

Israel's Arab Citizens and the March 2015 General Elections

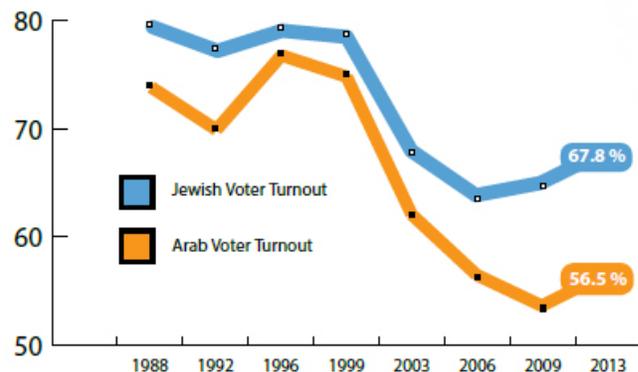
January Update

In December 2014, the 19th Knesset and 33rd government were dissolved and Israeli general elections to the 20th Knesset were scheduled for March 17th, 2015. This briefing presents key issues currently affecting Arab political discourse, voter attitudes, and anticipated turnout. Among them, two legislative initiatives from 2014 have had significant impact on the political landscape—namely, the new electoral threshold set in March that is driving Arab parties to unite, and the pending Jewish Nation-State Bill which has triggered controversy related to the status of Arab citizens.

I. Background: The Arab Vote

The Arab population in Israel makes up 20.7% of the total population, or a little over 1.7 million people.¹ However, 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 Over the past fifteen years, there has been a steep decline in Arab voter participation in general elections. Throughout the 80's and 90's Arab voter turnout was consistently around 70-75%, while in the elections of 2003, 2006 and 2009, these numbers dropped to 62%, 56% and 53% respectively.⁴

Arab & Total Voter Turnout in Israeli Knesset Elections, 2003-2013*



The most recent elections in January 2013 saw a small rise in Arab voter turnout. Arab voting reached 56.5% (compared to 67.8% among Jewish voters), 77.2% of which went to Arab or Jewish-Arab parties

¹ Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics [Population by Group and Religion, 2014](#)

* UK Task Force on Issues Relating to Arab Citizens of Israel briefing paper: [Arab Political Structures in Israel](#) December 2014

² The Arab population is on average younger than the Jewish one (46% of Arabs are below the age of 19 compared with 33% of Jews), so a smaller percentage is over 18 years old, or the voting age in Israel. Source: Ibid, [Population by Group, Religion, Age and Sex](#).

³ Around 300,000 Arabs living in East Jerusalem and around 24,000 Druze living in the Golan Heights have permanent residency status rather than citizenship and can thus vote in the local elections but not in the general elections. Sources: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, [Jerusalem: Facts and Trends, 2014 publication](#) (Hebrew); Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics 2013 [Population by Group, Religion, Age and District](#).

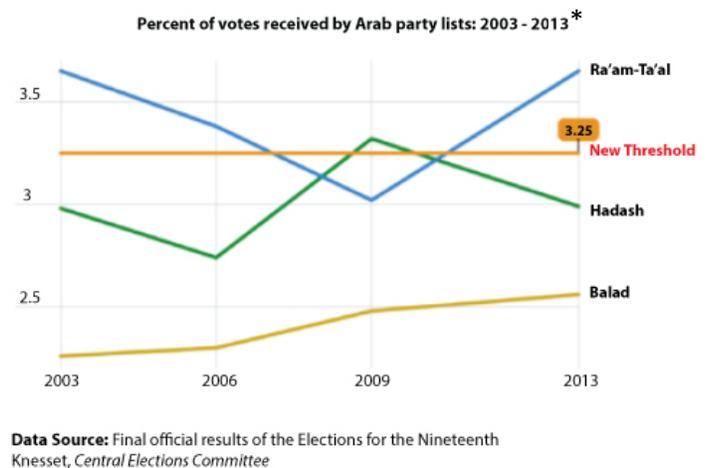
⁴ See The Abraham Fund Initiatives paper "[Voting in Arab Society: A Call for Action](#)," 2012 (Hebrew and Arabic). For further reading on public attitudes see a recent Israeli Democracy Institutes poll: <http://www.peaceindex.org/defaultEng.aspx>

and 22.8% to Jewish parties.⁵ In total, 12 Arab MKs were elected to the last Knesset—10 as part of the Arab and Jewish-Arab parties, and 2 as part of Jewish parties (Meretz and Israel Beitenu). At 12 MKs, Arabs make up 10% of the Knesset (24 MKs would be 20%, or proportional representation).

