

The “Trust and Reform” Party: New Arab Politics in Israel?

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On April 11, 2016, an important event took place in the sphere of Arab politics in Israel. A new political party, “Trust and Reform” (*al-wafaa’ wal-islah*) was established, led by Shaykh Hussam Abu Leil, an Imam from the community of Ayn Mahel, adjacent to Nazareth. The announcement aroused great public and media interest in the Arab sector, despite taking place between election cycles. Neither general elections for the Knesset nor elections for local councils are on the horizon. What drew attention to the announcement was the identity of the new party’s founders.

The five members of the party’s founding committee are identified with the northern faction of the Islamic Movement (IM) in Israel, which espouses dogmatic ideas about the Israeli establishment and Israeli society and consistently refrained from taking part in Israeli politics. Abu Leil is a senior figure in the IM, and is considered “number three” among its top leadership, after Shaykh Raed Salah and Shaykh Kamal Khatib. Professor Ibrahim Abu Jaber and Dr. Hasan Sun’allah, are senior researchers at the Center for Contemporary Studies (*markaz al-dirasat al-mu’aasirah* – an institute established in 1988, and based in Umm al-Fahm, that is identified with the northern faction of the IM. Mohammed Subhi Jabareen, who will be deputy head of the party, is a lawyer and was a member of the Umm al-Fahm city council from 2004 to 2014; Hiba ‘Awawdy, from Kufr Kana, has a Master’s degree in pedagogy from Hebrew University and is the wife of Dr. Yusuf ‘Awawdy, the head of foreign relations for the northern faction of the IM. The identities of the party’s founders, and the fact that the party was established less than six months after the Israeli government outlawed the northern faction of the IM, have led the media and analysts to raise the question of whether “Trust and Reform” is a new Islamist political party.

The party’s founders emphasized that the party is completely independent, not linked to the northern faction of the IM and not intended to replace it. A detailed

policy agenda has not been officially published, but Jabareen outlined the party's principles and goals on the day the party's establishment was announced. He clarified that the Palestinians in the "interior" [referring to Israel's Arab citizens] are an inseparable part of the Palestinian people (*al-sha'b al-filastini*) and the Arab and Islamic *umma* (nation - *al-umma al-'arabiyah wal-islamiyah*). He added that the party advocates the principles of liberty, justice, and respect for political and religious pluralism in Arab society, and views the al-Aqsa Mosque compound as belonging exclusively to Muslims. The party's goal is to strengthen the identity and national attributes of the Arab public, to emphasize the standing of the Arab language as a fundamental principle of identity, and to strengthen the standing of women in Arab society. Jabareen pointed out that one of the party's founders was a woman and that she was a source of pride for the party.¹

The party's founders stress that the principal reason for its establishment was the feeling that the existing political parties do not provide an appropriate response to the real problems facing the Arab public: "Arab society suffers from many afflictions," explained Abu Leil, adding that "until now, everyone talks about the disease but no one talks about the cure or the solution. First and foremost, negative trends like violence, weapons, and drugs should be uprooted." The party's name suggests the rationale for its establishment. The expression *al-wafaa'* means loyalty to a promise and the obligation to fulfill it. The promise of the party is to work honestly to bring about social change and to reform the Arab public in Israel. The party defines itself as "non-parliamentarian," and therefore at this stage does not intend to participate in elections to Knesset or to the local councils, but rather to focus its activities on Arab youth.

Despite declarations that there is no connection to the IM, one can hardly ignore the connection between the party's founders and their ties to the IM. The party's "bottom-up" strategy, focusing on fundamental social problems and non-participation in electoral politics, are the hallmarks of the northern branch of the IM.

Since its establishment, the party has issued three public declarations, all of which were published on the internet site identified with the Islamic Movement, www.pls48.net. The first declaration (April 19) condemned the decision of the court to sentence Shaykh Raed Salah to nine months in prison.² The second (April 21) included the declaration that the al-Aqsa Mosque is a purely Islamic

¹ Taha Aghbariya, "Advocate Muhammed Subhi Jabareen, Deputy Head of the 'Trust and Reform' Party": The doors of the party are open to every group and sector of our people," www.pls48.net [Arabic], April 12, 2016.

