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## THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT IN ISRAEL: THE INTERNAL DEBATE OVER REPRESENTATION IN THE KNESSET

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The Islamic Movement in Israel is different from other fundamentalist movements in the region. Whereas the other Islamist groups function within predominantly Muslim states, in the Israeli case, a Muslim minority is functioning in a non-Muslim state with a Jewish majority.

From its inception, the Islamic Movement was torn between three conflicting foci of identity: Islam, which was interpreted in terms of strict adherence to the revivalist-fundamentalist doctrine; Palestine, which meant loyalty to the Palestinian nationalist cause; and Israel, which implied acting within the confines of Israeli law.

Over the years, the movement attempted to walk a tightrope, seeking a workable balance between these conflicting loyalties. This dilemma accounts for the often ambiguous definitions of attitudes and positions on such sensitive issues as the Islamic state, Palestinian state, the Israeli-Jewish state, the Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas, the armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine and participation in Knesset elections.

From the late 1980s to the present, the Islamic Movement

has been deeply divided over the question of whether or not to seek representation in the Israeli parliament. Both supporters and opponents have used practical as well as doctrinal arguments to substantiate their cause. The practical approach relates to the current political situation, while doctrinal argumentation relies on precedents from the past. Both factions have employed the Shari'a (Islamic law), the Sunna (the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), Islamic precedent and the fatwa (religious opinion), to prove their case.

### The Supporters

A group of Islamists generally identified with Islamic leaders from the southern Triangle area, but with representatives of the north as well, has endorsed a pragmatic, flexible approach to the self-definition of the Islamic Movement within the Israeli milieu. The group includes Shaykh 'Abdallah Nimr Darwish, considered to be the leader of the Islamic Movement in Israel; Shaykh Ibrahim Sarsur, head of the Kafr Qasim Local Council; Shaykh Kamal Rayan, head of the Kafr Bara Local Council; and Shaykh Tawfiq Khatib, head of the Local Council of Jaljulia.

They support the idea of standing for elections either



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either independently or within the framework of a unified Arab bloc or list. An activist splinter group headed by Shaykh 'Atif Khatib of Kafr Kana in the Galilee separated from this group in 1995, set up its own political party - the Arab Islamic Bloc, and announced that it will run for the forthcoming Knesset elections in June 1996. [In early May 1996 the Arab Islamic Bloc had rejoined the mainstream Islamic Movement and was included in the Unified Arab List headed by an Islamic Movement representative (see below).]

Advocates of the viewpoint calling for participation in the Knesset cite a series of practical reasons for pursuing this line. Inasmuch as voting is a civil right, they argue, and so long as the exercise of this right does not harm Islamic belief, there is no reason not to apply it positively. Participation in parliament is permitted, they claim, so long as the Muslim minority is not deprived of the rights to worship and to adhere to its religious beliefs.

Politically, they point out, the Arabs ought to have recognized and fair representation in parliament. Arab political power should not be wasted or paralyzed - it can be influential, and the Islamic Movement should encourage this orientation.

For the pragmatists, participation in the Knesset implies, at least on the declarative level, (a) accepting Israel's existence and legitimacy as a Jewish state, and (b) accepting the Muslim community's status in Israel as a minority. Spokesmen for this trend have repeatedly declared that the Islamic Movement acknowledges the legitimacy of the Knesset and seeks to promote an Islamic way of life by democratic means only.

Various means have been employed by the pragmatists in order to reconcile the practical and political logic behind the advocacy of Knesset representation with Islamic perceptions.

One way has been to obtain a *fatwa*, as did Shaykh 'Atif Khatib in an effort to establish credibility and legitimize his move. The *fatwa* which he was reportedly

granted came from Shaykh Taha al-Barakati, director of religious guidance and preaching at the Haram al-Sharif Mosque in Mecca, who maintained that Muslims are allowed to participate in the Knesset elections, so long as they vote for a Muslim candidate.

