

Israel's Arab Citizens and the March 2015 General Election

March Update

The merger of the three Arab and one Jewish-Arab political parties in advance of the 2015 general elections is considered by many to be among the most significant political events within Israel's Arab society in recent history. Despite their ideological differences, the parties succeeded in creating a joint list that may very well become the third largest contingent in the next Knesset.

How has this joint Arab list affected Israeli political discourse in general and in Arab society specifically? What are the hopes and expectations regarding its impact on the upcoming elections? This update aims to share insights from the field and identify some of the main issues related to the newly structured Arab presence, as well as highlight a number of additional developments related to Arab society and the upcoming elections.

I. The Joint Arab List

While initially met with some skepticism because the merger took place in response to the increase in the elections threshold,¹ today the Joint List is by and large welcomed on its own merits in Arab society as an answer to "mounting pressure from [...] constituents to cooperate in order to tackle the challenges facing the Arab community."² In the days following the announcement of this union, it was widely celebrated among Arab leadership and public as a move that would make them "a central player in politics like never before"³ and "a force to be reckoned with"⁴ — not to mention as a successful trump of Foreign Minister Liberman's push for the higher threshold.⁵ The merger—which was a hard-won negotiation between leaders of Arab nationalist (Balad), religious (Ra'am), and secular (Ta'al) parties and a socialist Jewish-Arab party (Hadash)—is also being called an "important precedent of collaboration" in contrast with the "civil wars taking place throughout the Arab world."⁶

The Joint List aims to balance "efforts to address the domestic concerns of Arabs in Israel alongside veteran Arab lawmakers' longtime focus on the rights of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."⁷ The party platform lists as its first basic principle the pursuit of a just end of the occupation, followed by a second principle of full equality, individual, and collective rights for Arab citizens. According to Jack Khoury, a veteran reporter on Arab affairs, "[t]here is a sense that the list's representatives realize that

¹ The Governance Bill of March 2014 increased the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25%, requiring political parties to receive a larger portion of all eligible votes in order to enter the Knesset. Of the two Arab and one Jewish-Arab parties, only Ra'am-Ta'al surpassed the new threshold in 2013. See: ["The Governance Bill."](#) IA Task Force. 1 Mar. 2014.

² AP. ["Arab Lawmakers Shake Up Israeli Politics With Historic Union."](#) *The New York Times*. 27 Jan. 2015.

³ AP. 27 Jan. 2015.

⁴ ["Our Home Too."](#) *The Economist*. 7 Feb. 2015.

⁵ "Avigdor Lieberman, who spearheaded the legislation to raise the electoral threshold with the purpose of excluding Israeli Arabs from the Knesset, ... appears to have brought forth a blessing: The Arab parties were the first to rise and adopt the challenge." Gvirtz, Yael. ["A chance for Israel's Arabs."](#) YNet. 1 Jan. 2015.

⁶ ["Political Participation of the Arab Palestinian society in Israel, Analysis of Trends towards Elections for the 20th Knesset."](#) Mossawa Center the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens of Israel. 1 Feb. 2015. (Hebrew)

⁷ AP. 27 Jan. 2015.

economic and civil issues are of more interest to [the Arab] public than the conflict with the Palestinians [and that] this is expressed in the campaign itself and in election gatherings.”⁸

Indeed, in a recent Haaretz poll, 70% of Arab respondents indicated they “care much more about bettering their socioeconomic lot than about solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”⁹ In accordance, the remaining principles on the Joint List’s political platform focus in large part on issues of poverty, discrimination and oppression, including the rights of women in the private and public sphere. Notably, while some principles focus on the rights of Arab citizens (e.g. land confiscation, the status of Arabic, unrecognized Bedouin villages,) many are directed towards all disadvantaged citizens, not only the Arab community.

