

# Bayan بیان ביאן

The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

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Editor: Arik Rudnitzky

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## Table of Contents

From the Editor's Desk .....	2
Yusri Khaizran / Arab Society in Israel following October 7:	
Integration without Identification .....	3
Local civil discourse in Arab society following the Arab Spring .....	5
The emerging civil discourse in Arab society as an alternative to the national discourse.....	6
Reincarnations of the civil discourse in the Palestinian space .....	7

## From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of **Bayan** contains an article by **Dr. Yusri Khaizran** which examines the reaction of the Arab public to the events of the war that broke out on October 7, 2023, against the backdrop of the emergence of civil discourse as an alternative to the national discourse in Arab society over the past decade.

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## Yusri Khaizran \* / Arab Society in Israel following October 7: Integration without Identification

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Arab society in Israel has developed a paradigm that balances between Palestinian national identity and commitment to Israeli citizenship.

Arab citizens are not interested in conflict with the state, but neither do they identify with its ideological foundation. They do not support the horrific actions of Hamas, but at the same time, many do not sympathize with Israel's aggressive response, with some perceiving it as genocide.

Following the Arab Spring, a civic discourse emerged among Arab citizens that was manifested in, among other things, support for the inclusion of Arab parties in the government coalition and increased participation in national or civil service.

The results of the last Knesset elections in November 2022 show that this local civic discourse is expanding at the expense of nationalist discourse. Arab citizens are increasingly seeking to obtain additional budget and to become involved in decision making that affects them.

The current discourse within Arab society no longer seeks to challenge the Zionist establishment; nonetheless, the Palestinian nationalist discourse has not ceased to exist.

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Since the establishment of the state, Arab citizens in Israel have been viewed with suspicion, and during the period of the Military Government (1948-1966), Arabs were to some extent regarded as a fifth column.<sup>1</sup> Their political passivity during this period did not help the situation, and they were expected to express loyalty in times of crisis or war. Despite the violent confrontations in 1976 (Land Day), in 2000 (the October events), and 2021 (the Guardian of the Walls events), Arab society in Israel has created a paradigm that balances between a Palestinian national identity and a commitment to Israeli citizenship. In other words, it maintains a rational and realistic approach, expressing its protest within the boundaries of the law. Against this background, it is worth mentioning the passivity of Arab society since the events of October 7, 2023, and the outbreak of the war.

In what follows, we will discuss three surveys that examined the attitudes of Arab society towards the war and towards the Hamas attack on towns and kibbutzim in the western Negev. The picture that emerges is inconsistent and clearly indicates ambivalence among the Arab public in Israel. The first survey was conducted by the

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<sup>1</sup> See: Yair Baumel, *A Blue and White Shadow: The Israeli Establishment's Policy and Actions Towards Arab Citizens – The Formative Years: 1958–1968* (Pardes Publishing, 2007). [Hebrew]

Israel Democracy Institute a few weeks after the outbreak of the war, and shows that 70% of Arabs identify with the state and see themselves as part of Israel and its challenges. The pollsters' assertion that 70% of Arab citizens thus identify with the state reflects their own wishful thinking more than it does reality.

Arab citizens are concerned about their fate in light of the reality created by the war and the fear that any deterioration in the political and economic reality or in relations between Arab society and the rest of Israel will worsen their situation.<sup>2</sup> Although the survey marks a peak in terms of the number of respondents who say they feel part of the state (a metric it has measured since 2003), it is worth noting two reservations regarding the survey results. First, 88% of Druze and Christians reported that they are integrated within Israeli society, while only 66% of Muslim citizens gave that response.<sup>3</sup> Second, the survey was conducted in circumstances unprecedented in the country's history, perhaps even relative to 1948, and it is likely that a considerable proportion of respondents were convinced that an anonymous survey was a guise being used by the security authorities. The suspicious attitude of Arab citizens toward the state is nothing new, and it has been documented in research, particularly in times of war.

The survey conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Program provides a more realistic picture.<sup>4</sup> It found that 47% of all Arab citizens justify Israel's response following the attack on IDF bases and settlements in the Gaza border area, while 44% do not. Another survey by the Israel Democracy Institute on Arab society's attitudes toward the Iron Swords war shows a consistent and more realistic trend. It was conducted between November 27 and December 4, 2023 among a sample of 548 Arabic-speaking respondents and found that 56% of the Arab public in Israel supports Mansour Abbas's statement that Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023 does not reflect the general sentiment in Arab society nor the values of Islam. However, an equally significant finding reflects the sentiments and atmosphere among the Arab public: 71% of them do not feel comfortable expressing themselves freely on social media, 84% fear for their physical safety, and 86% fear for their economic security.<sup>5</sup>

The aforementioned findings reflect ambivalence mixed with concern and anxiety among the Arab public in Israel. The combined data from the three surveys indicate that Arab citizens do not identify with Hamas' ideological discourse, although neither they do not adopt Israel's narrative regarding the events of October 7. They are not interested in a confrontation with the state, but neither do they embrace its ideological foundation. Another trend emerging from the combined results of the

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<sup>2</sup> Tamar Hermann and Or Anabi, "Flash Survey during Iron Swords: A 20-Year Peak in Feelings of Belonging to the State Among Both Jews and Arabs," Israel Democracy Institute, November 10, 2023: <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/51391> [Hebrew]

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Arik Rudnitzky, "In-depth Survey of Arab Society's Views on the War between Israel and Hamas," Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation, Tel Aviv University, December 3, 2023, pp. 1–2: <https://dayan.org/content/depth-survey-arab-societys-views-war-between-israel-and-hamas>

<sup>5</sup> Adam Asaad and Yaron Kaplan, "Survey of Arab Society's Attitudes to the Iron Swords War: About Two-Thirds of Citizens Feel Part of Israel and Its Challenges," Israel Democracy Institute, December 25, 2023: <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/51968> [Hebrew]

three surveys is a genuine concern among Arab citizens about harm to the fragile fabric of coexistence, erosion of their civil status, and threats to their livelihood.<sup>6</sup> The events of October 7 and the outbreak of the war have placed Arab citizens once again in a precarious situation, in which they feel the need to prove not only loyalty to the state but also a rejection of Hamas's atrocities.

As mentioned, Arab citizens in Israel do not identify with Hamas's heinous actions, but neither do they identify with Israel's aggressive response, and many of them see it as genocide. Accordingly, the majority of Arab citizens still believe that the way out of the political maze is a two-state solution.<sup>7</sup> This formula preserves their civil status within Israel while also offering a realistic solution to the Palestinian issue. It is worth noting that the prevailing opinion among both Arabs in Israel and the Israeli public in general has for a long been that resolving the status of Arabs in Israel is intertwined with resolving the Palestinian issue. This view began to fracture in the 1990s, primarily due to the signing of the Oslo Accords and against the backdrop of the Arab Spring. The Oslo Accords highlighted the local aspect of Israeli Arabs' identity and had an impact on their priorities. Under these agreements, Palestinian citizens in Israel felt a double exclusion, from both the Israeli agenda and the Palestinian agenda. Consequently, Arabs in Israel began to increasingly emphasize the importance of the civil component within their identity, with local considerations gaining priority over national ones.

### **Local civil discourse in Arab society following the Arab Spring**

The search for ways to extricate Arab society from its dependency on the resolution of the Palestinian issue became more pressing in the wake of the Arab Spring. These popular uprisings marked the beginning of one of the most significant shifts in the history of Arab politics in Israel. Since then, a local civic discourse has been gradually coalescing among Arab citizens. It is manifested in three phenomena: consistent support for the inclusion of Arab parties in the government coalition, a sharp increase in the number of participants in national or civil service and, most notably, the dissolution of the Joint List and Ra'am's historic participation in the government coalition. The results of the most recent Knesset elections clearly indicate that local civic discourse has been established as an ideological-political alternative to the nationalist mobilization discourse that dominated the Arab political arena until the last decade. Indeed, findings from public opinion surveys conducted among the Arab public in Israel from 2013 to 2022 indicate a consistent trend toward the dominance of the civic discourse over the nationalist one.

