

Bayan بیان ביאן

The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of Bayan is being published more than a year after the Knesset elections. For the first time in Arab politics in Israel, one party (United Arab List, Ra'am) joined the government coalition while another party (Joint Arab List) stays in the opposition.

In his article, **Rany Hasan** examines the dynamics and relations between the two parties in recent years, and the balance of power between them, one year after the elections.

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The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation (KAP) was established in 2004 by the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University as part of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. KAP is an expansion of the Program on Arab Politics in Israel established by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University in 1995. The purpose of KAP is to deepen the knowledge and understanding of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel through conferences, public lectures and workshops, as well as research studies, publications and documentation.

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Rany Hasan * / First year of the coalition: The situation of the Arab parties and the balance of power between them

Even before the resignation of Ra'am from the Joint Arab List prior to the last election in March 2021, the partnership between them had seen ups and downs. The Arab parties tried to conceal the differences in opinion and the internal conflict between them. In the end, the rift occurred over a marginal issue: LGBT rights in Arab society .

The Joint Arab List and Ra'am are looking to gain control of the Arab electorate. Currently, a significant portion of the Arab public have had enough of Hadash's political hegemony. Ra'am seeks to present itself as an alternative to the Joint Arab List and as a traditional and influential party that is suited to the character of Arab society .

A year after the creation of the coalition, reality has shown that Ra'am has not fulfilled its promises: Arab society continues to suffer from rising crime; the policy of building demolition has not changed; and the civil status of Arabs has not improved .

Ra'am went too far with the unprecedented concessions it made in order to survive politically and it is liable not to reach the vote threshold in the coming election. The Joint Arab List is in a better situation, but it is perceived as an outdated party without any political influence .

The great challenge facing the two parties is to persuade the Arab voter to participate in the next election – which now appears to be closer than ever.

The strained relations between the Joint Arab List and Ra'am is no secret. In the last election, Ra'am decided on a "new path"—as Ra'am refers to it—one that no other Arab party has dared to follow, whether in theory or in practice. Nonetheless, Ra'am is not the first to come up with the idea of joining the government of Israel and participating in political decision making. Recall that prior to the 22nd Knesset elections, which took place in September 2019, Ayman Odeh, the head of the Joint Arab List, declared that he is prepared to join a centrist-left government or to support it if it agrees to the party's demands, such as dealing with the problems of Arab society, fighting crime in Arab society, paving the way for a solution to the Palestinian issue, etc. Indeed, and despite the differences in opinion, the Joint Arab List recommended that Benny Gantz, the head of the Blue-White party, be designated to form a government. The Balad party reluctantly accepted the decision of the majority, despite its fundamental opposition to it. A short time later, officials of the Joint Arab List explained that Mansour Abbas played a major role in the approval of this recommendation during the intense discussions within the Joint Arab List.

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Even before Ra'am's resignation from the party prior to the 24th Knesset elections, its relationship with the Joint Arab List had its ups and downs. Moreover, party interests had a fateful influence on the party's behavior and on its direction in its previous format, despite the fact that it won a record 15 seats in the 23rd Knesset elections held in March 2020.

The Joint Arab List included movements that were ideologically opposed to one another and which nonetheless came together under one roof: the Communist party (Hadash), the Islamic movement (Ra'am party) and the nationalists (Balad party). If the voting threshold had not been raised, at the initiative of MK Avigdor Liberman prior to the Knesset election in 2015, this union of parties would not have taken place. The Joint Arab List tried to conceal these differences of opinion and to ignore the internal competition between its components over the leadership of Arab society; however, the divisions were not unexpected even though the timing of their appearance had been unclear. It is no surprise then that when tension rose the rift occurred over a marginal issue, namely the question of supporting the rights of the LGBT community in Arab society. Ra'am felt that this is a fundamental issue, to the point of breaking up the partnership. In this way, it freed itself from the dictates of the Communist party and presented itself as a legitimate alternative to represent Arab society in the Knesset.

Mansour Abbas wanted to dismantle this partnership and negotiated with then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to join the coalition. Among other things, secret meetings were arranged between him and Nathan Eshel, who was Netanyahu's contact person and righthand man, and attempts were made to convince Abbas to agree to the withdrawal of Ra'am from the Joint Arab List. Netanyahu publicly distanced himself from the idea and denied the existence of any such negotiations. However, Abbas revealed what actually happened in the media and during discussions in the Knesset following the last elections.