The drop in Arab voter participation has been the subject of a number of studies and efforts to increase and encourage turnout. Reasons cited for the decline include (i) a sense of powerlessness to affect decision-making circles in part due to the fact that Arab parties have never been part of a ruling coalition;⁶ (ii) recent legislation initiatives that are perceived as anti-Arab and enhance a sense of alienation among Arab citizens; (iii) separatist tendencies within Arab society that call on Arab citizens to boycott elections; (iv) disenchantment among Arab citizens with current MKs who are largely perceived as ineffective and inhibiting the formation of a larger and more influential Arab bloc due to personal motives; and (v) as 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."⁷

II. Arab Representation

Since the mid-90s, the two Arab parties, **Balad** and **Ra'am-Ta'al**, and the Jewish-Arab party, **Hadash**, have generally been seen as the parties representing an Arab platform in the Knesset. (See the [Annex on Arab and Jewish-Arab Parties](#) at the end of this update.) While Arab MKs have also been elected to the Knesset through mainstream Jewish parties, these three parties attract the largest portion of the Arab vote. For the upcoming elections in March, however, the Arab party landscape is undergoing dramatic change due to the the new electoral threshold legislated in 2014.



The current impact on the parties and projected effect on voter turnout is discussed below.

New electoral threshold

[The Governance Bill](#) that passed in March 2014 included a clause to increase the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25%, requiring political parties to receive a larger portion of all eligible votes. Parties must now gain at least 4 seats (in the previous national elections, this equaled approximately 130,000 votes) in order to enter the Knesset. Of the two Arab and one Jewish-Arab parties, only Ra'am-Ta'al surpassed that number in 2013.⁸

To meet the new threshold, Arab and Jewish-Arab parties will have to unite to increase their chances of making it into the Knesset. Since new elections were declared, Arab politicians and activists have been

⁵ UK Task Force on Issues Relating to Arab Citizens of Israel briefing paper: [Arab Political Structures in Israel](#) December 2014.

⁶ [Why Israeli Arabs aren't voting in the next elections](#), Shlomi Eldar, Al Monitor, 1.6.15

* UK Task Force on Issues Relating to Arab Citizens of Israel briefing paper: [Arab Political Structures in Israel](#) December 2014

⁷ The Abraham Fund Initiatives, "[Voting in Arab Society: A Call for Action](#)," 2012 (Hebrew and Arabic).

⁸ Balad, Hadash and Ra'am-Ta'al won 2.56%, 2.99% and 3.65% respectively in the last elections. Thus, Hadash had 4 Knesset seats in the 19th Knesset but did not reach the 3.25% threshold that will now be required. [Central Elections Committee website](#) (Hebrew).

attempting to create one or even two lists out of the existing Arab and Jewish-Arab parties despite their ideological differences. Generally speaking, Ra'am-Ta'al is a religious Muslim combined list, Balad is a secular nationalist party, and Hadash is a Jewish-Arab socialist party

Some Arab politicians argue that a merger will satisfy [demands within the Arab public](#) for Arab representatives to be more united and collaborative. They anticipate a united list will yield higher [voter turnout on election day](#) and actually increase the [number of Arab Knesset members](#). Conversely, others believe a merger will lower voter turnout since the Arab public may see the move as [opportunistic, and catering to right-wing](#) machinations, and—given the ideological differences between the parties—a loss of real choice and diversity of representation.⁹

A poll conducted by [+972 magazine](#) found that "nearly 70 percent of Arabs citizens of Israel intend to vote if the three existing Arab parties run on a joint list, compared to 56 percent who voted in the 2013 elections."¹⁰ A [recent poll by Statnet Research Institute](#) also found that "the vast majority (75 percent) of respondents support the Arab parties running together on one list." A [Panels Politics poll for Maariv Weekend Edition](#) found that a united Arab list would garner 13 Knesset seats, while if the three parties run separately, Ra'am-Ta'al would receive 6 seats, Hadash would receive 5 seats and Balad will not pass the electoral threshold.¹¹

Who will lead a joint list, who will serve as MKs, and in what order they appear on the list, add contention to the issue.¹² According to the Statnet poll, "a united bloc headed by [Ra'am-Ta'al MK Ahmad] Tibi would get the most mandates of any Arab constellation, with around 11 Knesset seats, and would get 10 if Hadash chairman Muhammad Barakeh or Balad leader Jamal Zahalka headlined it."¹³ Meanwhile, a group of Arab academics publically called for "new faces" including women, activists, Druze and Christians in the emerging list, to replace long-sitting Arab MKs.¹⁴ In the coming two weeks each of the existing parties will hold separate internal Primary Elections, and it is expected that the united list or lists would then be formed. The final date by which all electoral lists must be presented to the Central Elections Committee has been set for January 29, 2015.

In parallel to these developments, on December 28th, 2014, a panel of nine judges of the Israeli Supreme Court held a first discussion on a [petition filed against the raising of the electoral threshold](#). [The Israeli Association for Civic Rights \(ACRI\)](#) and [Adallah Center](#) joined the discussion as Friends of the Court. In the discussion, Supreme Court Judge Salim Joubran, who is also the Head of the Elections Committee said that new minimum vote threshold for seats in parliament could have dire consequences and could result in a total lack of Arab representation in the Knesset.¹⁵

⁹ Jacky Khouri, [Discussions over a United List Causing Rifts in Hadash](#) (Hebrew). For example, two members of the Hadash Secretariat, Aliana Mahamid (from Um El Fahem) and Adam Amorai (from Jerusalem) wrote an article entitled: "*Running for Elections as a Joint Arab List Would Serve the Political Right*," claiming that "raising the electoral threshold is trying to push all Arabs to run as a single block simply for being Arabs. A joint list might lead the Arabs towards political isolation." In [Sicha Mekomit website](#) (Hebrew).

¹⁰ [+972 poll: Joint Arab list would raise voter participation](#), Dahlia Scheindlin, +972 website, 12/24/14.

¹¹ [Polls Shows Joint Arab List Spells the End of Shas](#), Tova Dvorin, Arutz 7, 12/26/14.

¹² [Arab parties' internal divisions delaying negotiations over united list](#), Ariel Ben Solomon, Jerusalem Post, 1/6/15

¹³ [Poll: United Arab list headed by Tibi would get most mandates](#), Jerusalem Post, 12/30/14.

¹⁴ [Arab academics call for new faces in emerging list](#), Jacki Khoury, Haaretz, January 5, 2015 (Hebrew)

¹⁵ [High Court judge warns against Knesset without Arabs](#), Stuart Winer and Times of Israel staff, 12/28/14.

Representation in Jewish Parties

A few Arab (including Druze) candidates are running as members of Jewish parties. These include MK Issawi Freij in Meretz, journalist [Zohir Bahalul](#) and MK Raleb Majadele¹⁶ in Labor and [Anett Haskia](#) and Ghasoub Hasson in Habait Hayehudi. Ayoub Kra was elected in the Likud Primaries for the 24th place slated for "minorities" and MK Hamad Amar is expected to again be included in the list of Israel Beitenu (determined by the party Chairman).

III. Recent Legislation

Along with the electoral threshold forcing a reshuffling of Arab parties, in the past two years since the last general election there have been a number of [legislative initiatives](#) perceived as disadvantageous to Arab citizens. Particularly controversial were the [land transfer proposals](#) raised by Foreign Minister Lieberman in January 2014; then-Minister of Finance Yair Lapid's [VAT Exemption Housing Plan](#) in May, a proposal to [cancel the status of Arabic as a formal language](#), and a Bill proposed by Israel Beitenu MK Alex Mille in October 2014 to [outlaw the northern branch of the Islamic Movement](#).

Ultimately, the most controversial legislative initiative—in terms of content, process and timing—has been the proposal for a new **Basic Law: [Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People](#)**, aiming to define the Jewish character of the state. The Jewish Nation-State Bill, as it is often called, triggered heated controversy across the political spectrum and surfaced deep-seated unease among Arabs about their status as citizens of the state. The debate surrounding this bill is seen, in part, to have caused the dissolution of the current government and call for new elections.

Over this same period, 'Price Tag' activity (or anti-Arab hate crimes) has also been [on the rise within Israel](#) and tensions between Jewish and Arab citizens escalated during and after the military operation in Gaza. Along with the legislative initiatives, this backdrop has created a sense of urgency among Arab citizens but it is not yet clear among Arab commentators whether this will generate greater participation in the upcoming elections, or enhance alienation, mistrust and cause for retreat.

From within Arab society this backdrop has generated calls in both directions. Some Arab leaders are calling on Arab citizens to boycott the elections claiming that "the Arab MKs merely serve as a fig leaf" for Israel's unjust political system and that "as long as the Israeli government is built on Jewish ethnic purity, the Knesset has nothing to offer Israel's Arab citizens."¹⁷ According to the +972 poll, these calls "hold powerful sway [with Arab voters]. A majority of 54 percent says that if there are such calls to boycott the elections, they will decide not to vote."¹⁸

Other voices within Arab society and Jewish civil society are calling on Arab citizens to enhance their voting participation, as this could have significant impact on the Israeli political system and enhance Arab participation in decision-making circles on the national level,¹⁹ even claiming this is the "patriotic Palestinian" thing to do.²⁰

¹⁶ MK Majadele reentered the Knesset in December 2014 after the resignation of MK Binyamin Ben Eliezer. In 2007, Majadele was the first Muslim Arab appointed to a Ministerial position, he served as Minister of Culture, Science and Sports.

¹⁷ [Israeli Arabs, don't give the Jewish State your vote](#), Salman Masalha, Haaretz, 12/16/14.

¹⁸ [+972 poll: Joint Arab list would raise voter participation](#), Dahlia Scheindlin, +972 website, 12/24/14.

¹⁹ [If Herzog wants to lead, he'll need to bring the Arabs with him](#), Thair Abu Rass, +972 Magazine, 1/8/15

²⁰ [Israeli Arabs, be true Palestinian patriots: Vote!](#), Oudeh Basharat, Haaretz, 12/8/14.

IV. Civil Society Efforts

A number of civil society organizations aim to address issues related to the Arab vote. In coordination, they are planning initiatives to (a) urge Arab citizens to participate in the elections—regardless who they vote for; (b) prevent racist and exclusionary discourse in election campaigns; (c) encourage inclusion of Arab candidates in the Jewish parties and issues of equality, shared society, and integration in mainstream party platforms and campaigns; and (d) ensure issues related to Arab voting are given fair and sufficient coverage in the mainstream media.

Already, [The Abraham Fund Initiatives](#) (TAFI) is conducting a poll asking Arab citizens what deters or prevents them from voting as opposed to what motivates or increases the likelihood they will vote to identify barriers to participation. The results will inform TAFI's work with young political leadership in Arab society, Arab and Jewish parties, and the Central Elections Committee to enhance positive, inclusive political discourse and Arab voter participation.

[Shatil](#) and [AJEEC-NISPED](#) are also working to identify and reduce physical barriers that may prevent Arab citizens from voting in the elections. In addition, Shatil, [Sikkuy](#), [Shutafut-Sharakah Forum](#) and [Givat Haviva](#) are creating a work plan to monitor and prevent anti-Arab discourse and enhance fair coverage during the campaigns.

ANNEX: Arab and Jewish-Arab Parties²¹

HADASH - The Democratic Front For Peace And Equality

Hadash is a Jewish and Arab socialist party. Since its inception, Hadash has advocated a complete Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, recognition of the PLO and the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside Israel. In addition, Hadash advocates for the end of discrimination at all levels, to ensure full equality for Arab citizens in Israel, and to change state symbols, including the flag and anthem, so that they comply with these principles. In the 2013 elections it obtained 113,439 votes, which amounts to four seats in the Knesset.

Three Arab MKs and one Jewish MK represent Hadash in Knesset: Mohammad Barakeh (party leader), Afou Agbaria, Dov Khenin and Hanna Swaid. Hadash received 23.2% of the Arab vote, a marked reduction from 2009.

BALAD - National Democratic Assembly

Balad is an Arab party that advocates for Israel to be 'a state of all its citizens.' It campaigns for a democratic secular state as the only way in which Arab citizens will achieve full cultural, national and minority rights. It believes that coexistence with the Jewish majority is desirable, but only on the basis of equal citizenship and equal individual and collective rights.

Three MKs represent Balad in the Knesset: MKs Jamal Zahalka, Basel Ghattas and Hanin Zoabi. Although the number of seats remains the same, there is a marked increase in the number who voted for Balad compared to the 2009 elections.

RA'AM-TA'AL – Alliance of The United Arab List (Ra'am) and The Arab Movement for Renewal (Ta'al)

Ra'am is an Arab political party dominated by the southern branch of the Islamic movement in Israel. The movement's candidates are guaranteed three of the top five spots and five of the top ten spots on the party list. Ra'am is particularly popular among Bedouins; in the 2013 election Ra'am attained 61.6% of the vote of Bedouin communities in the South, a larger majority in comparison to other Arab parties. The general aims of the Islamic movement are to encourage observance of Islamic law, cultivate Islamic culture and education and to carry out social welfare programmes. It operates on three levels: religious (Islamic education, religious service), social (welfare services) and nationalistic (opposition to the state of Israel and support for Palestinian nationalism).

Ta'al is a single-member party founded by Ahmed Tibi. It ran as the Arab Union in 1996, capturing 0.1% of the vote. Since then, Ta'al has run jointly as part of the Balad (1999), Hadash (2003) and Ra'am (2009 and 2013) lists in Knesset elections, with Tibi winning a seat on each occasion. Ta'al backs the formulation of a constitution that would recognise Israeli Arabs as a national minority. The party rejects the recruitment of Arabs to the IDF and wants equal representation for Arabs in state institutions. Ta'al calls for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, the right of return to Palestinian refugees in accordance with international decisions and the Palestinian consensus, as well as the evacuation of all settlements and of the Golan Heights.

²¹ UK Task Force on Issues Relating to Arab Citizens of Israel briefing paper: [Arab Political Structures in Israel](#) December 2014.