

Israel's Arab Citizens and the 2015 General Elections: Post-election Review

In the General Elections of 2015, Arab citizens achieved greater prominence in Israel and on the world stage than any time in recent history. Successful creation of the Joint List – a merger of the 2 Arab and 1 Jewish-Arab parties that formerly represented Arab society in the Knesset – raised the profile of Arab political domestic aspirations in Israel and inspired Arab voters to come out in higher numbers. In addition, controversy surrounding PM Benjamin Netanyahu's comments about Arab voters in the last hours of the campaign made headlines within Israel, the Jewish diaspora, and among Israel's international relations.


Now, with 13 mandates, the Joint List is taking its first steps to address issues important to the Arab community and cement its place in the 20th Knesset. Arab voting participation rates, election results, and controversial campaigning all set the tone for the new reality in which the Joint List is taking its place as the third largest political party.

Election Results

The Joint List secured 13 seats in the new Knesset (12 filled by Arab MKs and 1 by Jewish MK from Hadash.) This is two seats more than the Arab and Jewish-Arab parties secured by running individually in 2013.

Joint List leaders hoped to win as many as 14-15 seats, enough to function as an obstructive block to a right-wing government. Thus, the result comes with some disappointment. At 13 seats and a right-wing government, Joint List MKs may find it "difficult to present significant achievements to the constituents, achievements that will prove to them that the unification was worth it."¹

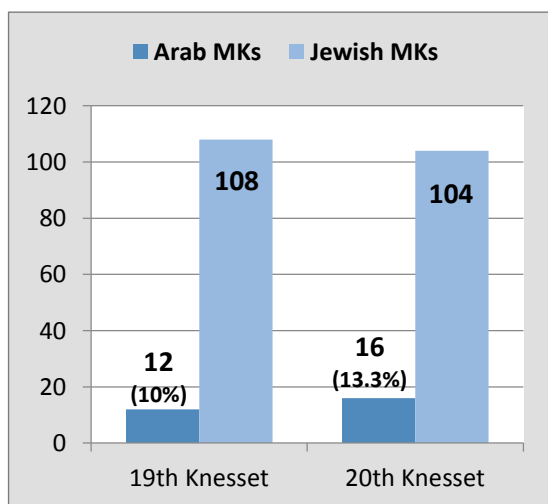
Overall there are fewer parties in the 20th Knesset (the number dropped from 14 to 10 due to the higher electoral

 Elections for the 20th Knesset 17 March 2015				
Party	Leader	%	Seats	+/-
Likud	Benjamin Netanyahu	23.40%	30	▲ +12
Zionist Union	Isaac Herzog, Tzipi Livni	18.67%	24	▲ +3
Joint Arab List	Ayman Odeh	10.54%	13	▲ +2
Yesh Atid	Yair Lapid	8.81%	11	▼ -8
Kulanu	Moshe Kahlon	7.49%	10	▲ +10
The Jewish Home	Naftali Bennett	6.74%	8	▼ -4
Shas	Aryeh Deri	5.73%	7	▼ -4
Yisrael Beiteinu	Avigdor Lieberman	5.11%	6	▼ -7
United Torah Judaism	Yaakov Litzman	5.03%	6	▼ -1
Meretz	Zehava Gal-On	3.93%	5	▼ -1
(Total number of seats)			120	

¹ Eldar, Shlomi. ["Israeli Arabs disappointed by election results"](#) *Al Monitor*. 19 Mar. 2015.

threshold), and the power of the two strongest parties, Likud and Labor, increased at the expense of the smaller parties.² Still, as the third largest party in the Knesset, the Joint List will see some automatic benefits. “Opposition party members get to serve as deputy speakers, who rotate time at the rostrum based on the size of the faction, so the List’s designee will be holding the gavel more often. Committee seats, too, are proportional. Ahmad Tibi, a Knesset member since 1999, said the Economic Committee, for example, ‘always had one Arab member; now there will be at least two.’”³

The Joint List is also due two seats on the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee (FA&D) and two on the Finance Committee. In early allocation of committee seats, the Joint List asked to relinquish its FA&D seats for 4 seats on the Finance Committee. The Joint List is ideologically opposed to sitting on a military and defense related committee and the prospect evoked considerable concern among Jewish parties as well. Strengthening its presence on the Finance Committee is a “signal (of) the list’s intention to focus on solving the economic problems of its voters.”⁴



In all, with 12 Arab MKs from the Joint List and 4 Arab MKs from other parties,⁵ there are 16 Arab MKs in the 20th Knesset. An increase of 4 seats from the last Knesset, Arab representation rose from 10% to 13.3%. Proportional representation of 20% would consist of 24 Arab MKs.

