



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

Municipal Elections in 2018: Insights and Trends in Israel's Arab Society

November 2018

Municipal elections were held across Israel on October 30. These elections, held every five years, determine mayors and heads of local and regional councils, as well as city and local council representatives. Elections were held in all Arab municipalities¹ (except in three that held special elections in 2015²), including for the first time in four Golan Druze communities.³

High Priority

In Arab society, local elections are widely regarded as more significant than national elections. They draw high numbers of candidates, far greater turnout among Arab citizens than do elections for Knesset, result in high turnover of leadership, and are often accompanied by local outbursts of violence.

Most Arab citizens view local government as more influential and relevant to their daily lives than the national government. They regard local leadership as their most immediate access to government services and resources, as their natural circle of identity and identification, and as a representative of Arab society to the government.⁴ Municipal bodies are also often the largest employer in Arab towns, given that nearly all Arab localities have low levels of commercial activity and are among Israel's most economically disadvantaged communities. As a result, local office takes on heightened political and economic significance.⁵

In the words of Arab journalist Jack Khoury, "It is impossible to compare the degree of emotional involvement of the [Arab] public with other events ... the interest in the election process itself and the social and political implications within the municipalities is much higher."⁶

Focus on Internal Trends

Unlike in national elections or in mixed cities, where election discourse and behavior are heavily influenced by state-minority and Jewish-Arab relations, local elections in Arab municipalities are determined primarily by local issues, distinct from Arab society's broader national and ideological concerns. Municipal elections therefore provide "an excellent opportunity to examine the internal dynamics of the Arab-Palestinian community in Israel," writes researcher

¹ The majority of Arab citizens live in all-Arab villages, towns and cities, with only about 10 % residing in mixed cities. Except for 11 localities defined as cities, Arab communities are small to medium local councils.

² Taibeh, Baqa El Gharbiya and Jatt.

³ These villages until now have been managed by the Ministry of Interior via nominated oversight committees.

⁴ The Crumbling of the Arab Local Authorities, Aziz Khaider (ed.), *The Van Leer Institute*, 2010, p. 11 ([Hebrew](#)).

⁵ Marzouq Alhalabi, [Arab Local Government – a Missed Opportunity](#), *The Forum for Regional Thinking*, October 2018.

⁶ Jack Khoury, The involvement of businessmen and the retreat of clans: The Trump effect came to the elections in the Arab communities, *Haaretz*, November 14, 2018, ([Hebrew](#)).

Marzouq Alhalabi. They are “a sort of a courtyard of this community, an arena in which the different forces operating within it compete.”⁷

The 2018 cycle showed that these forces are a continuation of trends developing over at least the last decade—namely ongoing struggles between traditional and progressive influences, including growing participation of Arab women; the diminished role of Arab political parties; and high levels of violence.

While the substance of campaigns differed by location, the two overarching dynamics at play remained the dominance of **traditional family and clan structures** (*Hamoulas*), and the efforts of **a growing young and professional Arab middle-class**—men and women—to modernize and professionalize local governance explicitly. In between is the growing influence of local business leaders using their relative wealth to advance an economic agenda in local government—some affiliated with *Hamoulas*, some influencing them from within, and some aligned with progressive democratic forces. Noticeably less prominent in these elections were **Arab national political parties**, whose weakening role in local politics is seen both as related to the sustained dominance of *Hamoulas*, and as yet another indication of the gap between local election dynamics and Arab society’s national concerns.

Mixed Cities and Golan Druze

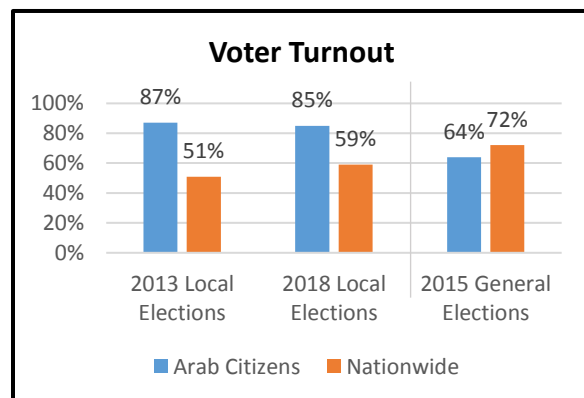
In the four Golan Druze communities, where local elections were held for the first time, these same forces were at play but were overshadowed by significant protest and boycotts as religious leadership and community members identified the elections as part of Israel’s ‘occupation’ of the region.⁸ In mixed cities, local elections were characterized by controversial anti-Arab campaigns; no Arab candidates ran for mayor, but Arab and Jewish-Arab lists ran for local council positions to promote diversity and enhance Arab participation in and influence on their local governments.