In recent weeks, Joint List leaders have made special efforts to campaign in the Jewish sector despite low hopes for Jewish votes.¹⁰ The list launched a Hebrew language media campaign under the slogan “My Answer to Racism,” advancing the message that the Joint List “represents everyone and is reaching out to the weak sectors of society,” and to “legitimize elected Arab officials following many attempts at the Knesset to exclude them.”¹⁰

Arik Rudnitzky of the Konrad Adenauer Program on Jewish-Arab Cooperation calls this an unprecedented shift in which Arab leaders are saying they represent “not only Arabs who vote for us, but Jews and Arabs alike, all the citizens of the state of Israel who wish to vote for an alternative.”¹¹ A number of Jewish journalists and activists openly stated they will support the Joint List.¹²

Still, the Joint List’s presence in the upcoming Knesset largely depends on the Arab vote, and much uncertainty remains within the Arab public about the parties’ ability to remain united after elections, what goals they will actually pursue, what role they will play in the next government, and how effective they will be in pursuing their goals.

Internal tension was already detectable in the final weeks before the elections when a last-minute vote-sharing agreement with Meretz fell through.¹³ The agreement, which would allow the parties to combine spare votes towards attaining another seat, was strongly supported by Hadash leaders but ultimately vetoed by Balad, leading to strong criticism by Meretz leadership¹⁴ and raising additional doubts about the Joint List ability work together beyond the campaign and cooperate with other parties in the Knesset.

II. The Arab Vote

In a study completed just prior to the parties’ merger, The Abraham Fund Initiatives found that a single electoral list would “raise expected turnout among [Arab] citizens by almost 10 percentage points, from 57% to 66.4%.”¹⁵ Joint List representatives say they hope for a turnout of as much as 70%.¹⁶

⁸ Mualem, Mazal. [“Joint List Leaders Must Seize Momentum.”](#) Al-Monitor. 25 Feb. 2015.

⁹ Khoury, Jack. [“Poll: Most Arab Voters Want Joint List in next Government.”](#) Haaretz. 20 Feb. 2015.

¹⁰ Eldar, Shlomi. [“Will Israeli Jews vote for Joint List?”](#) Al-Monitor. 25 Feb. 2015.

¹¹ Rudnitzky, Arik, Sweid, Hana. [“The Upcoming Elections and Israel's Arab Society.”](#) IA Task Force. 4 March. 2015.

¹² E.g. Halpern, Gilad. [“Why I, an Israeli Jew, Will Vote for the Arab Party.”](#) The Forward. 1 Feb. 2015. and Niv, Kobi. [“Without Arabs, there won't be democracy in Israel.”](#) Haaretz. 2 Feb. 2015.

¹³ Hoffman, Gill. [“Balad blocks deal with Meretz to save left-wing votes.”](#) The Jerusalem Post. 7 March. 2015.

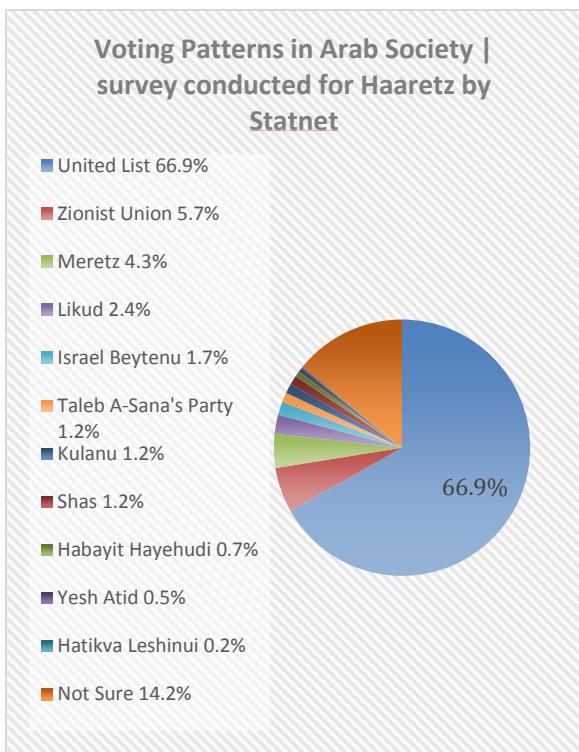
¹⁴ Skop, Yarden. [“Meretz slams Joint List over failed votes accord.”](#) Haaretz, 9 March. 2015.