Voting Rates

Total voting participation in Israel reached 72.34%, the highest in more than 15 years. Arab voting rates were 63.5%, up 7% from 2013. These were also the highest in 15 years, but not as high as initial hopes and expectations that the Joint Arab List would draw Arab voting rates of 66% - 70%.⁶

According to an election day poll, the Joint List received 80% of the Arab vote (up from 77.2% that the three lists received separately in 2013). The remainder of Arab votes were divided between the Jewish parties: 22% to the Zionist Union, 15% to Likud, 13% to Yisrael Beytenu, 11% to Kulanu, 11% to Meretz and 8% to Shas.⁷ This strong show of support is seen as giving the Joint List a “mandate to speak on behalf of all Israeli Arabs, from every possible stage, and set out a clear vision based on equality, the preservation of national identity and cooperation with Israel’s democratic forces.”⁸

² According to the President of the Israeli Democracy Institute, Yohanan Plesner, these are positive outcomes that strengthen governability and stability. Plesner, Yohanan. “[The 2015 Elections and Israeli Governance](#)” *Jerusalem Post*. 25 Mar. 2015.

³ Rudoren, Jodi. “[Arab Alliance in Israeli Legislature Sees Unity as Vehicle for Progress](#)” *New York Times*. 19 Mar. 2015.

⁴ Lis, Jonathan. “[Arab Joint List asks to relinquish seats on Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee](#)” *Haaretz*. 27 Mar. 2015.

⁵ The other Arab MKs, including Druze, are MK Zohair Bahalul (Zionist Camp), Mk Issawi Freij (Meretz), MK Ayub Kra (Likud), and MK Hamad Amer (Israel Beitenu.)

⁶ “[Long sidelined, Arab parties are emerging as a force to be reckoned with](#)” *The Economist*. 7 Feb. 2015.

⁷ Ben Solomon, Ariel. “[Arab sector turnout for recent elections reached 63.5%, polling data shows](#)” *Jerusalem Post*. 24 Mar. 2015.

⁸ Khoury, Jack. “[Joint List given clear mandate to speak on behalf of all Israeli Arabs](#)” *Haaretz*. 19. Mar. 2015.

A closer look at the election results reveals the following:⁹

- The Joint List received 446,583 votes. This is nearly 100,000 votes more than the three parties received in 2013, or an increase of almost 28%.
- In a number of major Arab cities in the north of the country voting rates were even higher. In Um El Fahem they were 67.4%; in Sakhnin - 81.6%, and Kfar Kana - 70%.
- Meanwhile, in Nazareth, Israel's largest Arab city, which is considered the minority's "capital", voting rates were only 61.4%.
- As in previous election campaigns, voting rates were much lower among Negev Bedouin, although in some localities there was a rise in voter turnout when compared with 2013¹⁰. For example, in Rahat, voting rates were 58% (up from 56.5%), Hura – 51% (up from 37.8%), and in Laqiya – 44% (down from 63.8%).
- In a few smaller Arab localities there was significant support for the Likud party, and in one extreme example, in the small Bedouin village of Arab-al-Naim, 76% of its 380 votes went to Likud, while the Joint Arab List received 15%.¹¹

Voting Numbers at a Glance			
	2013	2015	Change
Total voter participation	67.70%	72.34%	+ 4.64%
Arab voter participation	56.50%	63.50%	+ 7.00%
Arab parties' share of Arab vote	77.20%	80%	+ 2.80%
Total votes for Arab parties <i>(2013: Ra'am-Ta'al, Balad, and Hadash / 2015: The Joint Arab List)</i>	349,000	446,583	+ 97,583 votes

Campaign controversy and status of Arab citizens

The elections season was marked by controversial statements and "campaigns of hatred," later described by the Israeli Democracy Institute as "worrying signs for the future of Israeli democracy."¹² Outgoing Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beitenu) made waves when he suggested Arab citizens "who oppose the state" should be beheaded.¹³ Chair of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh, largely avoided incendiary statements, but Joint List spokesperson Raja Zaetrah was roundly denounced for saying Hamas was not a terrorist organization and suggested ISIS learned its tactics from the Zionist State.¹⁴

⁹ [20th Knesset Central Elections Committee website](#) (Hebrew).