Insights into these aspects of the local elections and the overall outcomes are detailed below.

BY THE NUMBERS

Candidate participation, voter turnout, and leadership turnover are some of the data underscoring the priority of local elections in Arab society and the high stakes often involved.

| Mayor / Council Head | | |
|------------------------------|-------|--------------|
| | Total | Arab Society |
| No. of municipalities | 251 | 76 (30%) |
| No. of candidates | 836 | 288 (34%) |



⁷ Alhalabi, [Arab Local government – a Missed Opportunity](#).

⁸ Eli Ashkenazi, 20 voters and a single (female) candidate – the small northern village that participated in elections for the first time, *Walla! News*, October 31, 2018 ([Hebrew](#)).

Out of a total of 836 candidates for mayor and head of council nationwide, 288 were from Arab society, or 34% of all candidates for top positions. This is significantly higher than the proportion of Arab society in Israel, about 21% of the population, and means there were 3.8 candidates per Arab municipality compared to about three candidates on average per Jewish ones.⁹

Likewise, Arab voter turnout was approximately 85%, [significantly higher than the national average](#) (a relatively high 59%,¹⁰ attributed to the fact that Election Day was, for the first time, a day off), and well above the Arab participation rate in the general elections.

Leadership Turnover

Leadership turnover remains high in Arab municipalities, although there is a slight decrease from the previous local elections. Of the 76 participating municipalities, 50 (65.7%) elected new leadership, comparable to 2013 when 51 of 73 mayors (70%) were replaced.¹¹ Where incumbents were re-elected, most are entering their second term, as few Arab mayors serve more than twice before being defeated.

Only 48 elections were decided in the first round. Runoffs were held in 28 Arab municipalities where no candidate received more than 40% of the vote.¹²

| 76 Arab Mayoral and Council Head Elections | | | | |
|---|----|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----|
| First Round – 48 Elections Decided | | | Second Round – 28 Election Runoffs | |
| Incumbent | 19 | 57 of 76 ran for re-election (75%) | Incumbent | 7 |
| Turnover | 29 | 5 previously served as mayor / head | Turnover | 21 |
| TOTALS | | | | |
| Incumbents Reelected: 26 (34.3%), New Leadership: 50 (65.7%) | | | | |

Former MK Hana Swaid (Hadash), also a former mayor, suggests this turnover indicates the level of engagement in local politics; the expectation that local leaders will deliver swift results and disappointment when they cannot; and the pressure from competing Hamoulas and a growing field of young professionals running for positions.

⁹ According to researcher Mohammed Khalaila of the University of Haifa, the number of candidates for the top positions of Arab localities has always been higher than in Jewish society but is decreasing steadily. In the 2008 local elections, there were 4.5 candidates on average per position in Arab localities, and in 2013 the average was 4.2 candidates per position.

¹⁰ Ministry of Interior ([Hebrew](#))

¹¹ Ghaida Rinawi-Zoabi, The Catch-22 of Arab Local Authorities, *The Marker*, 12.31.13, ([Hebrew](#)).

¹² This number represents 51% of all localities in Israel where second rounds were held (55 localities), again attesting to the higher number of candidates per locality in Arab society, more often resulting in the need for a second round.

Women Candidates

A total of 20 Arab women were elected to council seats,¹³ with six more who will rotate in the second half of the term.¹⁴ This includes the first Druze and Bedouin council women, and for the first time four women who headed their own lists.¹⁵

The number of Arab women who ran for local council representation hit an all-time high in this election cycle, with 367 Arab women¹⁶ who ran on lists in Arab municipalities and in mixed cities, representing about 8% of all candidates (up from 270 women in 2013, around 4% of all Arab candidates). There were 12 women heading lists, dozens of women in realistic positions on their lists,¹⁷ and a first-ever [all-woman list in the Druze village of Usafiyya](#). And whereas in 2013, 47 Arab municipalities had no women candidates at all, this time only 13 Arab localities had none.