¹⁵ The Abraham Fund Initiatives. [“The Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel: An Attitude Survey ahead of the Elections to the 20th Knesset.”](#) IA Task Force. 14 Jan. 2015; In another poll by the Konrad Adenauer Program on Jewish-Arab Cooperation, 64.7% of respondents are planning to vote in the coming elections: Miller, Elhanan. [“Arab voter turnout to surge following political union, polls find.”](#) Times of Israel. 3 Mar. 2015.

¹⁶ Kuttab, Daoud. [“Odeh: racist Israeli laws to benefit joint Arab list.”](#) Al-Monitor. 17 Feb. 2015.

Among Arab citizens that said they would abstain, the study found that only 17% (or 3% of the Arab population) say they do so for ideological reasons, while the remaining non-voters abstain out of a lack of interest, a disbelief in the ability to effect change, or the general situation of Arab citizens in Israel. The study also found that positive statements by leaders of the main parties, regarding the status of Arabs and the peace process, could increase turnout of Arab voters.¹⁷

Other issues affecting voter attitudes in Arab society are recent legislation such as the Jewish Nation-State Bill¹⁸ and the rise in Price Tag attacks¹⁹—though it is unclear whether these issues will lead to greater voter participation or abstention as a form of protest. Among Negev Bedouin, where Arab voting rates are lower, recent clashes with the police have added to the sense of alienation and disenfranchisement. A number of civil society organizations have launched non-partisan efforts to get out the vote, promoting civic involvement throughout Arab communities. (*See Appendix for Civil Society efforts*).



A recent study by the Konrad Adenauer Center for Jewish-Arab Cooperation shows that as many as 44% of Arab voters have been positively encouraged to vote by the Joint List and according to two different polls, it is expected to garner between 66.9%²⁰ and 80.7%²¹ of Arab vote. Still, as many as 30% of Arab voters are undecided or plan to vote for other parties.

Critics of the Joint List's political platform say it is too vague and too much uncertainty remains about actual commitments.²² There are also calls from Bedouin feminist/anti-polygamy activists not to vote on the grounds that at least two men on the list are married to more than one woman.²³ In addition, some leaders from the Bedouin community are disappointed they were not better included in the creation of the list and are now underrepresented in the resulting union.²⁴

¹⁷ The Abraham Fund Initiatives. 14 Jan. 2015.

¹⁸ [“Basic Law Proposal: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People.”](#) IA Task Force. 2 Dec. 2014.

¹⁹ Mossawa Center. 1 Feb. 2015.

²⁰ Khoury, Jack. 20 Feb. 2015.

²¹ Miller, Elhanan. 4 Mar. 2015.

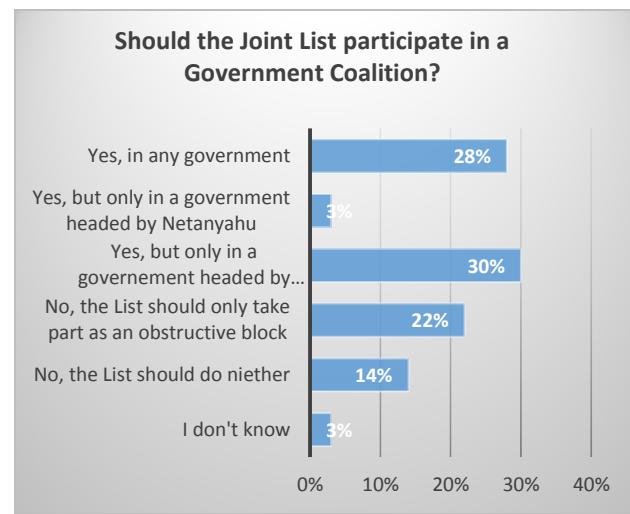
²² Professor Asad Ganem of Haifa University: “It is not enough to say, ‘We are Arabs, so vote for us.’ The public, and young people in particular, wants to hear a lot more than that. People want to know what the plan is.” See in: Mualem, Mazal. [“Joint List leaders must seize momentum.”](#) Al-Monitor. 25 Feb. 2015.

²³ Abu Sharb, Insaif and Shlabana-Behuti, Rinal. [“The Problematic Aspects of the Arab Joint List.”](#) Haaretz. 8 Feb. 2015. (Hebrew); Young Arab women elsewhere in the country have also raised this argument: Some of my friends like the feminist ones don't want to vote because there is two men in this list who is married to two women. They don't want to support a list where there is man married to two woman and I don't want to support it.” – Leyan, 20 year old student at Jaffa College. See in: Kaufman, Lissy. [“United they stand? The hopes and fears of Israel's Arabs.”](#) TLV1. 11 Feb. 2015.

²⁴ The Joint List currently has a single Bedouin nominee, Taleb Abu Arar, who is number 9 on the list.

III. Possible Role in the Next Government and Knesset

There has been a fair amount of speculation whether the Joint List would form a coalition with The Zionist Camp, if invited, in order to unseat Likud. (Arab parties have never been part of a ruling coalition.) By and large, Joint List leadership has been vocal that they will not,²⁵ despite the fact that 60% of Arab citizens said they would be in favor of joining a coalition.²⁶ More recently, Chairman Ayman Odeh left a little more room for discussion, saying that the time is not ripe,²⁷ and that “if and when we get to that junction [where Herzog approaches us], then we will decide.”²⁸ This approach was echoed by Herzog and Livni who said The Zionist Camp isn’t ruling out Arab parties and “everything will be discussed after the elections.”²⁹



Outside of a coalition, the Joint List could play an important supportive role, as was the case with Arab leadership during Rabin’s administration. If Likud and Labor form the government, and the Joint List is the third largest party, it stands to lead the opposition, which would set an historic precedent in itself and provide, as Ayman Odeh says, “an extremely important podium.”³⁰

In any event, as the third or even fourth largest party, the Joint List will be able to pursue and obtain membership in major Knesset committees such as Finance or the Interior Committee and from there “develop an action plan that includes the enactment of laws and provisions guaranteeing equality for Arab citizens.”³¹

IV. In Media and Campaign Discourse

The establishment of the Joint List and the change it reflects in the Arab political landscape in Israel has affected general public discourse, Jewish parties’ campaigns, and media coverage of Arab society in these elections. The fact that the small parties that for years comprised Arab representation in Israel merged and fresh leadership has come to the fore has garnered new interest and attention.

Ayman Odeh, who was relatively unknown prior to chairing the Joint List, has become a popular interview subject on all of the political news shows in Israel and received significant international coverage.³² Whereas in the past, Arab parties were frequently left out of election polls, debates and mainstream media

²⁵ Ben Solomon, Ariel. [“Arab Joint List rejects idea of joining Herzog-led government.”](#) *Jerusalem Post*. 3 March 2015; and [“MK Tibi: Arab politicians won’t join coalition as long as occupation continues.”](#) *Haaretz*. 24 Feb. 2015.

²⁶ Khouri, Jack. 20 Feb. 2015.

²⁷ “I believe that certain problems could arise within the coalition a year or two into its rule. Only then will we study the matter [of joining the government].” See in: Miller, Elhanan. [“After uniting Arabs behind him, Ayman Odeh looks to lead opposition.”](#) *The Times of Israel*. 4 Mar. 2015.

²⁸ Shulman, Marc. [“Israeli Election: What Do Israeli Arabs Want?”](#) – *Newsweek* – Marc Shulman – 3.6.15.