¹⁰ [19th Knesset Central Election Committee website](#) (Hebrew).

¹¹ Shpigel, Noa. "In one Bedouin village, a landslide for Netanyahu" *Haaretz*. 22 Mar. 2015.

¹² "The Day After the Elections" *Democratic Agenda*. Israel Democracy Institute. 19 Mar. 2015. (Hebrew).

¹³ Tharoor, Ishaan. "Israeli foreign minister says disloyal Arabs should be beheaded" *Washington Post*. 10 Mar. 2015.

¹⁴ Sharon, Jeremy; Harkov, Lahav. "Joint Arab List spokesman: ISIS learned its crimes from Zionism" *Jerusalem Post*. 10 Mar. 2015.

A number of civil society organizations issued statements against what they saw as “racism, fear-mongering and exclusionary tactics against Arab citizens of Israel.”¹⁵ But it was Prime Minister Netanyahu’s warning that “Arab voters are coming out in droves” in the final hours of the campaign that elicited not only deep controversy and criticism,¹⁶ but confusion about where Netanyahu’s administration stands on better integration of Arab citizens.

On the one hand, under his leadership, billions of shekels have been invested into massive Arab economic development and integration. PM Netanyahu's office even released national commercials encouraging employers to hire Arab candidates and the PM holds an annual conference on Arab economic development in Israel. On the other hand, the statements fell along the same lines as legislation advanced during the last two Netanyahu governments that was perceived as exclusionary and anti-Arab.¹⁷ The Prime Minister’s Election Day comments reflected divisive rhetoric that, as the Anti-Defamation League wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister, “leaves questions in people’s minds about your views of that community and their place in Israeli society.”¹⁸

On March 23rd, PM Netanyahu met with Arab leaders to publicly issue an apology to Arab citizens and affirm his commitment to all citizens of Israel. “I know that my comments last week offended Arab citizens of Israel. I had no intention that it would be this way. I apologize for this.” He added that his “actions as prime minister, including the great investments in the minority sectors, prove the total opposite,” and that “I see myself as the prime minister of each and every one of you, of all Israeli citizens without differentiating between religions, races and sex. I see in all Israeli citizens partners in building the State of Israel, one that is thriving and safe for all Israeli citizens.”¹⁹

The apology was welcomed by organizations like ADL and the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement who had issued statements or asked for such a gesture. ADL reinforced that “under Prime Minister Netanyahu’s watch there’s been a significant effort by the Israeli government to integrate Israeli Arabs into the broader society.” The Rabbinical Assembly applauded the apology and added that “In this spirit, we hope that this statement begins a process of healing and unity for common purpose.”²⁰

For its part, The Joint List rejected the apology, saying it “isn’t a true apology”²¹ and was made before Arab “Likud supporters, with no Joint List representatives invited.”²² Many civil society leaders also felt the apology did not go far enough and that Netanyahu will have to be judged on his actions, not his words.²³ Ron Gerlitz, Co-director of Sikkuy wrote that it “will take us a long time to undo the damage that [Netanyahu] did,” suggesting that the apology should have been made “to the legitimate representative leadership of Arab society” and should have included “a number of very strong commitments to prove that [it] was genuine,” such as not appointing the anti-Arab Liberman as cabinet minister, committing to periodic meetings with Joint List heads, committing not to advance legislation “that harms the rights of Arab citizens” and so forth.²⁴

¹⁵ “Post-Election Update from Mahapach-Taghir” *Mahapach-Taghir*. 23 Mar. 2015.

¹⁶ [“Netanyahu apologizes to Arab citizens for remarks - Israeli and international leaders respond.”](#) IA Taskforce. 25 Mar. 2015.

¹⁷ For example: [“Basic Law Proposal: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People”](#) IA Taskforce. Nov. 2015

¹⁸ [“ADL Welcomes Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Apology for Election Day Comment About Arab Voters”](#) ADL Press Release. 23 Mar. 2015.

¹⁹ Lis, Jonathan. [“Netanyahu 'sorry' his comments offended Israeli Arabs”](#) *Haaretz* 23 Mar. 2015.

²⁰ Dvorin, Tova. [“American Jewish Groups Welcome Netanyahu Apology”](#) *Israel National News*. 24 Mar. 2015.