Only [three Arab women ran for mayor or council heads](#), two in Kafr Qara and one in the Druze town of Ein Kinya in the Golan. One in Kafr Qara withdrew early and the other two were not elected. To date, only a single Arab woman has ever headed an Arab locality.¹⁸

The number of Arab women seeking local office has risen significantly over the last decade due to empowerment processes, enhanced representation of Arab women in the labor market and higher education, and [concerted efforts to increase women's representation](#), but the number elected is still marginal. While this is an issue in local political representation in Israel overall (women comprise 13.5% of local council members nationwide, and there are 13 Jewish women mayors in 2018, up from 6 in 2013.)¹⁹, MK Aida Touma-Sliman (Joint List), who chairs the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality, conceded that despite gains, "conservative socio-cultural norms in Arab towns and villages mean that political opportunities for women remain relatively limited."²⁰

| Arab Women in Municipal Elections | | | |
|-----------------------------------|------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| | 2008 | 2013 | 2018 |
| Candidates | 149 | 302 w/ 1 head of a list | 367 w/ 12 heads of lists |
| Elected | 7 | 13 with 3 more rotating in | 20 w/ 6 more rotating in |

¹³ In Nazareth, I'billin, Jadida Makar, Jish, Deir al-Asad, Deir Hanna, Tamra, Ka'abiyye-Tabbash-Hajajre, Kafr Qana, Majd al-Krum, Maghar, Usfiya, Arrabe, Rameh, Haifa and Lod. Tamara Zieve, [Preliminary Data From Local Elections Finds Increase Of 100 Women](#), *The Jerusalem Post*, 11.9.18.

¹⁴ Rotations in Tira (2), Shefaram, Ein Mahel, Beit Jann and Jdeideh-Maker

¹⁵ Samah Salaime, In Every Circle in Israel I was Excluded, Now I am in the Council, *Mekomit*, 11.3.18, ([Hebrew](#)).

¹⁶ Ola Najami, [Israel's Local Elections 2018: Arab Women Entering Public Life](#), Abraham Initiatives, 11.19.18

¹⁷ Much like Knesset elections, local lists receive the number of seats on the council proportional to the number of votes they attain. They fill those seats in the order in which they candidates are listed. Therefore, the top positions on the list are much more likely to serve (as they require the minimum number of votes), are seen as the representative faces of the list and often are more influential in setting the list's agenda.

¹⁸ Violet Khuri, who was nominated as Council Head of the village Kfar Yassif in 1972.

¹⁹ Knesset Research Center, Appropriate Representation of Women in Local Government, Situation in Israel and Comparative Perspective, March 5, 2018 (Hebrew).

²⁰ Maya Margit, [Record Number Of Women Elected In Israeli Municipal Elections](#), *The Media Line*, 11.1.18.

ELECTION INSIGHTS

Primacy of Local Government

The passage of the [Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People](#) (“Nation-State Law”) in July 2018 led to some speculation outside of Arab society that national identity and state-minority issues might become central to municipal campaigns, despite the strong tendency to focus on local and pragmatic concerns. However, with broad consensus against it in Arab society, the Nation-State Law emerged as neither a point of contention nor a rallying point among candidates. Rather, since it was widely received as message of national exclusion by Arab society, the law may have only further reinforced the primacy of local government.

“Representation of Arab citizens in national politics and centers of power is practically non-existent,” writes Advocate Somow Younis, “so their active civic participation has been directed inwards to elections in the local arena.” The Knesset is not viewed as “a platform or mechanism through which their rights can be fought” she continues, as “it either maintains the status quo or exacerbates this situation by enacting discriminatory law.”²¹

But the significance of municipal office derives far more from local realities than national discourse. With high level of poverty, lack of economic opportunities within Arab communities, and a relatively weak and still emerging civil society, local politics is both “the sole organizational framework and channel to advance political, social, and economic development”²² in Arab society, and a source of “political power and social prestige, promising the ruling group (Hamoula, religious faction or political party) tangible advantages”²³ not readily available elsewhere.

Competing Forces: Traditional Voting Patterns and a Growing Middle Class

Much of the discourse surrounding these elections was over whether the dominance of traditional extended families (Hamoulas) in local politics would be diffused by the “the emergence of younger, educated candidates running on independent slates, challenging [them].”²⁴ For decades, writes political science Prof. Muhammad Amara, “the basic loyalty of the Arab voter was to the representative of his Hamoula, rather than to who best represents the interest of his locality, and the basic loyalty of the Hamoula representative or list was to their own members rather than to the entire locality.”²⁵

The stronghold of Hamoulas on local political power is widely considered an important factor, historically and still today, in the overall weakness of Arab municipal management and professional capacities. Elected officials “from a particular clan will, in many cases, employ the members of his family and his allies, regardless of their ability or professional training,”²⁶ which “sometimes includes dozens of people beyond the required manpower, overburdens the budget of the local council.”²⁷ The cost to long-term development has come increasingly under

²¹ Somow Younis, Local Elections and the Change in Arab Society, *YNET*, 11.15.18 ([Hebrew](#)).

²² Nadia Hilou, [The 2013 Municipal Elections in the Israeli Arab Communities](#), *INSS Insight No. 482*, November 6, 2013.

²³ Aziz Haider (ed.), *The Crumbling of the Arab Local Authorities*, *The Van Leer Institute*, 2010, Introduction and p. 11 ([Hebrew](#)).

