

Arab Politics in Israel and the 19th Knesset Elections

Arik Rudnitzky

At 8 PM on January 22, 2013, two hours before Israel's election-day polls were to close, the Arabic-language websites typically visited by Arab internet surfers in Israel headlined a distress call: "Arab Parties in Danger!" At that time, there were reports of an especially low voter turnout, approximately 30%, among Israel's Arab citizens. The specter of an election boycott in the Arab sector, which had hung ominously over the heads of the three main Arab political parties in the previous two months, seemed to have become a tangible reality. An especially low turnout in the Arab sector, coupled with a relatively high turnout in the Jewish sector, in which voters vote almost exclusively for Jewish (and mostly Zionist) parties, was likely to result in a significant decline in the number of seats held by Arab parties in the next Knesset (Israel's parliament) and perhaps even prevent one of them from passing the electoral threshold and thus shut it out entirely.¹ To prevent such an outcome, Arab Knesset members and party activists joined forces across party lines in an unprecedented display of cooperation, jointly encouraging Arab voters to go to the polling stations and vote for one of the Arab parties.

Their efforts bore fruit. The next morning it became clear that the Arab sector turnout had reached 56.5%, a three-point increase from the 2009 elections. All in all, the Arab

¹ Israel operates an election system of proportional representation by party list. A party must receive at least 2% of the valid votes to obtain representation in the Knesset.

parties retained their level of representation in the Knesset and, in fact, nearly increased it. *Ra'am-Ta'al-Mada'*, a united Arab list representing the national-Islamist stream in Arab politics—comprising the parliamentary faction of the Islamic Movement and several small Arab nationalist parties—remained the largest Arab party, having won 138,362 votes, equivalent to four seats in the Knesset (out of a total of 120), with the fifth seat only barely eluding its grasp. *Hadash* (The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), whose main component is the Israeli Communist Party, and which advocates Arab-Jewish cooperation to promote the equal civic and national status of Arab citizens in Israel, retained its four seats. *Balad* (The National Democratic Alliance), which represents the secular-Palestinian Arab nationalist stream and aspires to redefine Israel as a “state of all its citizens” instead of a “Jewish and democratic state,” retained its three seats, with 96,926 votes. *Da'am* (the Workers' Party), another small Arab-Jewish party, attracted a mere 3,550 votes, thus failing to pass the election threshold.

Even without the threat of a boycott, the predominantly Arab political parties faced difficult electoral odds. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel's Arab population of 1.63 million accounts for 20.6% of the country's population. However, eligible Arab voters constitute only 15%, or 848,500 of a total of 5,656,705 eligible voters. This is because adults aged 18 and older, who are eligible to vote, constitute a smaller share of the Arab population than this age group in the Jewish population. Due to its high fertility and birth rates, the Arab population is younger than the country's Jewish majority. Since the Arab parties rely primarily on Arab voters, this statistic in itself helps explain why these parties have continuously struggled to maintain their standing.

Were this not enough, Arab participation in Israeli politics has demonstrated a steady drop for over a decade. Turnout in the Arab sector declined from 77.0% in the 1996 elections to 53.4% in 2009. Admittedly, the declining voter turnout is not unique to the Arab sector, but typical of Israel's entire population, and is the result, primarily, of growing political indifference: nationwide turnout dropped from 79.3% in the 1996 elections to 64.9% in 2009, although it rose slightly in the recent elections to 67.8%.

Among the Arab public, declining participation in Knesset elections can be traced to several causes. One, the elections are boycotted for ideological reasons: specifically, in some Arab circles, it is inconceivable for Arab citizens, the remnants of the Palestinian population that survived the hardships of the 1948 war, to vote in the elections for the Knesset, the supreme representative institution of the self-defined nation state of the Jewish people that was established in 1948. This group of boycotters mainly identify either with the “Sons of the Village” Movement, a small radical Arab nationalist movement that openly calls for boycotting elections, or with the non-parliamentary faction of the Islamic Movement, which is officially content to express reservations on electoral participation (although several of its senior members do openly call for an election boycott). The second reason for non-participation in the Knesset elections is political indifference, which, as noted above, affects Israeli society as a whole.

The third, and apparently the main, reason for declining electoral participation is that Arab citizens mistrust Israeli politics, and have lost hope of generating a positive change in their condition through the Knesset. The watershed event for the Arab public was the yawning rift that opened up between it and state institutions in the wake of the October 2000 events, when riots flared up in most Arab localities in the Galilee and central regions of Israel as the Second Intifada broke out in the Palestinian Territories. The police’s harsh response to Israeli Arab demonstrations and riots, which ended with the deaths of 13 young Arabs, proved to many among the Arab public that state authorities do not consider them to be legitimate citizens equal to their Jewish counterparts, and that Arabs remain on the margins of Israeli society and politics. Furthermore, Arab citizens had had high hopes for the peace process involving Israel and the Palestinians: they anticipated that progress toward peace would promote equality of Arabs and Jews in Israel and would lead to improvements in the deplorable social and economic conditions of the Arab population, which suffers from much higher rates of poverty and unemployment than does the Jewish population. These hopes were dashed by the outbreak of the Second Intifada in late September 2000, which marked the collapse of the peace process, and by the ongoing stalemate in peace negotiations ever since, thus further deepening the degree of Arab alienation.

In recent years, such mistrust has been directed not only toward the Knesset and other state agencies; it has also (and perhaps primarily) been directed toward the Arab parties themselves. The Arab population has become increasingly disappointed with the Arab parties' failure to generate significant change in the conditions of the Arab population through parliamentary action. Furthermore, many had hoped that the Arab parties would learn from the events of the "Arab Spring" across the region and realize the potential of uniting forces for a common cause. There were hopes that Arab parties would ultimately rise above their internal disputes and would, for the first time, run in a joint Arab list for the Knesset elections. It was believed that a united list would have conveyed a message of unity and renewal to the Arab public and encouraged it to vote on Election Day. Some commentators speculated that through a united list, the Arab parties might have realized the full electoral potential of the Arab vote and increased Arab representation in the Knesset to 15 or 16 seats.

Many among the Arab public had also hoped to see new faces in Arab parliamentary politics. They were unable to understand how Arab party leaders, who have vigorously supported democratic processes in Arab states and applauded the fall of the dictatorial regimes, failed to implement those same democratic principles in their own parties, and placed few if any new candidates in realistic slots on their lists for the upcoming Knesset elections. Wadea' 'Awawdy, a journalist and publicist, wrote that "These elections, more than previous election campaigns, are taking place under the shadow of a clear contradiction: the Arab parties are growing old, and the target audience is growing younger, smarter, and hungrier for change. This is reflected in the disrupted connection between the people and its Knesset representatives. Young Arab adults [...] have despaired of their attempts to create change through the Knesset using conventional means."² The well-known journalist and publicist Zuheir Andreus argued, "An increasing number of Arab citizens have become completely convinced that the so-called 'Arab Spring' has had no impact on the Arab parties until now. [...] We demand democracy in Syria, but do not adopt it for ourselves?"³

² Wadea' 'Awawdy, "Arab Parties in Crisis," *Hadith al-Nas*, November 2, 2012.

³ Zuheir Andreus, "Knesset Elections: Boycott, Participation, or International Monitoring," *Maa' al-Hadath*, November 2, 2012.

While the three main Arab parties failed to form a joint Arab list, and instead ran three separate lists in the elections, they were fully aware of the risks involved, and thus devoted their election campaigns almost exclusively to efforts to increase Arab turnout. All three parties decided to downplay their long-standing rivalries and take an active stand against the calls for an election boycott and against the general indifference towards national politics among the public.

Ultimately, the Arab parties were “rescued” by Arab voters who responded to the last-minute call to vote. According to figures published by the Central Election Committee, not only did the vast majority of Arab voters vote for one of the three major Arab parties—who jointly won 77% of the valid votes cast in Arab localities—but in comparison to national voting patterns, Arab voters wasted few votes on lists that failed to pass the electoral threshold. A mere 1.6% of all valid votes in Arab localities were wasted on lists that failed to pass the electoral threshold, compared to the overall figure of 7.1%. Therefore, in the final calculation in which the number of valid votes was divided into seats, the votes given to Arab parties had relatively greater weight.

This does not mean that the Arab parties can rest on their laurels. In order to maintain their standing, let alone increase it, they must continue to rebuild the Arab public’s faith in parliamentary politics while working, albeit against all odds, in a Knesset dominated by right-wing Jewish parties that systematically promote legislation emphasizing Israel’s Jewish-Zionist nature. Is there room for Arab politics in a Jewish nation-state? As recent elections have proven, Arab politics in Israel have not been consigned to oblivion. Arab Knesset members may now be more motivated to play an important role in parliamentary politics, yet the question arises whether Arab politics can be effective in the current Knesset that seeks to emphasize the Jewish character of the state of Israel. Only time will tell.

[Arik Rudnitzky](#) serves as Project Manager of Tel Aviv University's Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

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