...through a military/national/civilian service, work, paying taxes..."
- Offers that "the obligation to serve the state must be enforced on all citizens independent of religion, race or sex...either in the IDF or in a national or civil service". Economic benefits "will be revoked from defectors."
- Calls to enforce "the integration of minorities up to 20% of the state (civil service) employees"; to promote equal opportunity in education to all of Israel's citizens; to close existing gaps in education and to streamline educational content between Jews and Arabs.

6) Yesh Atid (Yair Lapid): <http://yeshatid.org.il>

The party platform makes no specific mention of the Arab minority except in the following way:

- Defines Israel as "a democratic, Jewish state in the spirit of the visions of the prophets of Israel" in which "every person must have their fundamental rights met regardless of religion, race, gender or sexual orientation."
- Offers that "every citizen of 18 years will have to serve in military or civilian service." The chapter discusses mainly Haredi Jews but calls the state to "open quotas that will enable the absorption of Arab youngsters" to voluntary service.

7) Meretz (Zehava Galon): <http://meretz.org.il>

- Defines Israel as "the state of the Jewish people and of all its citizens."
- States that The Law of Return "provides Jews with an advantage only as far as entering Israel is concerned" and that "Israel must recognize the Arab minority as a national minority with collective rights."

- Acknowledges the existence of discrimination against Arab citizens “throughout the entire life of the state... in a deep and systematic manner in numerous fields.”
- Commits to advance the full implementation of the Orr Committee Recommendations, as well as a detailed plan to close gaps in infrastructure and planning, historical narrative, resolution to the unrecognized Bedouin villages, etc.
- Calls for preferential treatment to Arabs in higher education; separation of religion and state; strengthening the socio-economic status of the Arab community and correcting discrimination.

8) Yahadut HaTorah (Ya'akov Litzman)

Yahadut Hatorah is an electoral alliance of two Ashkenazi Haredi parties - Agudat Israel and Degel Hatorah. The parties have run with a joint list since 1992. Neither of the parties has an internet website nor online platform.

9) Hadash (Mohammed Barakeh): www.hadash.org.il

Hadash is a joint Jewish-Arab party.

- Determines that “HADASH plays an important role in crystallizing the Palestinian society in Israel as a public fighting for its rights ...as well as a democratic force in the all-Israeli political arena.”
- States that “the national Arab minority, working consistently with the democratic Jewish forces, has an important role” in fighting against social wrongs, advancing rights and equality and fighting racist trends.
- Criticizes the “incitement against Arab citizens...which enhances racist trends”, the promotion of development programs that are “actually programs to Judaize the Negev and Galilee... ignoring the needs of the Arab inhabitants” and the “lack of proper representation of Arab citizens in state apparatuses”.
- Proposes a detailed “plan to reach equality for the Arab minority”, including recognizing it as a national minority with equal civilian and national rights and suggesting practical steps in development, employment, religious rights, local government, etc.

10) BALAD (Jamal Zahalka): <http://www.tajamo.org>

BALAD is an Arab party

- Defines the party's main objective as "a struggle to transform the state of Israel into a democracy for all its citizens, irrespective of national or ethnic identity."
- Demands to acknowledge the Palestinians in Israel as a national minority; a nation with collective national rights and full civic equality according to international law and UN Resolutions.
- Promises to work to enact a law that would legalize the national rights of the Arab-Palestinian minority including correcting past discrimination; appropriate representation of Arabs in all formal and public bodies; development of the Arab culture without interference from the state; establishment of representative and public bodies for the Arab minority; strengthening the status of the Arabic language; inclusion of the Arab minority in all decision making processes and the right to reject state decisions taken without their participation and against their interest; acknowledgement by the state that the Arab public is part of the Palestinian people and refraining from interfering in any contacts between them.

- Promising to advance legislation that will enable the Arab minority to manage its own affairs in culture, education, communication, media, etc.

11) Ra'am-Ta'al (Ahmad Tibi)

Ra'am Ta'al is an electoral alliance of two Arab parties, [Ra'am](#) and [Ta'al](#). These two parties are running with a joint list since 2006.

- **Ra'am (Ibrahim Sarsur):**
The party has no internet website or platform.
- **Ta'al (Ahmad Tibi):** <http://www.a-m-c.org>
 - Calls to advance "full civilian equality" by recognizing the Arab minority as a national minority, advancing the legal and civilian status of Arab citizens and closing socio-economic gaps between the Arab and the Jewish sectors.
 - Stresses the cultural and national Palestinian identity of the Arab public in Israel and the importance of the connection with the Arab Nation worldwide.
 - Calls to create an independent Arab education stream in Israel.
 - Supports the principle of Arab-Jewish coexistence and peace, based on mutual respect.
 - Works to ensure Arab citizens are part of the national decision-making process.
 - Supports the industrialization of Arab localities and the acceptance of Arab professionals to work in state bodies.