²⁴ Jack Khoury, [In Israeli Arab Local Elections, New Faces Fail to Overtake Clan Loyalties](#), *Haaretz*, 10.31.18.

²⁵ Muhammad Amara, *The Hamoula in Arab Politics – Adaptation to Changing Trends*, in Eli Reches (ed.), *The Arabs in Israeli Politics – Identity Dilemmas*, 1998, p. 92 (Hebrew).

²⁶ Rami Younis, [Arabs are Voting for Hamoulas? True, but not for the Reasons you Thought](#), *Local Call*, 11.21.18 ([Hebrew](#)).

²⁷ Marzouq Alhalabi, [Arab Local Government – a Missed Opportunity](#), *The Forum for Regional Thinking*, October 2018.

fire over the last decade among Arab researchers and a growing middle class that wants to professionalize local governance and advance economic development through democratic processes.

In the current election cycle, many municipalities, (i.e. Fasouta, Um El Fahem, Tira, Eilaboun, and more) featured lists campaigning on cross-family, professional agendas and against the concept of voting by family. These lists united local professionals and academics—men and women—from different families. They focused on pragmatic priorities like improving education, municipal infrastructure, and public facilities, and often emphasized accountability, transparency, and the principle of independent democratic choice.

In Fasouta, for example, candidates showed residents PowerPoint presentations on economic development progress in the village and plans for the future. In other localities candidates stated they are working to bring "a new spirit" as "people today have the freedom to vote for whoever they want."²⁸

The influence of these groups focused campaign discourse on "the functioning of the local council, its professionalism, the town's development, and the outcomes of the management of the council."²⁹ But while seen as an indicator of positive social change, it is not at all clear from outcomes that the dominance of traditional family structures actually waned.

The emerging Arab middle class also includes successful business leaders who played an unprecedented role in this local election cycle. In many cases, local businessmen either ran as candidates in affiliation with Hamoulas, or supported Hamoula candidates financially who would advance their economic development agenda;³⁰ thus reinforcing the dominance of family structures, but also changing them from within.

Marzouq Alhalabi and Adv. Sonow Younis say overall the influence of a progressive class of professionals are '[undermining the power of the traditional clan](#),' and represent a "[light at the end of the tunnel](#)." Others, like journalist Jack Khoury, conclude that "Women and young people played a greater role this time around, but tribe, family and money still rule."³¹

Diminished Influence of National Parties

The ongoing competition between traditional family-based power and an emerging class seeking professional governance is correlated with the diminished role of Arab political parties in the local arena. Historically, political parties played a major part in local government, alongside and often in affiliation with Hamoulas, often representing a national and ideological Arab discourse. In 1983, for example, party-backed candidates won in 21 localities, representing 46% of all council heads elected that year. When in the 1990s the Arab public agenda shifted away from a national agenda towards a civil and pragmatic one,³² most of the political parties

²⁸ Eran Zinger, [The New Arab Lists that Ignore the Hamoulas](#) *TV Kan11 Evening News*, 10.21.18, Min 33:14 to 40:34.

²⁹ Alhalabi, [Arab Local government – a Missed Opportunity](#). *The Forum for Regional Thinking*, October 2018.

³⁰ Jack Khoury, The involvement of businessmen and the retreat of clans: The Trump effect came to the elections in the Arab communities.

³¹ Jack Khoury, [In Israeli Arab Local Elections, New Faces Fail to Overtake Clan Loyalties](#).

³² According to an article about Khalaila's study, "the Oslo Accords 'are a key factor in changing priorities and preferences of Arab citizens.' In short, in the Oslo process, Jewish decision-makers excluded Arab citizens from the Israeli agenda, and Palestinian decision-makers excluded Arab citizens from the agenda of the Palestinian national movement. From the double exclusion, the Palestinian citizens have reached the conclusion that they must take care of themselves, and moreover, they must focus on the civilian level, even at the expense of the national discourse." Younis, *Local Call*, 9.21.18 ([Hebrew](#))

chose to retain a local foothold by deepening their alliances with Hamoulas rather than investing in building an alternative framework for pragmatic local political engagement. This, Khalaila writes, "undermined their legitimacy and even strengthened the traditional social structure."³³

In the local elections of 2013 (the previous round), only 7% of elected mayors and council heads were clearly identified with political parties.³⁴ In 2018 again, while final data is not yet available, the vast majority of candidates ran as political independents—as Hamoula candidates, in opposition to Hamoulas, or on a socio-religious platform (i.e. the Islamic Movement), and only a handful of party-backed candidates won.

The Joint List, the third largest political party in the Knesset, did not nominate any candidate while the smaller parties comprising the Joint List umbrella – Hadash, Raam-Ta'al and Balad—backed roughly a dozen candidates for top positions in various localities, some successfully, and some after it was clear they would win.

The “young, educated, enlightened generation with a Palestinian national identity” is seen by some as the emergence of a political alternative in the wake left by the national parties, and even a direct response to the inability of the Joint List “to identify and advance the common interests of the entire Arab society.”³⁵

Others suggest that because “the almost total collapse of the parties has given rise to a new leadership in one place and strengthened clanhood elsewhere,”³⁶ there is still a need for civic institutional development in the Arab local public sphere that can match the organizational strength of the traditional Hamoula.³⁷ Moreover, some connect the decline of national parties to the extent of local violence around elections, since campaigns and results are driven more by personal, family and emotional connections, rather than political structures that are more deeply associated with electoral principles and processes.

THE (SLOW BUT STEADY) RISE OF WOMEN

According to feminist activist and civil society leader Samah Salaime, the 26 of 367 Arab women elected to office represent "26 small steps forward." If the complex history of Arab citizens of Israel has strengthened traditional patriarchal clans and pushed women out of political life, the growing numbers of young, educated men and women seeking more modern and democratic local governance have forged a pathway back in.³⁸

Over the last decade, Arab and Jewish-Arab civil society organizations advancing women’s issues in Arab society have been working to increase the number of women pursuing roles in public leadership. They encourage women to present their candidacy, prepare and support women interested in running, raise awareness and encourage electoral lists to include women candidates, and encourage residents to vote for lists that include women. This year, more than 11 Arab-led NGOs worked to [advance women candidates in Arab society](#), in parallel to the work

³³ Mohammed Khalaila, The Political Parties’ Decline in Local Elections in Palestinian Society in the State of Israel, *University of Haifa School of Political Science* (Hebrew).

³⁴ Ibid. Mohammed Khalaila.

³⁵ Somow Younis, Local Elections and the Change in Arab Society, *YNET*, 11.15.18 ([Hebrew](#)).

³⁶ Samah Salaime, I was Excluded from Every Circle in Israel, Now I'm in the [Local] Council, *Local Call*, 11.3.18 ([Hebrew](#))

³⁷ Younis, *Local Call* 9.21.18 ([Hebrew](#)).

³⁸ Salaime, *Local Call*, 11.3.18 ([Hebrew](#)).

of a wider coalition of Jewish and Arab organizations, "[Mekomiot 2018](#)," working to increase women's political leadership nationwide.

According to Ola Najami, head of Leadership Programs at the Abraham Initiatives, beyond the historic 367 women running for local council, these efforts succeeded in generating unprecedented interest and discourse within the wider Arab society about women's political representation and the added value that greater representation would bring to Arab society. The increased presence of women candidates' faces on election posters and billboards suggests greater openness to and internalization of the possibility in Arab society, as does the fact that only 13 of all Arab municipalities had no women candidates.



Poster for Victoria Madaj-Zahalk's campaign for mayor of Kfar Qara

Despite the increased number of candidates, and the rise in the number of women elected, the number of Arab women in municipal councils remained marginal. Nasreen Hajyahya, Head of the Jewish-Arab center of the Israel Democracy Institute, wrote: "Over the past few years we have seen more Arab Knesset Members...more Arab women entering key positions in the civil service...more Arab women going to high-tech and leading in civil society. But of all places, in our own home, we have not managed to overcome the patriarchal Hamoulas."³⁹

On a more optimistic note, Samah Salame summarized: "The women this time tried, from the villages back to the big cities. It did not always work... Maybe I'm naive, I'm obviously naive, but that's all the beauty of feminism: to believe that the big change will surely come. And on the way we learn to appreciate and enjoy small steps in the right direction."⁴⁰

Examples: Nazareth, Um Al Fahm, Kalansawe

A few examples from significant Arab cities underscore the themes outlined above:

- **Nazareth – Incumbent Ali Salam retained his seat.** A complex and heated campaign on many fronts, the election in Israel's largest Arab city (over 75,000 residents) sheds some light on the diminished influence of Arab parties even when they are active: In 2013, Hadash lost its decades of control in the city when its candidate, then incumbent mayor Ramez Jeraysi, lost to the independent Ali Salam. In the current round, both Hadash and Balad (and a coalition of other non-political forces) supported businessman Walid Affifi who ran against Salam, also as an intendent. Salam had [strongly criticized Joint List leadership](#) during his term and is seen by many in Arab society as a controversial figure, leading to a heated and even violent campaign period. In the last few weeks, MK Dr. Ahmed Tibi (Raam-Taal) threw his support behind Ali Salam in what is perceived as a challenge to the other parties in the Joint List. Despite the coalition behind Affifi, Salam won by a dramatic 65% while Hadash also lost council seats in Nazareth.
- **Um Al Fahm – Two term incumbent lost to high school principal, genetic engineer.** Um Al Fahm is the third-largest Arab city with more than 55,000 residents, and the historical stronghold of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement, which [was declared illegal in 2015](#). Here, Dr. Samir Mahmeed, a high school principal and doctor of genetic engineering, won a surprising victory with 54% of the vote in a runoff against two-term

³⁹ Nasreen Hajyahya, Is There A Chance that in 2023 We Will See an Arab (woman) Council Head in Israel?, *The Marker*, 11.12.18 ([Hebrew](#))

⁴⁰ Samah Salame Local Call, 11.3.18 ([Hebrew](#))

incumbent Khaled Mohammed Hamdan Aghbariyaa. In an interview following his victory he spoke about "the numerous groups of young people in the city" that want to promote its development and "move it out of the dead end it is currently in," about his wish to "change the city's negative image" and about his promise to ensure "there will be women in each municipal committee."⁴¹ Although Mahmeed's statements reflect the voices for change within Arab society, he was reportedly also backed by the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement, raising questions among the public about possible influences on his term. The defeated Mayor Aghbariyaa had been first elected in 2008 under the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement and ran again as an independent in 2013, though the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement (which otherwise boycotted the local elections) supported him when it became clear he would win. Um Al Fahm also saw the first woman elected to a council seat, albeit not from the incoming mayor's list; Haneen Raja Agbaria was in the second position on the National Alliance list, which won one seat, and she will rotate into the council during the term.

- **Kalansawe – Dominant Hamoulas Vied for Power in Campaigns Marked by Violence.** This city of around 22,000 saw a stormy and violent election season in which the main Hamoulas in the city vied for power. Initially, 6 candidates ran for the position of mayor, including the incumbent Abed El Basat Salameh, who finished a first 5-year term in office. Then, two days before Election Day, Ma'arouf Zmero, a leading candidate, withdrew his candidacy after gunmen threatened him and fired shots and his car and his wife's car.⁴² The first round saw a 90% voter participation rate with no winner, followed by a runoff between incumbent Mayor Abed El Basat Salameh and Dr. Ahmed Kashkush, a well-known local doctor. In interviews, each of the candidates stated they represent the Hamoula they came from - with Salameh being the largest family in the city, and Kashkush the second largest family, that has joined forces with additional smaller families (including Zmero). In the second round, the incumbent mayor won by a 53% majority.

ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE

In Arab towns and cities in Israel, [high levels of crime, gun violence and lawlessness](#) have [become one of residents' and leadership's top concerns](#). High unemployment, chronic poverty, lack of frameworks for youth, and widespread illegal weapons, along with inadequate law enforcement and police-minority relations fraught with tension and mutual mistrust,⁴³ contribute to this difficult reality.

Within this context, local elections represent some of the most emotionally heightened events in Arab municipalities due to their high social, political and economic stakes. Over the years, campaign events and election outcomes have become triggers for outbursts of violence.

Prior to the October 30 Election Day, there were numerous clashes between supporters of political opponents, with street fights, damage to property and at least two dozen people arrested. In Kalansawe, as mentioned above, one of the candidates withdrew following threats.

⁴¹ "A Change of Image, the Elections in Um Al Fahm—a Hit to the Islamic Movement," *TV Channel 10 News* ([Hebrew](#) with video).

⁴² Mass Rioting, Fire Exchange and Arson, Yigal Mosko, *Mako Online News*, 11.17.18 ([Hebrew with video](#))

⁴³ [The Abraham Fund Initiatives' Position on Police Violence against Arab Citizens of Israel](#), June 2018

Social networks, which played an unprecedented role in this cycle, were also fraught with violent rhetoric, harsh campaigns and, at times, posts and videos that were used to shame and intimidate candidates' families, further exacerbating local tensions. Many Arab activists have voiced their criticism and disappointment that their community was once again resorting to election-related violence. Arab writer, activist and journalist Odeh Bisharat wrote, "You see what is happening in the Arab localities on the eve of elections and you want to weep."⁴⁴

Following the publication of results, [dozens of violent incidents broke out in Arab communities](#), with fist fights, tear gas, cars torched and gunfire. Violence continued to rage even two weeks after elections were over. For example, in regional council Tuba Zangariyye, several masked men fired into the air and threw a grenade at the house of Mayor-elect Wissam Omar. In Kalansawe, the second floor of the town hall was set on fire, and in Kfar Manda, "hundreds of residents rioted ...and police arrested 17 people...Police officers were assaulted using stones, fire-work launchers and explosive devices, two officers were injured."⁴⁵

Efforts to Prevent Violence

In advance of the 2018 local elections, [The Abraham Initiatives](#) launched an extensive campaign for "violence-free local elections" in Arab society. The campaign included a [charter for "violence-free elections"](#) circulated in partnership with the Council of Arab Mayors and signed by local politicians, candidates and leaders, as well as a series of Arabic-language videos ([here with English subtitles](#)) of activists and children speaking against violence and in favor of fair elections.



Women in Tour'an march against election-related violence.
Photo credit: Samah Kassem

Some local leaders also took action against violence. In the village of Yafiya near Nazareth, all the candidates posed together for a photo to show that they stood together for calm and fair elections. In Tour'an, wrote activist Samah Salaime, election-related clashes prompted local women to organize a march, in which women from all families in the village carried signs condemning violence and reminding political opponents that "there is no 'my group and your group' – there is 'our village.'"⁴⁶

After results were announced, a number of local leaders came forward to curtail the violence. A notable example was the incumbent mayor of Sakhnin, Mazen Ghenayem, who lost the election and publicly came to congratulate his rival, Dr. Safuat Abu Riya, in an effort to defuse local tensions.

For the runoffs, to avoid renewed outbursts of violence, most candidates called on supporters to remain restrained and avoid provocations. In an unprecedented development, candidates in Kafr Qana agreed to split the leadership term to avoid additional bloodshed between two dominant families, a move that was congratulated by some as curtailing violence but criticized

⁴⁴ Odeh Bisharat, If this is the situation of Arab villages – go live in the Jewish cities, *Haaretz*, 10.22.18 ([Hebrew](#))

⁴⁵ [Arab Town Engulfed In Further Riots After Local Elections](#), Hagay Hacohen, *Jerusalem Post*, 11.12.18

⁴⁶ Samah Salaime, the Women of Tour'an Went Out to the Streets – Enough with Election [related] Violence, *Local Call*, 10.21.18 ([Hebrew](#))

by others as undermining residents' democratic choice and rewarding violent behavior.⁴⁷ Likewise, in Um Al Fahm, incumbent mayor Khaled Aghbariyaa, who lost the second round of elections, congratulated his rival Dr. Samir Mahameed, leading to a peaceful transition.

MIXED CITIES

Unlike the separation of local elections from national issues in Arab localities, in the mixed cities, where Jewish and Arab citizens live together, "[matters of national identity can arise in local debates, thus providing a granular view of the overall state of affairs between Jews and Arabs](#)."⁴⁸ In a number of mixed cities, some political parties [campaign on platforms of tensions and mistrust](#) between Jewish and Arab citizens, reinforcing and some say legitimizing divisive discourse along ethnic lines. These campaigns were strongly criticized by political opponents, civil society organizations, and Arab leadership, while local party leaders stood by these campaign themes.

In parallel, in some mixed cities joint Jewish-Arab lists for municipal council seats conducted [campaigns focused on equality and shared society](#) as their vision of these mixed cities and made meaningful gains in representation, as detailed below:⁴⁹

- **Tel Aviv-Jaffa:** In Tel Aviv-Jaffa, at the beginning of October, the local Likud party debuted a campaign slogan, "[It's us or them](#)," framing the election as Jewish residents vs. Arab residents of Jaffa, African migrants, and NGOs that oppose Israel's presence in the West Bank. The campaign [led to widespread criticism](#) from other local candidates and incumbent Mayor Huldai, from [activists](#) and from political leaders and was consequently taken down. Two joint Jewish-Arab lists ran in the election: We Are the City, headed by Jewish TV personality Assaf Harel with Arab city council member Amir Badran in the second slot, and the Yaffa List, headed by and comprising mostly Arab candidates but also including a number of Jewish activists.

Results: The Likud list won only one seat in the 31-member city council, the lowest number ever. Yaffa won one seat, while Asaf Harel's joint list won 11% of the votes and will have four seats.

- **Afula:** In this city with a growing Arab population, incumbent Mayor Yitzhak Meron was attacked by his opponent, former Mayor Avi Elkabetz, for publicly stating that Jews and Arabs can live in Afula together. Elkabetz, who had the support of the Jewish Home Party, warned that Meron is "turning Afula into a mixed city," and "colluding with the extreme left."

Results: Elkabetz, who campaigned against Arab integration into the city, won the elections over Meron by a small margin, 48% to 45%.

- **Ramle:** In Ramle, where about 25% of residents are Arab, the Jewish Home local list displayed posters showing a woman wearing a hijab, with Shabbat candles and wine in the background, and the statements: "Tomorrow this Might be Your Daughter," and "Only a strong Jewish Home will keep Ramle Jewish." Numerous [political leaders and civil society organizations criticized the campaign](#) and soon after the posters went up, [most of the billboards were smashed](#), prompting the removal of the signs. Text messages sent to

⁴⁷ Jack Khoury, "The involvement of businessmen and the retreat of clans: The Trump effect came to the elections in the Arab communities" *Haaretz* 11.14.2018 (Hebrew)

⁴⁸ Naomi Zeveloff, [Tel Aviv's One-State Reality](#), Foreign Policy, 10.29.18

⁴⁹ For more details see Task force post: [Upcoming Local Elections in Mixed Cities Bring Out Anti-Arab Sentiment, 10.18.18](#).

voters by a right wing faction called "Jewish Power" on Election Day said that Likud had withdrawn support for incumbent mayor Michael Videl, because he "is selling Ramle to the Arabs...and has signed secret and dangerous agreements with them." Likud denied any connection to the message ([Hebrew](#)).

Results: Likud-supported incumbent mayor Michael Videl won with 61% of the vote. The Jewish Home local list, not previously represented in the council, received two seats. Arab parties won a total of four of the council's 19 seats.

- **Lod:** In the mixed city of Lod, where around 30% of residents are Arab, the Arab list -- a first-time union of all Arab lists in the city -- won an unprecedented six council seats out of 19, including one woman. "There was an atmosphere of joy among Arabs in Lod with this unprecedented victory in the local elections," stated [an article on the Bokra website](#).

DRUZE VILLAGES IN THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

Local elections were announced for the first time in the four Druze villages of the Golan Heights. To date, since Israel formally applied Israeli law to the Golan Heights in 1981, only around 12% of the 23,000 residents of these four villages have requested and received Israeli citizenship status, while most have remained "permanent residents," with their identity tied to Syria's Druze community where many of their families live.

Until this year's elections, these four villages were managed by the Ministry of Interior. In the current municipal elections, all Golan Heights Druze, both citizens and permanent residents, were able to elect their local councils, but only citizens were eligible to present their candidacy for office. These first local elections [raised strong political reactions](#) among the Golan Heights Druze community.

While 14 candidates initially ran—among them Samira Rada-Amran, the first Druze woman to ever present candidacy for council head--most withdrew their candidacy towards Election Day following intense pressure from the community and its religious leaders to boycott the elections. Criticism within the community was voiced against the elections as a "bid by the Jewish state to legitimize its control"⁵⁰ and annul the Druze's identity which "is "Syrian and Arab" in what some perceived as another manifestation of Israel's "occupation of the Golan Heights."⁵¹

In the village of Mas'ada, all candidates withdrew and elections were cancelled, while in Buk'ata, a single candidate remained and was announced as the new council head. In the two remaining villages, Majdel Shams and Ein Kinya, only a small percentage of residents voted between the remaining candidates. In Ein Kinya, a total of 21 residents voted, and Rada-Amran was the only one who voted for herself, following pressure exerted on her friends and family that prevented them from voting.⁵² Activists in the Golan Druze community view these results as a victory of their protest, stating, "These elections will be remembered as the day we fought against the occupation and won."⁵³

⁵⁰ Clothilde Mraffko, [In Israeli-occupied Golan, Druze struggle over first ever vote](#), *AFP*, 11.26.18

⁵¹ Stephen Farrell, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, [Druze On Golan Heights Protest Against Israeli Municipal Election](#), *Reuters*, 10.30.18

⁵² Eli Ashkenazi, [20 voters and a single \(female\) candidate – the small northern village that participated in elections for the first time](#), *Wallah! News*, 10.31.18 (Hebrew).

⁵³ Rami Younis, [Elections in the Golan Will Be Remembered As the Day We Fought Against The Occupation And Won](#), *Siha Mekomit*, 10.31.18 ([Hebrew](#)).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Task Force is deeply grateful to the following individuals and organizations for sharing their knowledge and insights with us: Ola Najami – the Abraham Initiatives; Sawsan Touma – Women Against Violence; Samah Salaime – Arab Women in the Center; Dr. Hana Swaid – Arab Center for Alternative Planning; Marzouq Alhalabi – Regional Thinking Forum; Ayal Kanz and Muhammed Khalaila– INJAZ; Eran Zinger – Reshet Beit Radio; Mohammed Darawshe – Givat Haviva; Jacky Khouri – Radio a Shams and Haaretz; Ron Gerlitz and Rawnak Natour – Sikkuy; Kher Elbaz - AJEEC.