Another means used by the pragmatists had been reliance on the precedent set by other Islamic movements that have opted for participation in existing secular and constitutional parliaments. These include the Jordanian experience and the experience of the Islamic Raza Party in Turkey. Of even greater relevance to the Israeli case are the Islamists in Sweden who in 1995 formed an alliance with the Swedish Socialist Party as a first step toward entering the parliamentary race.

The pragmatists also relied on historical precedent, namely that of Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, who was among those ordered by the Prophet in 616 to emigrate from Mecca to Abyssinia in light of harassment by the Prophet's enemies within their tribe, the Quraysh. Ja'far remained in Abyssinia for twelve years, historic proof for contemporary Islamists in Israel, that a Muslim minority can live peacefully in a non-Muslim state under two conditions: that the minority obey the prevailing law of the land, and that the ruler (the Negus of Abyssinia in Ja'far's time, and the Israeli government presently), ensure the right of the minority to practice its religion.

### The Opponents

The opposition is identified with radical Islamist leaders from Kafr Kana in the north and from the town of Umm al-Fahm in the northern triangle. Central figures in this camp are Shaykh Kamal Khatib (Kafr Kana), Shaykh Ra'id Salah and Shaykh Hashim 'Abd al-Rahman (both from Umm al-Fahm).

The radical Islamists have utilized the same methods as their opponents in attempting to legitimize their opposition to Knesset participation. Arguing on the pragmatic level, they claim that Knesset representation is a waste of energy. The Knesset is compared to a cemetery in which the Arab cause will be buried at

the expense of the interests of the Jewish majority. "Even if we win seven Knesset seats," one of the opposition leaders has argued, "we would be unable to serve the people, because the Jewish parties would unite in a broad coalition against us."

The radicals believe that the Islamists would be much better off restricting their activity to the municipal level as has been the case until now. By confining themselves to building up support in the towns and villages, the Islamists need not daily confront the distressing reality of Jewish-Israeli symbols and a secular constitutional system so alien to their precepts. In their own localities, by contrast, they operate within a purely Arab, and in most cases Muslim, environment. They are able to function independently and exert direct control over both human and financial resources. Perhaps above all, the municipal avenue has largely proved to be a success story.

Opponents of parliamentary representation also reject the idea ideologically, based on irreconcilability with Islamic concepts. In Shaykh Ra'id's words: "The Knesset represents a form of legislation which stands in contradiction to what Allah ordered and bequeathed to us." According to this thinking, the Qur'an, which is the source of divine legislation, constitutes the sole permissible constitution and cannot be replaced by any secular legislative system, let alone the Jewish-Zionist one. Furthermore, participation in the Knesset implies pledging allegiance to the State of Israel and its Jewish symbols, the Star of David, the blue and white flag and the Jewish national anthem, "Hatikva" - acts that are doctrinally unacceptable.

The radicals, then have the dual difficulty of reconciling their Shar'i, traditional Islamic outlook to (a) the Jewish-Zionist nature of Israel, and (b) the modern, alien concepts of constitutionalism, parliamentarism and Western democracy.

Some radicals further argue that the Shari'a specifically prohibits a Muslim minority ruled by a non-Muslims majority to take part in the procedures of governmental elections. If such participation were forced on them

Muslims must perform a *Hijra* (emigrate), they maintain. *Hijra*, as interpreted by these Islamists, means restricting activity to the municipal sphere and avoiding parliament. The hardliners also resort to the *fatwa*. Two such opinions were issued upon the request of the more radical Islamists in Israel in May 1995, one by Shaykh Muhammad Abu Faris (a Jordanian Islamist) and the other by Shaykh Yusuf al-Qirdawi (an Egyptian religious leader). Segments from the latter include:

Israel in Shar'i Islamic outlook is an alien entity in the region, an entity which imposed itself on the region through the force of iron and fire, through bloodshed and by emptying the land of its people through means of terror.

[The result was that] an alien state opposed to the goals of the Umma [Islamic nation] ... was implanted in Dar al-Islam [the realm of Islam].