12) Kadima (Shaul Mofaz): <http://www.facebook.com/kadimaparty>

- Commits to leading "a comprehensive reform in equal distribution of burden in Israel and to social justice...where all citizens, without distinction of religion, race or religious background, carry the burden and enjoy fair and equal opportunity."
- Defines "social justice" as including the following issues: cost of living; human dignity; housing, equal burden sharing, social welfare and "equal opportunity for minorities".
- States that "Kadima will create a new civic order, in which minorities will receive equal opportunities, rights and obligations. The state will identify and address the plights of the minorities within it, in a way that would make their integration into Israeli society easier".
- Further details a work plan for such integration in housing, education, employment, representation etc.

III. Central Elections Committee and the Supreme Court of Justice

Recent Rulings on Elections Issues Related to Arab citizens

- A number of motions were brought before the Central Elections Committee to disqualify Arab and rightist parties from participating in the elections, and disqualify portions of campaigns used by Otzma Le'Israel (a new right-wing party led by MK. Michael Ben Ari) and by BALAD. The Committee ultimately decided not to disqualify any party, but disqualified portions of the campaigns of Otzma Le'Israel and of BALAD. The Committee ruled that Otzma Le'Israel party could not broadcast the phrase "Not an Arab country, not a country of infiltrators" in its campaign ad, claiming this ad is racist, while also disqualifying a BALAD ad that ridiculed rightist MKs singing Hatikva to an Arabic music tune, claiming it insulted

national icons. On January 15th the Israeli Supreme court overturned the Committee's decisions and allowed both ads to be broadcasted.

- A petition to disqualify MK Hanin Zoabi (BALAD), the first woman to have ever been elected as part of an Arab party in Israel, was presented to the Central Elections Committee. The petition stated Zoabi undermined the state and its institutions, including the IDF, by participating in the Mavi Marmara flotilla that tried to breach the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip in May 2010. On December 19th, the Committee decided to disqualify MK Zoabi on grounds that she supported terrorism and rejected Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in opposition to Article 7A of the Basic Law: The Knesset. The decision was taken notwithstanding an opposite stand expressed by Attorney General Yahuda Weinstein two days earlier, that there was not sufficient grounds to disqualify any of the parties or candidates to the current elections. Consequently, the Attorney General refused to defend the Central Election Committee's decision before the Supreme Court. On December 30th, the Supreme Court ruled that the Committee's decision should be reversed and MK Zoabi will be able to run in the upcoming elections. The unanimous decision, which was not explained, was rendered by a special panel of nine judges headed by Supreme Court President Asher Grunis.
- The [Shutafut-Sharakah Forum](#) wrote Judge Elyakim Rubinstein, Chairman of the Central Elections Committee, to raise his awareness to the fact that there was no Arabic language in the Committee's website, or in its campaign currently broadcasted in Israel's TV and radio, explaining voting procedures and encouraging citizens to vote. Judge Rubinstein responded in a letter in which he agreed that there is great importance in ensuring all services are provided in Arabic, which is a formal language in Israel. As a result, the Committee's website has now been [translated into Arabic](#).

IV. Further Reading

MK Hanin Zoabi

[AG rejects all petitions seeking to bar parties, Arab candidate from elections](#), by Michal Shmulovich, The Times of Israel, December 17, 2012.

[Central Elections Committee bans Arab MK Hanin Zoabi from running in elections](#), by Stuart Winer and Adiv Sterman, Times of Israel, December 19, 2012

[If parliament has no Arabs](#), by Amnon Be'eri-Sulzeano and Mohammed Darawshe, Haaretz, December 21, 2012

[Disqualifying Zuabi, forgetting Zionism](#), by Dimtry Shumsky, Haaretz, December 23, 2012

[When liberalism trumps treason](#), by Ruthie Blum, Israel Hayom, December 30, 2012

[Right lambasts court after Israeli Arab MK cleared to run](#), by staff, Israel Hayom, December 31, 2012

[The Supreme Court has again rescued the shards of Israeli democracy](#), by Aeyal Gross, Haaretz, December 31, 2012

Otzma LeYisrael's and BALAD's campaigns:

[Election committee bans far-right party's campaign ad for being racist](#), by Jonathan Lis, Haaretz, December 13, 2012

[Otzma LeYisrael campaign nixed over racism](#), by Roi Mandel, Ynet, December 13, 2012

[Elections panel nixes belly-dancing Liberman ad](#), by Lahav Harkov, Jerusalem Post, January 8, 2013

[High Court Overturns Decision to Ban Election Ads](#), by Aaron Kalman, The Times of Israel, January 16, 2013

Participation of Arab voters and Jewish-Arab relations:

[Study: Arab sector sees no point in voting](#), by Ilene Prusher, The Jerusalem Post, October 28, 2012

[Israeli Arabs unenthusiastic about January 22 vote](#), by Lauren E. Bohn, Associated Press, December 19, 2012

[On My Mind – the Arab Voters](#), by Kenneth Bandler, The Jerusalem Post, December 24, 2012

[In Israel, Arab MKs Seek the Impossible Voters](#), by Jack Khoury, Haaretz, December 26, 2012

[How Israel's Arab Citizens Vote](#), by Samuel Thrope, the Daily Beast, December 27, 2012

[Likud-Beiteinu rejects call to sign cross-party Jewish-Arab equality covenant](#), by Hor, Haaretz, January 3, 2013

["Get out and vote!"](#) Haaretz Editorial, January 15, 2013 (this editorial appeared in both Hebrew, Arabic and English)