

# Bayan بیان ביאן

The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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Editor: Arik Rudnitzky

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## From the Editor's Desk

Almost three months have passed since the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset elections held on March 2, 2020. Dr. Rana Zher analyzes the achievements of the Joint List in the elections and the challenges that lie ahead. Dr. Ahmad Agabaria addresses the Arab public's mood and feelings following the recent election campaign.

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## **Rana Zaher \* / The Joint List: The Achievement and the Price**

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**The achievement of the Joint List in the elections was made possible by the maturity of its constituents, the presentation of clear vision and objectives, the management of prudent media campaigns, the cumulative experience of parliamentary activity, and the response of Arab citizens to racist statements against them by Jewish politicians.**

**The election of four Arab women for the Knesset on behalf of the Joint List breaks the glass ceiling for the political representation of women in Arab society. Arab women have high electoral potential and can reduce the gender gap between them and men.**

**In the current political configuration in Israel, the Joint List has a significant political power and can no longer be ignored. However, unity has its price as the unique space of each constituent party is shrinking.**

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As a field activist for the Joint List's campaign for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset elections, and as one who follows the social and political developments that resulted from those elections, I can point to the emergence of several noteworthy social and political messages. On the one hand, these messages paved the way for new relations between the various ideological and political streams in Israel's Arab-Palestinian society. On the other hand, they spurred new relations between Arab-Palestinian society (and all of its ideological streams) and state institutions, independent of the results of the negotiations for a government coalition. These messages are the result of the remarkable achievements of the Joint List party, which are no less important than the achievement of securing 15 seats in the Knesset. In this essay, I will detail these achievements and expand upon the price of unity.

### **The Achievements of the Joint List: From the Inner Circle to the Outer Circle**

There is no doubt that the 15 seats won by the Joint List are an achievement for the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel. For us, this is a historic result. The accomplishment can not only be attributed to the functioning of the party on the election night, but also several internal and external factors, both present and past. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory<sup>1</sup>, it is possible to conclude that direct and indirect factors influenced the electoral victory in an ecological

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<sup>1</sup> U. Bronfenbrenner (1992), "Ecological Systems Theory", in R. Vasta (ed.), *Six Theories of Child Development: Revised Formulations and Current Issues* (pp. 187–249), London and Bristol: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

manner – from the outside in. Since the party operates in different circles, it is necessary to examine its achievements from a comprehensive standpoint.

Achievements in the inner circle:

1. As compared with previous elections, on the eve of the last elections, relations between the Joint List's component parties reached a point of maturation that enabled them to rise above their differences in opinion. This fact strengthened the party's appeal to voters.
2. The party and its representatives presented a clear vision and objectives. Chief among those objectives was increasing their representation in Knesset, not only to remove Netanyahu from the Prime Minister's chair and prevent him from establishing a government, but also to influence the future livelihood of the Arab minority, which suffers from exclusion and delegitimization. Looking back, the Joint List did not achieve this objective, but it did present a clear aim rather than an ambiguous one.
3. The Joint List positioned its vision for the future and goals within the wider inner circle. Their vision and goals were clearly translated in media through the party's campaign and in the field through the activities of its MKs, candidates, and activists.

The party's achievements in the outer circle of operation consisted of:

4. The party's activities during the election campaign were based on the accumulated experiences of previous campaigns and on action and protest trends that had reached maturation. These trends had a longer-term orientation than in the past. A few examples include: achieving budget allocations such as the government's 922 program, fighting against police brutality, attempting to abolish the Kaminitz Law (or at least ease its effects); leading activities to obtain recognition for academic degrees earned abroad by Arab students; and the recent successful attempts (even before the elections) of the party's chair, Ayman Odeh, to return young citizens who had been detained abroad on various charges to the country.
5. Among the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel, there is a prevalent sentiment of indignation, protest, and outrage at being repeatedly targeted and facing racist condemnations by Jewish politicians. The main incident was Trump's "Century Plan" and its consequences for the state's Arab citizens, especially the denial of Israeli citizenship to Arab citizens of the triangle region.
6. Ahead of the elections for the 21<sup>st</sup> Knesset, there had been a call encouraging Arab voters to boycott the Joint List. However, that call was met with fierce public opposition and proved that those calling for a boycott were unable to present an alternative to the Joint List. This conclusion was strengthened by an investigation that was broadcast on Channel 12, which contended that one of the boycott campaign's main financiers was a Jewish settler.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Settler releases campaign to encourage Arabs to boycott the elections" [Arabic] Arab48.com, 12.9.2019, <https://bit.ly/2yO1IPW>.

7. In the national circle, strategic and communication errors in the unions of the Center-Left, such as Labor-Gesher-Meretz, created disappointment among their voters for their participation in these unions. The Blue-White partnership did not present a real alternative to the Likud and the Right-wing. This was demonstrated by Netanyahu's continual incitement against the Arab minority's representatives in Knesset and the fact the Blue-White party held backdoor talks about a "Jewish Majority".

Each victory in these circles and the connections between them gave birth to the Joint List's undeniable electoral achievement and strengthened the party. Presently, the party's biggest challenge is to maintain this strength and use it for the advantage of its constituents, Arabs and Jews alike.

The general political arena in Israel and its dynamics are sometimes surprising. It would be difficult to say that the Joint List is the main beneficiary of the last election cycle, even though its representation grew considerably. On the other hand, the party certainly was not this cycle's biggest loser. I submit that the party's main achievement was not only political but also social. The social characteristics of the unity of the Joint List shows that we, Israel's Palestinian society, have overcome numerous difficulties to achieve unity. This message is not only for the Palestinian people within Israel, but also for Arab people at large.

One of the most important barriers to unity is sectarianism. Ninety percent of Muslims and Christians voted for the Joint List out of a sense of belonging and in the name of a common goal. But among the Druze there was also a significant increase in the percentage of votes cast for Arab parties, the highest percentage since the country's first national election. Another barrier was based on ideological conflicts. In voting for the Joint List, secular Arabs voted for a party that includes the Islamic Movement. Conversely, Islamists voted for a list that includes secular and Communist representatives. Palestinian Nationalists voted for a party that raised the flag of Arab-Jewish cooperation, while Jews voted—perhaps not with complete conviction, but with understanding and acceptance-- for a list whose agenda represents Arab, Islamic, and Palestinian interests.

The party's unity was also demonstrated by its 15 Knesset Members' unanimous endorsement of one candidate - Benny Gantz - to form the next government. Their unity was not disrupted despite strong reservations about Gantz and internal fighting, which is a natural occurrence in any party, irrespective of the result. The List's unified behavior contributed to the easing of friction between its component parties in the field.

### **Arab Women: Rising Political Potential**

As a feminist activist, I believe gender and the political representation of Arab women is the most important issue facing the Joint List. The Joint List continued breaking the glass ceiling by doubling the strength of Arab-Palestinian women in the Knesset and by bringing Iman Khatib, the first hijab-wearing woman, into the Knesset. This fact has great symbolic significance in terms of its influence on the discourse about religious Arab women. After all, Islamophobia is a global phenomenon. Khatib has repeatedly stated that her hijab is a personal matter, and she is correct in this. However, the important point here is that Khatib is a woman

with considerable skills and abilities to serve in Knesset, and the hijab she dons cannot be ignored, even if we wanted to. So long as we are living in a patriarchal society and so long as we are dealing with racism and Islamophobia, her hijab will spark debates and symbolize a call for change.

One of the most important figures on gender was published by the Israel Institute for Democracy in 2015.<sup>3</sup> It stated that voting rate of women was lower than the voting rate of men by 8 to 12 percent. This voting gap mainly reflects women with little education and low income, women living in the socioeconomic margins. The List's placement of women in its 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> seats for the Knesset encouraged many Arab women to go out and vote. In this way, Arab women shrank the gap between male and female voters and played an influential part in the last election cycle. Nevertheless, the Joint List must ensure higher places on its list for women and not push them to the bottom, where they are unlikely to become members of Knesset. The Joint List must remember that this segment of the population has the potential to hold great electoral power. But so far this notion hasn't received proper attention – and neither has the idea itself of integrating women into politics, strategies for action, or the campaign trail.

In addition to the electoral power women possess, we must take into account research that has shown that when the strategic environment is positive toward women – which is to say, when the representation of women grows and the connection between politicians and the female public is stronger – the likelihood that women will participate in politics increases.<sup>4</sup> When successful women take part in politics, they are likely to contribute to the growth of women's participation in politics at large. On the basis of this assumption, we may say that while Iman Khatib is the Knesset's first religious Muslim woman, she is likely not to be the last.

In total there are 4 women in the party's 15 seats, which is to say, a little more than a quarter of the party's Knesset members. This fact strengthens women's social standing in Arab society and sends a message to Israeli society that refutes many prevalent stigmas. Naturally, the entry of four women to the Knesset is a cumulative achievement not only for the Joint List but for the Feminist Movement in Israel. This movement works through several feminist organizations and groups that include men and women. Part of the movement's activists are party members and they continue to fight for the improvement of women's position in Arab society and especially in politics as they have done for decades. These important social achievements do not mean that Arab society is free of religious or ethnic sectarianism, nor from gender-based discrimination. Unfortunately, such phenomena continue to exist. However, it is possible to say that Arab society has gotten stronger and its management of these conflicts has matured. Today, the Joint List is the address for Arab citizens, "the government" in their eyes, especially in light of the current government's antagonism toward the existence of the Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel and their demands. More importantly, this achievement marked a milestone in the strength and ability of Arab citizens and that of their partners – the Jewish democratic parties – to influence what comes to pass in the

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<sup>3</sup> "Who didn't vote?" The Israel Democracy Institute (26 February 2015) [Hebrew], <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/3535>.

<sup>4</sup> M. Crowder-Meyer & A. R. Smith (2015), "How the Strategic Context Affects Women's Emergence and Success in Local Legislative Elections," *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 3(2), pp. 295-317.

political arena. The Joint List's supporters in Israel now know the party's strength and its ability to influence. Presently, it would be difficult to turn back the wheel and convince the List's supporters that any of the List's component parties would achieve better results in a national election if they ran separately.

### **Unity and its Price**

From a political standpoint, the Joint List has established its presence and legitimacy despite all the attempts to deprive it of both. The party opened its doors widely and directed its discourse toward new audiences beyond its usual supporters -- Arab citizens and Jewish Democrats. The party addressed citizens of Russian and Ethiopian heritage, and even reached out to Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Yiddish.<sup>5</sup> This openness made the party the topic of the day on several stages, as unconventional moves tend to draw attention. However, the main goal of this messaging was not to gain votes from these groups but to present a democratic alternative to all citizens. Day by day, the Joint List made sensational headlines in print and online.

In addition, the party's current political influence allows it to be in a central position. Because of this, the Joint List is a popular address for negotiations from various political streams. There is no doubt that the party's recommendation of Gantz after the September elections paved the way for its status as a political player. It has been made clear to all politicians of Jewish lists, whether they are on the left or the right, that they can incite against the List or befriend it, hate it or love it, boycott it and neglect it – but they cannot ignore it.

In light of these political and social achievements, there was a call to replicate the Joint List's underlying idea in local elections as well. Dr. Hanna Swaid, a former Knesset member of the Hadash party, made the strongest call for replication in an essay he wrote on the subject.<sup>6</sup> I also enthusiastically supported this idea and even wrote an article on the subject entitled, "Between the National Dimension and the Local Dimension," which was published in the periodical *Nabad – Pulse* by the Neve Shalom School for Peace.<sup>7</sup> I continue to side with the proponents of this idea, although today I am unsure what price the various political parties might have to pay for this unity and for the attempt to balance financial interests and personal interests to preserve the identity of each component party.

The question remains how to not only preserve the important achievements listed above, but also how to preserve the uniqueness of each of the List's component parties. As a social activist in one such party – The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash) – I believe that the essential idea of the Joint List and its principles have injured the standing of these parties and their unique political projects. This injury is not felt among activists are among those who are naturally endowed with

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<sup>5</sup> "The Joint List Held its Election Campaign in Yiddish, Russian, and Amharic," [Hebrew], The Communist Party of Israel Website, maki.org.il (16 February 2020), <https://bit.ly/2yMYCf6>.

<sup>6</sup> "Dr. Hanna Swaid: I call to copy the Joint List's model in the upcoming local elections in Arab locales," *kasmawi.net* (12 December 2016), <https://kasmawi.net/?mod=articles&ID=122590&c=10> [Arabic]

<sup>7</sup> Rana Zaher (2018), "The Joint List Between the National Dimension and the Local Dimension." In: Amir Fakhoury (editor), *Alliances at Hand: The Case of the Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel. Pulse – A Socio-Political Journal* (Neve Shalom: The Research Institute, School for Peace), pp. 177-180.



political awareness, but among regular citizens who don't engage in politics at all on the conceptual level or in their way of life. Such people can make superficially distinctions between the component parties, but they are not able to delve deeply into the differences in opinion that differentiate one party from another.

Has this unity also been exhibited in the field? And if it has, what is its scope? There is no single answer to these questions because the answers are context-dependent and vary from place to place, according to the relative strength of the parties in a specific location. However, in large communities where there is representation from all the component parties, there weren't unified field activities among the leadership as there were during the election campaign. Each team functioned separately and autonomously, without coordination or contact with each other. If one thing can be revealed from this method, it is that the idea of unity has not been internalized in the field to the same extent that it has been internalized among the party leaders or on the national level.

In light of other developments, such as the establishment of a unity government under the leadership of Netanyahu and Gantz, some voices cast blame on the Joint List for the voters' disappointment. In contrast, some voices absolved the List of responsibility, laying the blame on the left and center political parties for their total failure. The question remains: Will the Joint List and its achievements stand up to these recent developments, or will it pay a high price for its political line? And, most importantly, will the Joint List transform itself from a list to a stable body with institutions for Israel's Arab-Palestinian minority? Only time will tell.



## **Ahmad Agbaria \* / Arab Citizens are Not the Problem: How the 2020 Election Might Redefine the Israeli Political Landscape**

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**The elections conveyed a message: The Arab public refuses to be a problem in Israeli society, and strives to return to normalcy.**

**The 1990s were engraved in the memory of the Arab public as a promising period for their rights, but today the tables have been turned. The establishment doubts the ability of Arab Knesset members to represent their constituents and doubts their allegiance to the state. Many in the Arab public understand that the enshrining national-Zionist identity of the state is directed against them.**

**The delegitimization of the Arab minority and its elected representatives reached its peak in the recent elections. The slogan "Bibi or Tibi" is an expression of incitement and racism that should be denounced.**

**The "deal of the century" plan, and in particular its intention to annex the Triangle Region to a Palestinian state, actually contributed to raising the turnout rate on the Arab street. The 15 seats won by the Joint List restored the belief to Arab citizens that change is possible.**

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The elections of March 2, 2020, filled me with more hope than I've felt since Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat sat at Camp David in 2000. What was particularly enthralling about this round of elections was that Palestinian citizens of Israel mustered the will to push back against political frameworks that have ostracized them and sustained their marginalization. For the first time in my life, I felt that my vote counts and that I'm no longer part of the electoral desert. The party that I cast my ballot for, the Joint List, is now the third biggest party in the nation and is primed to play a crucial part in allaying my existential concerns.

What were these elections about? First, these elections sent a resonant message that the Palestinian minority in Israel are clamoring for a return to normalcy. Second, these elections proved that the Arab minority refuses to be defined as a problem in broader Israel society. These two statements should be clear to anyone who pays attention to the Palestinian minority.

For Israel's Palestinian citizens, or Israeli Arabs, the past two decades have proven unusually challenging, almost unbearable. Violence in Arab locales has increased, the economy has stagnated, and the future has grown disturbingly unclear. They have fallen on hard times, passing fitfully through an inflection point in their tumultuous history. This is due, in part, to Israeli society's turn toward right-wing politics, leaving the Palestinian minority in a precarious situation: more vulnerable than ever, exposed and mistrusted by Jewish society. When Israel's economy contracted between 2009 and 2011, Arab citizens felt the brunt of the economic recession. And, when the shaky Israeli-Palestinian status quo was disrupted in 2013, Arabs were

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marked and looked at with growing suspicion. There was little escape from the feeling that the system is rigged against the them.

Slogging through hard times in an increasingly hostile political landscape taught Israel's Palestinian citizens that the state has completely failed them. This loss of faith was especially pronounced in the past three years, as violence ravaged Arab towns. Many Palestinians believed that the state could have prevented and even reversed this wave of violence. But the official Israeli response came up short, doing too little, too late. This deeply disappointing response re-affirmed that Israel is sticking to its old policy of disregard and indifference. A response that indicates that the state continues to see its Palestinian minority as a problem, and therefore did little to address its basic needs.

Struck by violence that threatens to fray social cohesion, Palestinian citizens were left with little bargaining power. Many Palestinians engaged in self-recrimination that led many, in turn, to believe that they were the source of the problem, rather than poverty, a broken school system, a crisis in public health and a general lack of infrastructure.

In light of these adverse circumstances, Palestinian citizens of Israel demanded to return to the political norms of the 1990s, before Israeli society was swept by a nationalist fervor. The 1990s seemed to have secured and imbedded social justice, human dignity, and mutual trust in Israel. The passage and consecration of the Human Rights Law in 1992 as Basic Law appeared to have launched Israel into promising and prosperous times. However, for Palestinian citizens, the last twenty years has been a process of watching the gains made in the 1990s slip through their fingers. The world they had taken for granted began to shatter.

This sanguine spirit of the 1990s was reflected in the demands of Arab representatives in the Knesset, which were focused on political and economic fronts. Backed by hard evidence, Arab leaders held the Israeli government accountable for higher mortality rates among Arabs, protested unfair economic policy and staggering income gaps, and chafed at educational discrimination. These demands were seen as legitimate in the eyes of the Jewish majority and the establishment.