² "'Trust and Reform' Party condemn the decision to jail Shaykh Raed and emphasize: This is political persecution," www.pls48.net [Arabic], April 19, 2016.

heritage site;³ it was only in the party's third communique (April 23) that it outlined its guiding principles, including a condemnation of the wave of violence spreading in Arab society, in light of the murder of two citizens of Umm al-Fahm, who had been engaged in a personal feud.⁴

In October 2015, www.pls48.net published detailed position papers on behalf of Shaykh Salah on four key issues: 1) Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque; 2) education, values, and morals; 3) the political path of the IM; and 4) religion and fatwas.⁵ Salah retained the IM's view that there will be a future Islamic Caliphate in the region, and outlined the three basic principles that guide the Islamic Movement: empowering the Arab public as a whole; broad societal cooperation in fashioning policy, including an openness to criticism; and adopting *wasatiyya* ("the middle path") with respect to religious law.⁶ Salah clarified that the northern faction of the IM is not glued to a dogmatic approach, but attentive to the mainstream Arab public in all of its diversity.

These developments strengthened the assumption that the "Trust and Reform" party was rooted in Salah's thinking. Indeed, some in the Arab public identify the new party as "the Islamic Movement in a civil framework," a "new version of the Islamic Movement that was outlawed."⁷ However, the internal discussion in the northern faction about establishing a political party had in fact began a year earlier, and there was no connection between the establishment of the new party and the IM's ban. Ibrahim Khatib, a former researcher at the Center for Contemporary Studies, explained that the new party "heralds a change in political operations, and especially those based on the Islamic dimension." One of the challenges facing the party will be "to instill the *wasatiyya* in the Islamic discourse as a way to deal with the political differences that exist in our society."⁸ These comments are consistent with Salah's statements in mid-November 2015, just a few days before the northern faction of the IM was outlawed. He admitted that the question of establishing a political party on behalf of the IM was under internal discussion and not yet decided. The establishment of such a party, he stressed, was likely to come at the expense of taking part in elections to the Knesset, which Salah views as totally unacceptable, from both the Islamist and

³ "Blessed al-Aqsa Mosque is a pure Islamic heritage site," www.pls48.net [Arabic], April 21, 2016.

⁴ "We in 'Trust and Reform' condemn the spreading violence in our 'Palestinian interior'," www.pls48.net [Arabic], April 23, 2016.

⁵ See, for example: "The clarification of the path of the Islamic Movement with regard to Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque," www.pls48.net [Arabic], October 2, 2016.

⁶ This doctrine, which was designed in the 1990s and is associated with Egyptian Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, combines adherence to the principles of Islamic religious law with flexibility, according to changing societal conditions.

⁷ Wadi' Awawdy, "An Islamic Movement – in a civil framework?," www.arab48.com [Arabic], April 11, 2016.

⁸ Ibrahim Khatib, "'Trust and Reform': Path of suffering and hope," www.pls48.net [Arabic], April 13, 2016.

Palestinian-national points of view.⁹ Salah's position is similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, and to the Islamic movements in Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia. In these states, the Islamic movements established political parties with a milder discourse than the dogmatic discourse of the movement. However, intellectuals close to the northern faction reject these comparisons, and claim that the new party is not an alternative to the IM, does not operate on its behalf, and is not presenting a challenge to the leadership of Raed Salah. Furthermore, the new party entirely rejects the government's decision to ban the IM.

What is it then, if the new party is not an "Islamic party" and not even a new "Islamic movement"? As'ad Ghanem and Mohanad Mustafa's definition of "Islamic activism" may provide an answer.¹⁰ They argue that "Islamic activism" tries to find a balance between traditional society subjected to the destabilizing influence of modernization on the one hand, and the failure of national movements on the other. Islamic activists want to establish a movement for effective Islamic change in the present while relying on Islamic values of the past. This approach combines dogmatism and flexibility, and adapts itself to the challenges of the external environment at both the local and regional levels.

The Islamic current in Israel is influenced not only by the Palestinian national movement – which has been in a crisis for more than decade – but to a great extent influenced even more by other forces in Arab society, like the "Arab Spring" and its aftermath, which introduced new Islamist movements in Syria and Iraq, such as the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusrah. It is too early to conclusively define the "Trust and Reform" party, which is still in the process of establishing itself. Nevertheless, it can be said that the establishment of this new party expresses the intentions of the IM to reassess its path, particularly in the social and political fields.

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⁹ See: "[Shaykh Raed Salah: Pragmatism calling for a change of principles is treason!](#)," www.pls48.net [Arabic], November 6, 2015.

¹⁰ As'ad Ghanem and Mohanad Mustafa, "Explaining Political Islam: The Transformation of Palestinian Islamic Movements," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41:4 (2014), pp. 335-354.

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