The fear of anarchistic trends and the disappointment with the failure of the transition to democratic regimes in the Arab world have led to the strengthening of pragmatic tendencies among the Arab public in Israel. This was reflected in a survey conducted by *Haaretz* in February 2015, which found that 70% of Arabs in Israel prioritize the improvement of their socioeconomic status over the resolution of the Israeli-

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<sup>6</sup> Mada al-Carmel, *A Look at Arab Society's Attitudes Toward the War on Gaza*. Mada al-Carmel (December 2023), p. 6. [Arabic]

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, over 60% said they are in favor of the Joint List joining the coalition, and 70% argued that improving the economic situation should be prioritized over pursuing a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>8</sup> A different survey showed that 83% of the Arab public in Israel strongly opposed the actions of MK Basel Ghattas of the Balad party who smuggled mobile phones into security prisoners.<sup>9</sup> Results from a survey conducted in May 2016 reveal that 60% of Arab citizens support prioritizing civic issues related to the Arab population relative to only 25% who believe the Palestinian issue should be the primary political focus of the Arab public in Israel. The survey further found that 61% expressed willingness to support a party that is willing to be part of the government coalition.

The tendency to prefer a focus on domestic socioeconomic issues over the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also clearly reflected in findings from a survey conducted for the Injaz Center for Professional Arab Local Governance in 2016. It found that 71% of Arab citizens prefer that Arab Knesset members address issues related to living conditions and internal issues important to the Arab public in Israel rather than the Palestinian issue.<sup>10</sup> These findings indicate that the Arab public has come to terms with Israel's existence as a Zionist state and that their integration within the state is preferable to other options, especially given the disintegration of sovereignty in various Arab states and the ongoing civil wars in some of them since 2011.<sup>11</sup>

In September 2022, an election survey among Arabs in Israel revealed that 65% of respondents support the participation of Arab parties in the coalition, while 57% believe that Arab parties should recommend a candidate for prime minister to the president.<sup>12</sup> As mentioned, there is a growing perception among the Arab public in Israel that their problematic civil status in Israel should not be coupled to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **The emerging civil discourse in Arab society as an alternative to the national discourse**

The departure of the Ra'am party from the Joint List and the local civic discourse in the March 2021 elections affirm the claim that civic discourse has become a genuine competitor to the previously dominant ideological-national discourse. Ra'am's election campaign and its participation in the Bennett-Lapid coalition undoubtedly marked a significant shift both in Arab politics in Israel and in the relationship between

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Khoury, "Most of the Arab Public Supports Joining the Government," *Ha'aretz*, February 20, 2015. [Hebrew]

<sup>9</sup> Yusri Khaizran and Muhammad Khlaile, *Left to Its Fate: Arab Society in Israel under the Shadow of the Arab Spring* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2019), p. 173. [Hebrew]

<sup>10</sup> Wadih Awawdeh, "Public Opinion Poll Among Palestinian Citizens of Israel Reveals Two Important Issues," *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, February 16, 2017. [Arabic]

<sup>11</sup> The survey was conducted by the Stat-Net Institute in December 2016 among about 500 Arab respondents of Israel.

<sup>12</sup> Survey of Arab Society: 65% Support Entry of Arab Parties into the Coalition, *Channel 7*, September 5, 2022.

Arab society and the state. Ra'am's campaign emphasized local issues that concern Israeli Arabs and the need for political realism with regard to the state, while de-emphasizing the national discourse and the Palestinian issue. The very act of an Arab party joining the coalition—for the first time in Israel's political history—is a historic precedent that underscores the strength of civic discourse within Arab society in Israel. This new trend in Arab politics shows that the civic approach has taken root, with Arab citizens focusing their efforts on attaining additional budgets and participating in decision making that affects their fate.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the results of the 25<sup>th</sup> Knesset elections held on November 1, 2022 confirm the rise of local civic discourse in Arab society. Ra'am became the largest party in Arab society, winning 194,047 votes (5 seats) as compared to 178,735 votes received by the Hadash-Ta'al list, led by Ayman Odeh. The Balad party, which is most associated with the national discourse, failed to reach the electoral threshold altogether (138,619 votes, 2.91% of the total valid ballots).<sup>14</sup> The November 2022 election results therefore appear to indicate that the status of local civic discourse is indeed gaining dominance at the expense of the national discourse among the Arab public in Israel.<sup>15</sup>