From a broader perspective, it can be said that the two parties—Ra'am and the Communist party—both aspire to control the Arab vote, which is reflected in the struggle for hegemony between the two political extremes. It is worth mentioning that a significant portion of the Arab public is tired of the Communist party's absolute control of the Arab political landscape since the establishment of the State of Israel. Currently, most of its supporters are members of the party since then or their family members and the party's ideological supporters, such as physicians and intellectuals who are graduates of universities in the FSU (Former Soviet Union). In contrast, the United Arab List (the Southern Section of the Islamic Movement) is a relatively new political body in Arab society.

Ra'am's need to withdraw from the Joint Arab List stemmed from its desire to detach itself from the party's platform, with the goal of realizing Ra'am's new political agenda, known in Arabic as *al-nahj al-jadid* ("the new path"), to advance Arab society and solve its problems: to improve its economic status; strengthen personal security and reduce crime; solve the problem of illegal weapons; and create a genuine partnership with Israeli society in order to achieve sustainable equality. Mansour Abbas understood the needs of Arab society and primarily the need for security in Arab towns and villages, in view of the increasing murder rate. He presented his party as the lifesaver of Arab society and at the same time emphasized its religious and Islamic side. He worked to present Ra'am as a traditional party that

is having an impact on Arab society and as an alternative to the Joint Arab List, which had not done enough on behalf of Arab society. His words were directed at the Hadash party which according to Abbas and his supporters could not show any real achievements even though the Communists have been in the Knesset since independence.

Abbas preferred traditionalism. He claimed that the Joint Arab List's support for the LGBT community is not aligned with the traditional nature of Arab society, particularly in view of the sensitivity towards this issue from both a religious and social-moral perspective. Therefore, his election campaign focused on the "tahini issue", a hint at the El Arz tahini producer's support of the LGBT community. Thus, Abbas succeeded in convincing his supporters that he would strongly oppose any law that supports the LGBT community. At the same time, he uttered promises to improve the status of Palestinian citizens of Israel on issues such as the Kamenitz Law and demolition of buildings, fighting crime in Arab society, the allocation of budgets to the local authorities and to education, etc. The Joint Arab List had no response to the "tahini issue" or Abbas' accusation that they had not achieved much in the past, even though they were the third largest party in the Knesset following the March 2020 elections.

Mansour Abbas' political rivals claim that Netanyahu indeed managed to dismantle this partnership with Abbas' help in order to attain a majority in the Knesset and stay in power. There is some truth to this claim – Abbas did meet with Netanyahu's aides for the purpose of negotiations and even met with Rabbi Druckman in gain approval for becoming a partner in a possible rightwing government led by Netanyahu, together with Ben-Gvir and Smotrich on the extreme right.

At the end of the day, Ra'am joined the Bennett-Lapid coalition rather than Netanyahu's and for now the coalition is keeping its head above water. The question now becomes: Has Ra'am accomplished what it set out to do?

Although Ra'am has declared that it would be a traditional and influential voice in Israeli politics and even though it is part of Bennett's coalition, the reality in Arab society after a year in the coalition is proving that Ra'am has not delivered on its promises. Thus:

- a. Arab society still suffers from a feeling of insecurity in the face of skyrocketing crime rates and the pervasiveness of illegal weapons. In 2021, 126 men and women were murdered in Arab society, more than any year in the past (according to the data of the Abraham Initiatives organization).¹ At the same time, there are serious incidents of shooting and violence occurring in Arab society.
- b. The policy of building demolition and the imposing of large fines under the influence of the Kamenitz Law still threaten thousands of homes in Arab towns and villages. The number of homes demolished in Jerusalem in 2021 was the highest number in 20 years. According to the data of Ir Amim ("City of Nations"), about 123 housing units were demolished and the rate of demolition almost doubled in the second half of 2021, during the term of the

¹ "Breakdown of murder statistics in Arab society in 2021 – Annual report", [The Abraham Initiatives web site](#), December 30, 2021. [in Hebrew]

current government (the “government of change”). During the first half of 2021, 85 buildings were destroyed in East Jerusalem (45 residential units and 40 other structures) and during the second half 150 buildings were demolished (87 residential units and 63 other structures).² Over 100 demolition orders were issued in Dalyat al-Carmel for buildings constructed without a permit.

- c. The status of unrecognized settlements in the Negev has not changed despite Ra’am’s promise that it would work toward their recognition. Although the government has recognized three Arab settlements in the Negev, at the same time Interior Minister Ayalet Shaked has pushed for the creation of 13 Jewish settlements on land belonging to Arab residents of the Negev. Furthermore, the local authorities continue to destroy the crops of Bedouin residents, claiming that they intend to formalize the presence of Bedouin residences in the area.
- d. The improvement in the status of Arab citizens has not been reflected in budget allocations nor in the area of civil rights. It is worth recalling that the government approved a five-year plan with a budget of NIS 32.5 billion; however, none of the budget has been distributed even though 10 months have passed since Ra’am joined the coalition. Neither is there any sign that the government of change, which includes leftist parties such as Meretz, will be initiating the passage of the Law of Equality to counteract the Nation-State Law which discriminates against Arab citizens and assigns them an inferior status to that of Jewish citizens.
- e. The traditional approach promised by Ra’am to its voters is not evident in reality. Ra’am supported the State Budget which included about NIS 9 million for the LGBT community. It appears that Abbas and his friends speak with two voices on this issue: the Arab voice in Arabic and the Israeli voice in Hebrew and huge gaps exist between the two. It should be remembered that support for the LGBT community contradicts the religious/traditional image of the party.
- f. The cost of living constitutes a heavy burden on the Arab population, but Ra’am, which is a partner in the government’s decision making, is not doing enough to alleviate this distress. Half of the Arab population is living under the poverty line and Ra’am’s acquiescence in the face of the government’s decision to raise the price of basic food products causes it immense harm.

The resignation of Idit Silman (Yamina) from the coalition is a difficult test for Ra’am and for the Joint Arab List. The Arab parties want to show achievements, but the recent political events are not making this possible. Ra’am has had few of its demands fulfilled and the Joint Arab List is painted as a useless and decrepit organization without any political influence. The major challenge facing the two parties is to convince the Arab voter to actually vote in the next election, which appears to be closer than ever.

² Oren Ziv, “‘The government of change’ has doubled the rate of building demolition in East Jerusalem”, [Siha Mekomit \(Local Call\) web site](#), December 19, 2021 [in Hebrew].

In my opinion, Ra'am went too far by making unprecedented choices and concessions on behalf of political survival, and in my estimation it will not exceed the vote threshold, especially now when they are viewed as supporting government decisions on highly sensitive issues such as violation of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Against this background, one can understand its overtures to the Joint Arab List to once again unite as the representative party of the entire Arab population. On the other hand, there is a huge gap between the two lists which is reflected in the mudslinging between them. More than once, Ra'am has accused the Joint Arab List of cooperating with the extreme Right and with Netanyahu in order to block Ra'am's efforts in the government. On the other hand, the Joint Arab List views Ra'am's joining the coalition as giving up on the nationalist Arab vote which maintains the Palestinian Arab narrative of Israel's Arab citizens. The members of the Joint Arab List have accused Ra'am's members of "collaborating" with the Israeli establishment in exchange for false promises that have not brought about any change for the better among Israel's Arab citizens. Therefore, in my opinion, it is difficult to imagine the union of the two parties and if they do unite, it is doubtful whether Arab citizens will vote for them since the level of trust they garner has reached an all-time low.

The situation of the Joint Arab List has improved from an electoral perspective because it has maintained a respectful discourse over time which stresses the preservation of the Arab minority's civil rights and furthermore it has not made any far-reaching concessions like Ra'am has done. On the other hand, the Joint Arab List has put itself in a difficult position without a lot of alternatives. Thus, it has consistently tried to bring down the current government in order to damage Ra'am, but it has not devoted any strategic thinking to a more feasible alternative. It should be remembered that the Joint Arab List's alternative to the current government is the return of the Right to power headed by Netanyahu together with partners like Ben-Gvir and Smotrich whose removal it has called for in the past.

Only time will tell who will win out: Netanyahu and the Right who will return to power based on narrow party interests that will bring down the present government and with it Abbas' party, or the current coalition in which Ra'am is a partner.