²⁹ [Herzog, Livni to Haaretz readers: We don’t rule out Arab parties](#), *Haaretz*. 23 Feb. 2015

³⁰ Miller, Elhanan. 4 Mar. 2015.

³¹ Kuttab, Daoud. 17 Feb. 2015.

³² For example, Odeh was profiled in [Newsweek](#), [The Washington Post](#), [The Times](#), [Reuters](#), [Fox News](#), among others.

coverage of elections, the media has been more attentive to the Joint List and issues in Arab society, though such omissions persist³³ and comparisons show coverage still falls short.³⁴

In some ways, this attention has allowed a more pragmatic message from Arab society to gain strength in the mainstream – that of greater interest in economic opportunities and equal participation in Israeli society. In other ways, some say the prospect has raised suspicions and fears about greater Arab participation,³⁵ adding fuel to a divisive backlash that started this summer during Israel's military operation in Gaza which saw a rise in hostility between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and explicit or implicit anti-Arab messages have found their way to mainstream campaigns.³⁶

This rhetoric has been most pronounced with Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman's who, as head of Yisrael Beiteinu, asked Ayman Odeh in a televised debate "Why aren't you standing for election in Ramallah rather than in the Israeli Knesset? Why are you even here? You're not wanted here."³⁷ While Odeh received praise about his cool-headed responses,³⁸ criticism was levied that such an attack could go unchallenged by others around the debate table.³⁹

MK Liberman has built much of his campaign on anti-Arab messages. His campaign slogan, "Ariel to Israel – Um El Fahem to Palestine," reflects his controversial proposal for 'population exchange' as part of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁴⁰ In recent weeks, Liberman continued to make headlines for asserting that Arab lawmakers [are] trying to impose Islamic State rule on Israel and that Arab Israelis who "oppose the state should be beheaded."⁴¹ When Jewish Home Chairman MK Bennett also insinuated that Arabs are responsible for high level of crime in some areas of Israel, causing an uproar,⁴² some speculated that divisive messages are being used strategically to rally right-wing voters.⁴³

For its part, The Joint List was forced to take down campaign ads that played up Price Tag vandalism by being designed to look as though they had been sprayed with the words "death to Arabs."⁴⁴

Petitions filed with the Central Elections Committee were also a widely publicized way tensions between the more extreme voices of the Jewish and Arab parties played out. The Headquarters Against Racism filed a petition to forbid Baruch Marzel (a far-right wing activist) from running; Baruch Marzel filed a motion to forbid the Joint List from running; and a group of Jewish and Arab activists filed a motion to stop MK Lieberman and Israel Beitenu from participating in the elections.⁴⁵ The most controversial petitions however, were filed by Foreign Minister Liberman and MK Yariv Levin (Likud) to forbid MK Hanin Zoabi from running with the Joint List. Contrary to the recommendation of the Attorney General, the Election Committee ruled in favor of the petition⁴⁶, which was then overturned by the Supreme Court, allowing MK Zoabi to run.

³³ Persico, Oren. ["Israeli media coverage: An election with no Arabs."](#) +972 Magazine. 3 Feb. 2015.

³⁴ Persico, Oren. ["Only Israel's public TV gives equal coverage to Arab Joint List."](#) +972 Magazine. 21 Feb. 2015.

³⁵ Lis, Jonathan. ["Arab list may seek place on sensitive Knesset security committee."](#) Haaretz. 10 Feb. 2015.

³⁶ Mualem, Mazal. ["Anti-Arab racism becomes tool in Israeli elections."](#) Al Monitor. 10 Feb. 2015.

³⁷ Miller, Elhanan. 4 Mar. 2015.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Persico, Oren. ["Liberman to head of Joint List: You're not wanted here."](#) +972 Magazine . 7 Mar. 2015.

⁴⁰ ["Party of Israeli FM Lieberman unveils controversial elections campaign."](#) I24 News. 15 Jan. 2015.

⁴¹ Grave-Lazi, Lidar. ["Arab students exit Bennett speech after he comments on Arab thieves in Negev."](#) Jerusalem Post. 8 Feb. 2015.

⁴² Mualem, Mazal. 10 Feb.2015.

⁴³ ["Controversial joint Arab party campaign ads removed."](#) Times of Israel. 21 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁴ All motions were based on Section 7a of Israel's Basic Law: The Knesset That forbids parties and people to run in elections if they (1) negate the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; (2) incite to racism; (3) support the arm struggle of an enemy state or a terrorist organization against Israel. See [Central Elections Committee website](#) (Hebrew).

⁴⁵ The Zionist Camp drew fire from all sides by initially stating it would join the disqualification vote, then stating it would

While extreme voices captured media attention, Jewish parties have been reaching out to Arab voters.⁴⁶ Among them, Shas, an ultra-orthodox party, launched a special campaign targeting Arab society from which it hopes to get "at least one Knesset seat." Shas attracts Arab voters on the basis of similar economic needs and the fact that Shas traditionally chairs the Ministry of Interior which deep relevance to Arab society. Adina Bar Shalom, daughter of Shas' spiritual founder Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, recently said in a meeting of political activists that "we forgot that we live in a country where Arabs also live and we discriminate their rights. ... If the state of Israel knew to anchor their rights as is needed, we wouldn't be in a problem like this."⁴⁷

oppose it, and finally joining the vote against Zoabi in the Committee. See in: Cesana, Shlomo, Shlezinger, Yehuda. ["Zionist Camp zigzags on petition to disqualify Arab MK."](#) *Israel Hayom*. 10 Feb. 2015. and Ezra, Hezki, Yashar, Ari. ["Labor 'Submits to Arabs,' Pulls Support for Barring Zoabi."](#) *Israel National News*. 10 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁶ The Mossawa Center reports that the Arab candidates from the Zionist Camp. Likud, Kulanu and even Israel Beiteinu are "roaming Arab localities". Mossawa Center. 1 Feb. 2015.

⁴⁷ Baruch, Uzi and Yashar, Ari. ["Rabbi Yosef's Daughter Clarifies: Shas is Leftist"](#) *Israel National News*. 10 Mar. 2015.

Appendix – Civil Society Efforts to ‘Get Out the Vote’

The Abraham Fund Initiatives (TAFI)

The Abraham Fund Initiatives has been involved in enhancing political participation of Arab citizens and legitimizing such participation in the mainstream Israeli public for a number of years now, including in conducting studies of political trends and running wide-scale campaigns to encourage Arab voter participation. This year, TAFI conducted a study, *The Political Participation of Arab Citizens in Israel: An Attitude Survey ahead of the Elections to the 20th Knesset*, that was used to inform its non-partisan efforts to promote voting as civic engagement.



It's Our Future Too!

Twenty graduates of TAFI’s Young Political Leaders courses are leading the voting effort. They are meeting politicians from the various political parties to encourage them to address the concerns and needs of the Arab citizens; maintaining a Facebook campaign called “*It’s Our Future Too*,”⁴⁸ and for the first time, conducting an election simulation in Arab high schools and colleges.



The Negev is Voting!

BOKRA.NET

Bokra.net, an Arabic-language online news outlet, is running a campaign focused on voting for people with disabilities. This campaign aims to inform individuals with disabilities and their families about elections, options for voting with disabilities, and encouraging their participation in the democratic process. Bokra is also raising awareness and working for reduction of social and technical barriers to voting that currently exist for Arab citizens with disabilities

Mazzawi Advertising

The Mazzawi Advertising Office in Nazareth is working on a large-scale effort to enhance voting participation and awareness of democratic procedures within Arab society, mostly in northern Israel. This includes working with over 200 Arab activists going door-to-door and promoting non-partisan participation among thousands of Arab families. According to CEO Fadoul Mazzawi, there are remote Arab villages where people are hardly aware of the fact that national elections are planned or that they have voting rights.

⁴⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/our.future.too>