### **Reincarnations of the civil discourse in the Palestinian space**

The early signs of Arab integration within Israeli society are already visible, and this trend has strengthened over the past decade. Its origins may lie in the signing of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, although the current local civic discourse is fundamentally different from that which prevailed following the Oslo Accords. According to the worldview of Balad, Israel should be a state for all of its citizens that aspires to a separation of religion and state and a dissolving of the state's Jewish and Zionist character. In this sense, Balad has since the 1940s proposed a civic discourse that characterizes the Palestinian national movement—a universal civic discourse aimed primarily at challenging Zionism and proposing a more progressive alternative. In 1943, the League for National Liberation proposed a plan to establish a single secular democratic state in which Jews and Arabs would have equal status. This universal civic perspective was also prevalent in the discourse on the Palestinian Left, which was

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<sup>13</sup> The head of the United Arab List is Dr. Mansour Abbas (born 1974), a dentist by profession and a graduate of the Hebrew University Faculty of Medicine. As a student, Abbas was twice elected head of the Arab Student Association at the Hebrew University, being the first to take this symbolic position away from Hadash representatives. He was close to the historical founder of the Islamic Movement, Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish. Alongside his medical work, Abbas served as a preacher at the Peace Mosque in the town of Maghar. Since 2007, he served as Secretary-General of the United Arab List, and in 2018, he was elected to head the party's list in the Knesset elections.

<sup>14</sup> Central Elections Committee for the 25<sup>th</sup> Knesset, Election Results for the 25<sup>th</sup> Knesset: National Results.

<sup>15</sup> Mada al-Carmel, *A Look at the Results of the 25<sup>th</sup> Knesset Elections in Palestinian Society in Israel* (November 2022), pp. 2–4. [Arabic]

primarily intended to ideologically and morally challenge Zionism. Thus, since Balad's creation it has proposed the idea of a state for all of its citizens.<sup>16</sup>

The current discourse in Arab society does not propose an alternative to Zionism or seek to challenge the Zionist establishment. At most, it seeks to bypass the constraint that is built into the lives of Arab citizens as a result of their Palestinian identity. However, this does not mean that the Palestinian national discourse has vanished. The fact that Ra'am has received as many or more votes than the Joint List indicates that there are now two models of political discourse in Arab society. The first, which can be referred to as the "national mobilizing discourse," seeks to politically mobilize Arab society. It is an expression of protest rather than a desire to integrate within Israeli society. It conditions the relationship between Israeli Arabs and the state on a resolution of the Palestinian issue and the establishment of Arab society as an indigenous national minority within a nation-state. The second is a local civic discourse which this condition is not a part of. It does not link the relationship between Israeli Arabs and the state to a resolution of the Palestinian issue. This model corresponds to the post-Arab Spring political strategy adopted by Arab monarchies. This was reflected in Abbas' speech following the formation of the Bennett-Lapid government which did not mention the Nation-State Law or the resolution of the Palestinian issue, nor did it endorse Herzl's Zionist vision. Indeed the speech did not include any acknowledgment of the state's ideological foundation, but rather was an attempt to circumvent the built-in constraint arising from the identity issue among Arab citizens.<sup>17</sup>

The strengthening of the civic trend among Israeli Arabs does not supplant their national identity; rather, it creates an instrumental paradigm that prioritizes interests based on citizenship over national affiliation, which often leads to alienation and distance between the state and its Arab citizens. The events of October 7 and the Iron words war placed Arab citizens on trial for expressions of sympathy with Hamas or with Palestinian suffering. While solidarity does indeed exist, surveys examining the behavioral patterns of Arab citizens since October 7 clearly point to the growth of local civic discourse and its emergence at the forefront of Arab society's politics, perhaps even as a competitor to the national discourse that has prevailed since the state's establishment.

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<sup>16</sup> Abigail Jacobson, "The League for National Liberation in Mandate Palestine," *History* 39–40 (2017), pp. 75–104. [Hebrew]

<sup>17</sup> See the main points of Mansur Abbas's speech after signing the agreement with Lapid and Benett: Davar [Hebrew], June 3, 2021, <https://www.davar1.co.il/310959/>