The Shar'i position toward the Zionist entity is [based on its] total rejection, continuous resistance and constant jihad

The correct stance, from the Shar'i point of view, makes it obligatory to disapprove of entry into the Zionist enemy's parliament, because [such a step] would inspire a potential recognition of their [the Jews'] right to exist or remain on the usurped land and this is what we should consistently, and emphatically deny.

### The Relative Success of the Two Camps

A relevant question at this stage is which of the two camps- supporters or opponents - has proved more influential. This may be determined relatively easily by examining the position taken by the Islamic Movement in the last three Knesset elections - in 1988, 1992 and currently in 1996. Ultimately, in all three instances (the recent unification effort notwithstanding), the decision made after heated debate, was to avoid the elections.

The issue first surfaced in 1988 when, after internal deliberations, the movement decided not to enter the elections independently, although it took a neutral position on the issue advocating neither abstention nor participation. A similar compromise was reached in 1992 whereby the movement itself did not enter candidates in the elections, yet it did not discourage followers from voting. A similar stance was adopted

in 1995 regarding the 1996 election, when the movement's General Congress was allowed to hold a vote to decide between several options. The results were as follows: 37% opted for boycotting the elections (representing the hardliners); 30% called for active Islamic participation either independently or within an Islamic list (representing the pragmatists); and 33% thought that members of the movement should be given the freedom of choice as to whether to vote or not (the "floating vote"). The third option, which implied encouragement to vote, was endorsed, as a compromise, but in actuality the majority - 70% (the hardliners plus the floating vote) - were opposed to representation.

The situation changed dramatically on 20 March 1996 when the movement's Shura Council (consultative council) decided to reexamine the 1995 decision to stay out of the parliamentary race. A week later, the movement's General Congress held a new vote which endorsed the participation of the movement in the Knesset elections "within the framework of a unified Arab party list headed by an Islamic Movement candidate" by the close margin of 47 for, 45 against. Shortly thereafter, representatives of the movement began intensive negotiations with various political groupings in an attempt to set up a unified Arab list [such a list was actually formed in early April 1996, representing the coalition between the Islamic Movement and the Arab Democratic Party].

What caused this turnabout? The initiative to reverse the previous decision came from the group of Islamic leaders associated with Shaykh Darwish. According to a statement published by the Shura Council, the motivation for this effort was the desire to unite the scattered Arab vote, put an end to the state of fragmentation in the Arab community in Israel, and prevent a situation in which, as a result of increased factionalism, Arab representation in the Knesset would be weakened or even eliminated. Darwish had been making strenuous efforts to consolidate the Arab vote and become the unifying force behind the scenes since the late 1980s but had failed both because of internal opposition in the Islamic Movement and the absence of the proper political conditions for the redrawing of the Arab

political map. Apparently, those conditions in Darwish's view, were created in early 1996 when the Arab community approached the 1996 parliamentary race in an unprecedentedly fragmented situation. No less than six parties, four of them new, were competing in a pool of some 150,000 votes. With the threshold set at approximately 45,000 votes, the results could be catastrophic from the Arab point of view, as in theory none of the six competing forces might pass the threshold. Many thousands of votes could be wasted.

At this junction, the Islamic pragmatists, convinced that a reassessment was needed, intervened and exploited the state of crisis in an attempt to emerge as a cohesive political bond.

The subsequent reversal of the General Congress decision caused an immediate crisis within the movement. The hardliners promptly accused the pragmatists of succumbing to government pressure. Earlier in March, the government had closed down and sealed one of the movement's central institutions, the Islamic Rescue Fund office in Nazareth, on suspicion that it was supplying financial aid to Hamas activists in the occupied territories, and had arrested Dr. Sulayman Ighbariyya, director of the fund and deputy mayor of Umm al-Fahm (later released). By so doing, argued Shaykh Kamal Khatib, the most outspoken of the radical Islamic leaders, the prime minister was signaling the Islamic Movement that unless it joined parliament, and, by implication, supported him personally together with his Labor Party, the government would take further action against the Islamists. The moderates, Khatib asserted, feared such an eventuality, gave in, and reversed their stand on the elections. In fact, the radicals claimed, there was a governmental "grand design," or conspiracy, to "domesticate" the Islamic Movement and draw it closer to the establishment by bringing the Islamists into the Knesset, thereby "enhancing the facade of Israeli democracy."

