

Bayan بیان ביאן The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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Table of Contents

From the Editors' Desk.....2

Tagrid Ka'adan / Arab Women and the Public Sphere in Israel.....3

Yusri Khaizran / A Whirlpool of Confusion and Cover-ups: The Political
Discourse of Arabs in Israel Five Years into the Syrian Uprising.....7

From the Editors' Desk

This issue of *Bayan* includes two in-depth essays on social and political developments that Israel's Arab society has undergone in recent years. Tagrid Ka'adan discusses the status of Arab women in the public sphere in Israel as reflected in the recent Knesset elections (March 2015) and the local authority elections of October 2013. Meanwhile, Yusri Khaizran analyzes the repercussions on the Arab public in Israel of the five year uprising in Syria.

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The Editors

Tagrid Ka'adan* / Arab Women and the Public Sphere in Israel

Over the last three years, Arab society in Israel has undergone transformative changes in different areas — the family, the economy, education, and culture. A growing middle class has established itself in Arab society, characterized by declining birth rates, women's employment outside the home, and increased educational attainment. In Israeli society, Palestinian-Israeli women are part of a national minority, whose civil status is afflicted by inequality in numerous areas of life, including the economy, employment, politics, and education. In addition, these women are subject to structural gender inequality that stems from the patriarchal order that characterizes parts of Israeli society in general and Palestinian-Arab society in Israel in particular. Under such adverse conditions, Arab women have little chance of making inroads into Israeli government institutions, or of being elected for public office or leading the voting public. Has Arab society sufficiently matured to embrace equal political participation of women? What barriers impede Arab women's integration into the fabric of Israeli politics?

Before the recent elections, some of the marked obstacles that seemed to hamper Arabs' integration into national politics were the Arab MKs inability to influence parliamentary work, and the opposition of the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement to any Arab involvement in the Knesset — referring to Arab men and, even more strongly to Arab women (Haidar, 2007). However, something happened in the 20th Knesset elections: The Joint Arab List made history and achieved significant electoral success as a result of the high voter turnout in the Arab sector.¹ The Joint List is a union of several Arab parties that had typically run separately in previous elections and joined forces in 2014 as a response to the decision to raise the electoral threshold. The Joint List won 13 seats and for the first time in history placed two Arab women in the Knesset — Hanin Zoabi of Balad (this is not her first term as an MK) and Aida Touma Suleiman of Hadash.

In a personal interview with Aida Touma-Suleiman, I met a woman whose personality radiated charisma and impartiality. She discussed the problems she faced as an Arab woman seeking a place for herself in Arab society, in the absence of gender equality. MK Touma-Suleiman, 51, was born in Nazareth, lives in Acre, and heads the Knesset Women's Status Committee, a committee whose is concerned not only with the status of Arab women, but also with the status of all women in Israel. She was selected unanimously for this position, which has never previously been filled by an Arab MK (Cohen, 2015). Touma-Suleiman comes from a poor Orthodox Christian family of nine, and has considered herself a Communist since the age of 21. She said that she first became conscious of discrimination against women when she was a student at Haifa University, as the first member of her family to matriculate to a post-secondary education. She submitted her candidacy for head of the Arab Student List but discovered that, behind her back, the organization had determined that it would not be headed by a woman (Eldar, 2015). Touma-Suleiman has recorded historical achievements throughout her political career: she was the first woman to serve on the Supreme Follow-Up Committee of the Arab Public in Israel; she founded "Women Against Violence," a feminist Arab non-profit organization in which she serves as

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¹ Voter turnout reached 70% in some places.

managing director; and she was editor of the Arab daily *Al-Ittihad*, which advocates absolute freedom of expression and is managed along communist principles. Her role model is former MK Tamar Guzhansky, who represented Hadash for many years in the Knesset. Touma-Suleiman explains that her public activism is her proactive contribution to a better and more equal world for her two daughters (Eldar, 2015). Gila Gamliel, the minister in charge of social equality, applauded Touma-Suleiman, whom she described as have an extremely comprehensive viewpoint and an “open mind” about issues related to women in general, with special emphasis on Arab women (Darom, 2015). Orna Cohen (2015) believes that Touma-Suleiman’s relatively high slot on the Joint List (fifth place), her relatively young age, her extensive experience in diverse public action, and the fact of her being a woman and a “new face” in the Knesset are some of the elements that account for the Joint List’s appeal for many female and male Arab voters. Cohen’s hypothesis clearly indicates the progress that women have made in assuming public positions in Arab society and the accompanying systemic changes in perceptions.

Unlike the Arab public’s sometimes ambivalent attitude toward national politics, local government is considered to be extremely important. Yousef Jabareen and Muhannad Mustafa both state that the significance of local governments for Palestinian-Arab society in Israel stems from the fact that they are the primary instrument of self-management available to the Palestinian-Arab population in Israel, and a major source of new leadership. Local governments appear to be a more convenient arena of activities for Arab women than the Knesset, both because their active participation in local politics is considered legitimate, and because of the relative effectiveness of political activism in this arena. Notably, local governments are not only a source of influence for women, but also a potential source of employment for these women who encounter difficulties finding suitable employment. Salim Brik states that one of the major challenges facing local governments in Arab society is the clan-based social structure, which results in the appointment of candidates according to kinship ties rather than their potential to promote local interests. The lack of secrecy in elections in many towns and villages also undermines the election of the most qualified candidates. All these factors impede women’s entry into politics, who continue to respect the very clan-based and patriarchal elements that exclude them (Brik, 2013). Another obstacle for women is economic: an election campaign requires financial resources that are often unavailable to women. For men in the Arab sector, national or local politics is a profession and a source of income, while women fill public positions as volunteers. Today, with the exception of the precedent of Violette Khouri of Kafr Yassif in 1974, no Arab woman has yet headed a local government in Israel and only a handful of women have served as local council members.

These circumstances constituted the backdrop to the revived hope that the 2013 local government elections would have been a turning point. Injaz, the Professional Center for Promoting Local Arab Governments, a non-profit that has been operating since 2008, provides financial and organizational consultations to the Arab local governments. The organization analyzed the patterns of Arab political participation in Israel in the 2013 local government elections, and showed that these elections reflected greater involvement of young adults and women, both as candidates and as partners in the public debate preceding the elections. Turnout was especially high and many of the elected heads of local governments were elected for the first time. Also reflecting this revival was a record number of women candidates running for positions on local government councils (Injaz, 2013). For the first time, 165 Arab women from all sects — Muslims, Christians, and Druze — appeared on the electoral lists in 44 local Arab governments. Two lists were headed by female candidates — in Sakhnin

and Kafr Qassem. Nineteen of the women were slotted in second place in their lists, 24 were in the third place, 23 in the fourth place, and 14 in the fifth place. Of all Arab women candidates, 34 live in mixed cities. According to a summary by Injaz, success was limited despite the fact that young people and women rallied to the call. Ultimately, only 6 women were elected as members of local councils, and even the high turnout was largely translated into the appointment of clan-affiliated candidates. This outcome may be explained by the political parties' increasing weakness in the local sphere, the absence organized [political] activities for young people, and the strong impact of tradition that continues to dominate Arab society. The existing order in Arab local governments in Israel, which excludes women almost entirely, remains in place.

The obstacles blocking Arab women's entry into local and national politics encouraged several of them to seek employment in civil society organizations, even though these are also mainly run by men. 43 year old Ghaida Rinawi-Zoabi exemplifies this trend. A Muslim, she was born in Nazareth and now lives in Nazareth Ilit. Today, she is the general director of Injaz, the organization mentioned previously. Rinawi-Zoabi entered this field after she became exasperated by the inferior municipal services in Nazareth. Critical of Israel's Arab citizens, she admonishes them for their self-neglect and expresses her envy of the Jews who, as she says, "know how to deal with problems." She is educated, opinionated, energetic, and is not hesitant about expressing her criticism of both Jews and Arabs. With her impressive skills, she is involved in action in the field designed to improve the local governments in those areas where assistance is possible, notwithstanding the budgetary discrimination and other issues that these local governments cope with (Arlozorov, 2010). Both women, Touma-Suleiman and Rinawi-Zoabi, complement each other in the local and national political arenas, and each does ground-breaking work in her field.

However, these two examples are exceptions rather than the rule. The road to politics and public activism is still largely blocked for Arab women, although there is some indication of a slow change in their status and in the legitimacy of their participation in the political sphere. Arab society in Israel clearly places obstacles in the path of women who seek involvement in public activity, and Israeli society does little to promote Arab participation in national politics in general.

Approximately one year ago, al-Qasemi College in Baqa al-Gharbiyya held the first course of its kind to train Arab women for effective political activism. The course was designed to teach participants the tools, knowledge, and social networking skills necessary to create a change. Attitudes have not yet changed sufficiently, however, and it will take time for changes of perception to trickle down to all levels of Arab society in Israel. The State of Israel can help women compete for slots in political lists by offering solutions that might promote this change, such as proper education in the Arab sector, but ultimately, if all else fails, the only option might be to reserve seats for Arab women in local governments and the Knesset through legislation and create a fait accompli.

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Yusri Khaizran* / A Whirlpool of Confusion and Cover-ups: The Political Discourse of Arabs in Israel Five Years into the Syrian Uprising

The upheavals and popular uprisings, erroneously and misleadingly called the “Arab Spring,” sparked the enthusiasm of the intellectual and political Arab elite in Israel — at least initially — even though the Palestinian cause and the struggle against Israel were markedly absent from the agendas of these revolutions. This enthusiasm stemmed mainly from the historical fact that Arab nations took a stand *en masse* against all the ideologies that had promised revolutionary change, reforms, equality, and economic prosperity, and instead instated repressive, unscrupulous totalitarian regimes that created a hybrid model of government combining political-ideological totalitarianism and institutionalized corruption. In some respects, these popular uprisings amplified the discourse of civic equality among the Arab minority in Israel, but at the same time, they heightened their confusion and their disappointment with the Arab sphere, especially after 2012.

The popular revolutions that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt and led to the fall of two corrupt, pro-West, dictatorships, triggered great expectations among the Arab public in Israel. This was not only because the events were considered a historical opportunity to promote democratization and liberalization in the Arab world, but also because the revolutions led to the collapse of pro-West governments that perpetuated the Arabs’ weakness vis a vis Israel. After all, masses of Arab nations finally broke the barrier of fear and helplessness that had constrained them for decades. Through an authentic popular protest movement, they managed to topple dictatorships and disprove pervasive assumptions about Arab submissiveness. As the revolutionary wave spilled over to other countries, these hopes and expectations gradually diminished as initial reservations regarding the Arab Spring appeared following the revolution in Libya, NATO’s intervention in the war against Gaddafi’s regime, and the brutal, horrific extermination of the Libyan tyrant.²

It was, however, the revolution in Syria that divided Arab society in Israel in an unprecedented manner. The rift grew wider as the revolution there sank deeper into violence and increasingly brutal civil war. This revealed the fragility, not only of the Arab political fabric in Syria, but also of the Arab social fabric in the entire region that extended beyond Syrian borders. The militarization of the Syrian revolution and the civil war generated a genuine sense of confusion among the Arab public in Israel, and divided it into two dichotomous camps: one camp identified with the Syrian regime and viewed the revolution as a plot to overthrow the last pluralistic Arab country remaining in the Arab world and eliminate the last remaining government that supports a struggle against Israel, and the other camp, which viewed Assad’s regime as a sectarian totalitarian regime that massacres its own citizens.

It would be incorrect to argue that the Arab society in Israel split along religious, sectarian, or political lines, because opinions on the Syrian crisis cut through the length and breadth of the Arab public in general. With this, the Druze and Christians

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² Interview with Ghaida Rinawi-Zoabi, *al-Masdar*, 9 September. 2013. Also see Ghaida Rinawi-Zoabi, “The Arab Spring and the Palestinians in the State of Israel,” *Mitvim* (September 2013), pp. 2-3.

have shown a tendency to support Assad's regime or express grave concerns about the Islamist alternatives, especially since the rise of the Jihadist organizations in Syria in 2013, most prominently Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. The growth of the Jihadist organizations sharpened the already existing divide and confusion in the Arab public in Israel, and triggered new directions in its political discourse, including attempts to adopt models that draw parallels between these organizations and with Israel or with the Syrian regime. Raja Za'atra, Hadash spokesperson in the Haifa region, argues that "ISIS found a role model for itself in the Zionist crimes of the war of 1948," so that "all acts of murder, slaughter, rape, and theft by the ISIS are repetitions of the Zionist crimes of seventy years ago."³ MK Hanin Zoabi (Balad) made a similar comparison between Israeli Air Force pilots and ISIS, when she stated, "ISIS and the IDF are armies of killers who have no red lines."⁴ In an interview with Palestinian Television, Former MK Muhammad Barakeh, Chairperson of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee of the Arab public in Israel, stated that "the government of Israel is the organization that is most similar to ISIS," and that "it has a vested interest in this phenomenon."⁵ Moreover, the sudden rise of these two organizations — ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra — and their horrific acts of killing revived the conspiracy discourse that ties these organizations to western interests or even to Assad's own regime, which supposedly cultivated them to demonstrate that all available alternatives are worse than his own rule. In a speech at the Al-Aqsa Convention of the Islamic Movement in Umm al-Fahm, in September 2014, Muhammad Zaydan, former chairperson of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee, stated, "The Israeli General Security Service [Shabak] and the USA are the ones who invented ISIS in order to achieve a new division of the Arab world and the region, to serve their interests."⁶

Ostensibly, the political leadership of Arab society in Israel concurred in condemning the brutality and horrific acts of ISIS, but occasionally these condemnations were public lip service demanded by the pluralistic character of the Arab public in Israel, and demanded by the anti-establishment discourse that hones in on the contradiction between Israeli democracy and the prejudice to the national and civil rights of its Arab minority. For example, Sheikh Kamel Khatib, Deputy Head of the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement, saw no problem in declaring that Jerusalem is designated to be not only the capital of the state of Palestine but also the capital of the righteous Islamic Caliphate. This declaration was perceived by many as an expression of support for ISIS's declaration on the establishment of a Caliphate.⁷

On the other hand, the official spokespersons of the Islamic Movement denounced ISIS's actions, especially the killing of Muslims, and called members of the Movement to renounce their tendency toward *takfir* (declaring rivals to be infidels) — but at the same time condemned the "coalition of evil" led by the US against the Jihadist organizations, which was described as a "Crusader-Zionist-heterodox-reactionary [coalition]." The statement did not condemn the horrific acts perpetrated against Muslim and non-Muslim minorities such as the Yazidis and the Christians.⁸ Moreover, a close reading of the statement shows that, more than an explicit denunciation, it instead expressed guarded reservations. Indeed, the emergence of

³ See Raja Za'atra, *al-Ittihad*, 13 March, 2015.

⁴ Yehonatan Liss, "MK Zoabi: IDF pilots are no less terrorists than ISIS head-choppers", *Haaretz*, 19 October 2014.

⁵ Muhammad Barakeh (possibly stated in September 2014) is quoted in:

<http://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/284640>

⁶ Muhammad Zaydan is quoted in Hasan Sha'alan, "Convention of the Islamic Movement, Israel supports ISIS." 12 September 2014. <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4570347,00.html>

⁷ See Sheikh Kamel Khatib's declaration in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BMRR063cqc>.

⁸ <http://www.arab48.com>, 7 November 2014

ISIS and the military might that it amassed in its campaign against the Syrian and Iraqi armies undeniably encouraged Islamist hopes for a powerful Islamist state in the region.

The discourse in Arab society in Israel surrounding the war in Syria and the emergence of the jihadist organizations clearly reflects confusion, embarrassment, and some degree of defensiveness in view of the collapse of the Arab social fabric in the Syrian expanse (of which Israel was once considered a part), and the moral deterioration of the organizations that operate in the name of Islam but yet recall the darkest regimes in the history of humankind. Arab society in Israel pinned high hopes on the popular revolutions and rebellions that materialized in the Arab world, but it became entangled in unprecedented confusion, coupled with growing alienation from Israel, on the one hand, and deep disappointment with their natural environment on the other. Balad Chairperson Jamal Zahalka may have offered a faithful description of this confusion in his speech in which he describes the establishment of the Joint List as an exceptional, commendable action in the regional Arab sphere. He stated, “We are going through a rough period. Look at what is happening around us: The Arab world is being destroyed, is falling apart, is fighting against itself and killing itself in Yemen, in Syria, everywhere, in Libya, and in the Palestinian arena, too; a government in Gaza and a government in the West Bank... We have swum against the current, we accomplished something, we did not ride this wave; so, there is a wave of unity and we united, but there is [also] a wave of fragmentation and we united against this wave of fragmentation.”⁹

⁹ See speech of Jamal Zahalka at the election convention in Umm el-Fahm.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhtFUwNRJ-w>