²¹ [“Joint List leader: A real apology from Netanyahu would be true equality for Arabs”](#) *Haaretz*. 23 Mar. 2015

²² Estrin, Daniel. [“Arab-Israeli political leaders reject Netanyahu’s apology”](#) *Washington Post*. 24 Mar. 2015.

²³ Ravid Barak. [“Netanyahu's half-apology can't fix the real problem: His policy”](#) *Haaretz*. 24 Mar. 2015.

²⁴ Gerlitz, Ron. [“I don't accept the apology”](#) *Times of Israel*. 26 Mar. 2015.

Amnon Beer-Sulitzeanu, co-executive director of the Abraham Fund Initiatives, explained that “[i]n parallel to ... positive developments we have been witnessing waves of anti-Arab policies and legislation, which have alienated the Arab minority and threatened it.”²⁵ According to him, economic improvement in the Arab sector would only solve underlying problems and tensions “if real participation and social inclusion are also sought.”

Moving Forward

Some Arab leaders believe that criticism leveled at PM Netanyahu for his statement on Election Day could result in positive movement in terms of budgeting for Arab local councils and closing gaps.²⁶ Many hope the Joint List will cooperate with the government and use their mandates to bring tangible change to Arab localities.²⁷ Alongside that hope, there is yet a lot of concern within Arab society and among Jewish and Arab activists regarding the level of damage that Netanyahu's statement on elections day caused, as well as regarding the legislative trends that characterized the previous Netanyahu governments and were perceived by Arabs as exclusionary.

The coming year will be the first time that an Arab party has such prominence in the Knesset and attention in the media. Throughout the campaign, party head Ayman Odeh made efforts to position the Joint List not only as an Arab party, but also as a party that will advance the interests of all Israel's disadvantaged populations and will collaborate with others to do so.²⁸

Early actions of the Joint List suggest this stance and their strength will generate collaboration, as well as highlight areas of tension. In one of its first moves as an elected party, the Joint List requested to relinquish seats on the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee in exchange for additional seats on the Finance Committee, to the relief of Jewish leadership concerned with their presence on the committee, and expectations among Arab leadership that this will bring more sway on budgetary matters.

The party also held a march, led by Odeh, from the Negev to Jerusalem to raise-awareness of Bedouin rights at the end of which they submitted a master plan to the President for recognizing their communities.²⁹ In doing so Odeh sent a message that “under his leadership Arab Knesset members will put social issues and the needs of their constituents at the top of their agenda ... [and that] he is not afraid to tackle politically loaded subjects.”³⁰ In another early move, Joint List leadership met with Mahmoud Abbas “to get acquainted and exchange pleasantries after the election in Israel,” a visit that drew ire from Likud leaders and other critics.³¹

At the same time that the Joint List will address issues affecting state-minority and Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, they will also be navigating tensions and modeling collaboration within the Arab community.³² As a single party representing Israel's Arab community, the united front may also highlight the diversity and advance dialogue within Israel's Arab society.

²⁵ Ben Solomon, Ariel. [“PM's investment in Arab sector doesn't match his rhetoric, say NGOs”](#) *Jerusalem Post*. 25 Mar. 2015.

²⁶ Eldar, Shlomi. [“Israel Arabs will look to Bibi's actions, not words”](#) *Al Monitor*. 25 Mar. 2015.

²⁷ Khoury, Jack. [“Poll: Most Arab Voters Want Joint List in next Government.”](#) *Haaretz*. 20 Feb. 2015.

²⁸ Rudnitzky, Arik, Sweid, Hana. [“The Upcoming Elections and Israel's Arab Society.”](#) IA Task Force. 4 March. 2015.

²⁹ Seidler, Shirley. [“March for Bedouin rights ends at President's Residence in Jerusalem”](#) *Haaretz*. 30 Mar. 2015.

³⁰ Futterman, Don. [“Is Israel ready for the new Arab leader Ayman Odeh?”](#) *Haaretz*. 1 Apr. 2015.

³¹ Siryoti, Daniel and staff. [“Israeli Arab MKs meet with PA president in Ramallah”](#) *Israel Hayom*. 26 Mar. 2015.

³² Abdelfattah, Awad. [“The Joint List isn't turning its back on Israeli society”](#) *+972 Magazine* 10 Mar. 2015.