Today, however, things seem to have turned around. The establishment holds Arab members of the Knesset accountable, questioning their "representational" power, impugning on their loyalty to the state, and publicly singling them out as outsiders to the recently affirmed Zionist narrative. Calling their loyalty in question has grown to the main framing through which to approach Arabs. Against this concerned voices within the Palestinian minority have made the powerful case that the problems afflicting their society are not only the results of discriminatory financial policies at the national level, but also a result of questioning the legitimacy of Arab citizenry and its leadership at large. This is why Joint List party chair Ayman Odeh made it clear that he would not join any coalition before it acknowledges and recognizes elected Arab leaders as the *legitimate* representatives of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

Since the failed Camp David summit in 2000, attacks and agitations against Palestinian citizens have become the norm in Israel's political scene. For many Palestinians in Israel, it was hard to suppress the feeling that the Zionist national identity of the state was weaponized against them. Stirring statements, whether by high officials or demagogues, have normalized the idea of Palestinian citizens as a

threat to the Jewish character of the state. As these stirring statements went unpunished, the media had to report them, and in the process, endorsed them as part and parcel of the new Israeli political discourse.

The process of delegitimization came to a head in the last election cycle, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leading the charge. He repeatedly rallied voters by vilifying the Palestinian minority, treating its leaders with contempt. While elections always contain some elements of antagonism and mockery between parties, Netanyahu's campaign was particularly spiteful and tinged with racism against Palestinian citizens. His ominous message, "Either Bibi or Tibi," should have been denounced as a grotesque experiment in incitement and racism. But this message resonated well with many Israeli voters, speaking to their nationalist instincts. Pandering to the lowest common denominator, this message proved reinforcing and contagious. Other parties were compelled to catch up with Netanyahu's wayward nationalism. Blue and White party leaders, falling behind on the nationalist front, left its connections with Arab delegates in the Knesset, condemning any possibility of assembling a future coalition with Arabs. Not even Meretz, the last relic of the Jewish-Arab Left and the only party that embodied the cooperative spirit of the 1990s, was left untouched by the new frenzy that Netanyahu stirred up. Instead of embracing the only Arab member in the party and reaffirming its commitment to the protection of the Arab minority, it too decided to give up on that dream. These elections were marked by the Jewish parties' unmistakable disassociation and distancing from the Joint List. This trend is distressing enough, but this alone does not explain the high turnout among Arab voters in the last round of elections.

High voter turnout was fueled by a much more sinister mood that roiled the political climate in 2020. To grasp the political angst that awoke political participation amongst Israel's Palestinian minority, we have to go back to January 28, 2020, the day President Trump released his Middle East Peace Plan. From his Oval Office in the White House, Trump's plan promised disaster for all Palestinian people, boosting their participation in the last elections. For the vast majority of Palestinians, nothing good could come from Trump's peace plan. He endorsed all of Israel's ambitions, expressing his consent to annex thirty percent of the West Bank to Israel. For me, the most worrying feature of the peace plan was its proposed land swaps in the Triangle region – my birthplace – whose vagueness left me unsure about my future in the state of Israel.

The fallouts of the peace plan enhanced the resolve of Palestinian citizens to take action. On a personal note, I would add that the proposal left me disaffected with the American and Israeli governments. Life for me began to lose structure, status, and meaning. I didn't know what my next year will look like, what investments I could make, or even what school I could send my child to. Dealing with this uncertainty made me feel as though my life was being torn apart and my identity robbed from me. I can only imagine the toll such instability will take on the health of Israel's Arab society.

I cast my ballot in favor of the Joint List Party. No other party could appeal to disenfranchised voters like me more than the Arab coalition that offered the only promise to put an end to two decades of political despair. The results were dizzying. With a whopping 15 Arab seats in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset, faith has been restored that change is possible; the election results have imbued Arab society with a sense of

empowerment. The Palestinian minority has long said that they see themselves as Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel. With their votes, they made it unmistakably clear that they would not succumb to fear and will not let the bullying Right to question their right to live in this land.

In the Triangle, more than sixty-nine percent of voters cast their ballots, marking the end of the era of “dissent,” an Arab movement of non-participation in elections commenced by Sheik Raed Salah in the 1980s. While Palestinian voters may eventually fail to unseat Netanyahu, they have nevertheless succeeded to block and reverse the movement that called on them to renounce their voice by abstaining from political participation. Israel’s Palestinian citizens put up a show of optimism in times of political despair. They have proven that they are a minority that steadfastly holds on to hope. Despite the nasty political campaigns that demonized them, they have demonstrated that they are willing to act to create a new government and new social reality geared toward better co-habitation and integration in Israel.