In another surprise move, two of the more radical leaders, Khatib and Salah, announced on 29 March that they did not view themselves as bound by the

Islamic Movement resolution to participate in the Knesset elections. Referring to the "former framework" (al-itar al-sabiq) which, they said, had crossed the red lines, they called upon members of the movement to reunite around their "mother movement" (harakatihim al-umm). The red lines were crossed, according to Khatib and Salah, when (a) negotiations were held between Darwish and Dr. Ahmad Tibi, head of the unity-oriented Arab Movement for Change, to set up a unified Arab list, and (b) the Islamic pragmatists allegedly called for supporting one of the candidates for premiership (Shimon Peres).

The pragmatists chose to disregard the radicals' pronouncements. Risking an open split, they negotiated the establishment of the Unified Arab List, based on an alliance between the Islamic Movement and Member of Knesset (MK) 'Abd al-Wahhab Darawsha's Arab Democratic Party. An Islamic activist, 'Abd al-Malik Dahamsha of Kafr Kana, a lawyer and a former security prisoner, was named head of the new list. Darawsha and his party colleague, MK Talib al-Sana, were given second and third place, respectively, while the fourth place was reserved for another representative of the Islamic Movement. Attempts were also made to include Tibi in the alliance and in the list. [The attempts failed and Tibi runs for elections as an independent.]

### Concluding Observations

1. The Islamic Movement in Israel is deeply divided ideologically and politically and is no way monolithic. There is no single party line. Pragmatists and radicals are divergent in viewpoint. These differences are significant, for in the case of the radicals, a careful examination of materials published by them shows a close relationship to extremist views aired outside Israel, that imply the goal of eliminating the Jewish state on religious grounds. In other words, the linguistic ambiguity often used by the radicals serves at times to cover up extremist viewpoints. With regard to the pragmatists, it is yet to be seen whether their recent adoption of an accommodative policy is only a short-term tactic, with the long-term goal constituting something else entirely.

2. It would appear that a balance of power exists between the two rival factions, as demonstrated by the close vote in March 1996 over participation in the Knesset elections. The competition between these rivals is far from having been resolved. Instability and open conflict might well continue, with far-reaching implications for the Arab political scene. Thus, while the Islamic Movement could play the role of a cohesive bond in Arab politics in Israel, it could also contribute to a deepening of the fragmentation of the Arab vote as a result of its own internal differences.

3. The Islamic Movement in Israel is thought to have a considerable measure of political influence, judging from the way the Islamists have been courted by the various Arab political forces. The direction taken by the movement will have an impact on the Arab political system as a whole. A unified Arab list led by the Islamists could prevent the waste of a sizable part of the Arab vote in the Knesset elections. A continued rift within the Islamic Movement, however, may cause the hardliners to instruct their followers to abstain, a development which could hurt not only the Arab constituencies but also Prime Minister Peres' chances of being reelected.

4. It appears likely that a unified Arab list under the leadership of the Islamic Movement will enter the Knesset in 1996. This would mean a list with a pronounced Islamic agenda and heightened motivation to achieve the following goals inter alia:

The return of Waqf endowment property to Muslim control; the appointment of religious judges from the Islamic Movement; an emphasis on Islamic education, including the demand for recognition of the Islamic Da`wa College in Umm al-Fahm; the establishment of an Islamic Higher Committee to overlook the religious affairs of the Muslim community in Israel; a more determined stand regarding the prominence of Jerusalem as a holy city to Islam; and the release of Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin.