

Bayan بیان ביאן The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

Editor: Arik Rudnitzky

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From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of **Bayan** is being published one week before the elections to the 26th Knesset and features an article by **Yusri Hazran**, examining the dichotomous structure of Arab politics in Israel.

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We invite our readers to contact us, through the following channels:

- The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation:
Dr. Arik Rudnitzky (Project Manager)
Tel. 03-6406046
- Moshe Dayan Center website: dayan.org

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Yusri Hazran* / On the Dichotomous Structure of Arab Politics

Arab politics in Israel is currently divided between two opposing schools of thought: a national school and a civic-local school. The national school, represented by the Joint List, links the normalization of relations with the state to a resolution of the Palestinian question and a change in the state's character. By contrast, the civic school, represented by Ra'am, seeks to improve the position of Arab society without setting national or ideological preconditions.

The weakening of the national school and the strengthening of the civic school in recent years are linked to local developments within Arab society and the repercussions of the Arab Spring in the Middle East. The civic approach reflects acceptance of the existing reality in Israel, but does not imply identification with Zionism or the abandonment of Palestinian identity.

Despite their fundamental differences, both schools approach the elections to the 26th Knesset (October 2026) with the shared goal of replacing Netanyahu's government. However, there is no consensus among the Jewish opposition parties regarding cooperation with the Arab parties.

Three main stages can be identified in the history of Arab politics in Israel: (a) the period of military government (1948–1966), a stage marked by the struggle between the Communist Party and the traditional leadership; (b) a national awakening intertwined with intensifying protest against the state, a trend that began following the Six Day War (1967) and reached its peak with the establishment of Balad in the mid-1990s; and (c) a new era in Arab politics in the wake of the Arab Spring (2011), during which the hegemony of the national discourse weakened and a local civic discourse emerged. The establishment of civic discourse as a dominant discourse in Arab society has—for the first time in its history—given rise to two models of politics.

* **Dr. Yusri Hazran** is a senior lecturer at the Shalem College and a research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His principal field of research is the political and social history of the Fertile Crescent. He has published books and articles on the subject, and in May 2025 his book on the effects of the Arab Spring on Arab society in Israel, entitled *The Palestinians in Israel after the Arab Spring*, was published by Bloomsbury.

A review of various studies reveals differing approaches to the study of Arab society in Israel and to understanding its relations with the state.¹ This article proposes a new thesis: **political dualism**. In recent years, Arab society and the Arab political system in Israel have been divided between two contradictory political approaches. The first has prevailed in Arab society since the establishment of the state and can be referred to as the “national school”: it places national identity as a barrier between itself and the state and makes its relations with the state conditional on resolution of the national conflict with the Palestinian movement and even on a change in the political and ideological character of the state. By contrast, the second approach, which can be referred to as the “local-civic school,” offers two innovations: (a) it completely severs the relationship between Arab society and the state from any requirement that the Palestinian problem be resolved first, thus establishing Israeli citizenship as an alternative point of departure for relations; and (b) this school no longer challenges the Jewish and Zionist identity of the state, but rather accepts the existing rules of the political game. It consistently seeks to become part of the Israeli political scene, with the stated aim of advancing the local interests of Arab society in Israel.²

In the past, adherents of the second school faced accusations known in Arabic as *al-takhwin*, that is, treason and collaboration with the state against the Palestinian people. Today, however, it is evident that the school of civic discourse has not only gained a foothold among the Arab public but has even acquired legitimacy among them. Herein lies the second significant innovation of the political dualism thesis. At the party level, the leading force behind this discourse enjoys a solid base of support in the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement.

Has the Mobilizing National Discourse Stagnated?

For decades, the dominant outlook in Arab society in Israel emphasized national identity in all dealings with the state and made the normalization of relations with it conditional on resolution of the Palestinian problem. The national discourse, which is

¹ Amal Jamal, *Between National Consciousness and Civic Existence* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2020) [in Hebrew], pp. 20–30; Yitzhak Reiter, *National Minority, Regional Majority: Palestinian Arabs Versus Jews in Israel* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

² Yusri Hazran, “Bargaining for the Colonial Model of Conditional Citizenship: The Local Civic Discourse among Palestinian Citizens in Israel over the Last Decade,” *Middle East Critique*, 35 (2026), pp. 171–192.

fundamentally a mobilizing political discourse, rests on three main pillars: (a) an emphasis on Palestinian national identity, a trend that has become increasingly influential since the 1970s with the revival of a distinct Palestinian national identity; (b) resolution of the Palestinian problem based on the principle of two states for two peoples; and (c) the granting of full civil rights to Arab citizens of Israel. Within this discourse there also arose a demand for the abolition of the state's Jewish and Zionist identity. The parties that have pursued this political line are currently part of the Joint List, which was reestablished this year and comprises Hadash, Ta'al, and Balad, as described below.

There is no party in Arab society more historically identified with the mobilizing national discourse than Hadash. Founded ahead of the 1977 Knesset elections, Hadash is a Jewish-Arab political framework that combines a socialist outlook with the pursuit of peace and equality. In its approach to the State of Israel, it emphasizes that the state should serve as a democratic space that guarantees full civil and national equality for all its residents. Hadash views Jewish-Arab partnership as a central prerequisite for building a just society and for combating racism against the Arab public and the exclusion of Arab citizens. On the diplomatic level, it supports ending Israeli control over the territories occupied in 1967, evacuating the settlements, and establishing an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It also calls for a negotiated and just solution to the issue of the Palestinian refugees.

Ta'al was founded in 1996 and focuses on advancing the civil and national status of Arab citizens within the State of Israel. It demands full equality in the allocation of budgets and resources and in the areas of education, employment, health, infrastructure, planning, and housing. Moreover, Ta'al emphasizes the need to recognize the Arabs in Israel as a Palestinian national minority and to reduce the disparities between them and the Jewish majority. Its positions on the diplomatic level are similar to those of Hadash.

Balad, founded by Azmi Bishara in 1996, is centered around a revolutionary anti-establishment outlook that calls for a comprehensive transformation of the Israeli public sphere in order to grant the Arab minority a constitutional and civil status equal to that of the Jewish majority. Balad built its entire political standing on the idea of

transforming Israel from a “Jewish state” into a “state of all its citizens.” According to this approach, the state should belong equally to all its citizens and should not grant constitutional, institutional or symbolic preference to any one national group—specifically, the Jews. Balad demands recognition of Arab-Palestinian citizens as an indigenous national minority with collective rights, rather than treating them as an aggregation of individuals possessing civil rights. According to Balad member, these rights include preserving the distinctive characteristics of Arab society: its national identity, language, culture, and education, including cultural autonomy. Balad’s positions on the diplomatic level are similar to those of Hadash, and it advocates resolving the Palestinian refugee issue on the basis of the right of return.

Balad’s anti-establishment discourse, which calls for abolishing the Jewish and Zionist character of the state, motivated the other parties to intensify their political rhetoric against the state. As a result, relations between the state and Arab society grew increasingly strained during the 2000s and 2010s. These three parties represent a protest vote, and for them, representation in the Knesset is a demonstration of electoral strength. They regard Palestinian national identity as an important factor in their relations with the state. For decades, they were able to maintain their strength and a consistent political trend of mobilizing national discourse, as well as constituting a protest vote in Knesset elections.

The Civic School: Politics as the Art of the Possible

Alongside the mobilizing national discourse, another political school has emerged within Arab society during the past two decades. It differs in the fact that, on the one hand, it has abandoned the mobilizing national discourse and, on the other, has focused on acceptance of the normative foundations of the existing regime and the advancement of local Arab interests, while making maximum use of Israeli citizenship.³ The Ra’am party, under the leadership of Mansour Abbas, has been the driving force behind this school.

³ As’ad Ghanem, “Parties and Ideological Currents among the Palestinian Arab Minority in Israel,” *State and Society*, 1/1 (December 2001), pp. 89–114. [in Hebrew]

In an interview with *Maariv* in December 2020, Mansour Abbas explained that his political doctrine rests on three foundations: (a) positioning civic discourse as a central axis of the relationship between Arab society and the State of Israel; (b) accepting the existing political reality without addressing the ideological aspects associated with Zionism; and (c) abandoning the boycott of the Israeli right within Arab society. Abbas did not make the integration of Arabs into the Israeli political arena conditional on resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on a commitment by the Zionist political elite to advance the peace process or even on modifying the Jewish-Zionist character of the state. Rather, Abbas proposed recognizing the deep-seated fears of the Jewish people as a basis for building a political partnership with the Jewish majority in Israel, including the Zionist right.⁴

Consistent with this approach of changing prevailing perceptions, Abbas has voiced sharp criticism of the other Arab parties. In his words, they “think dogmatically and are unable to self-criticize, to look at themselves in the mirror and ask the difficult questions—Why are we not succeeding? We raised the banner of equality, so why are the disparities so large? We raised the banner of peace, yet peace is receding. We raised the banner of a ‘state of all its citizens’ and got the Nation-State Law. It is always possible to say that Israeli politics is to blame for the situation, but I say that we need to ask ourselves what our responsibility is.”⁵ Abbas made clear that the local interests of Arab society—rather than ideological principles—would determine the nature of Arab integration into Israeli politics.⁶

Ra’am’s campaign in the elections for the 24th Knesset (2021) reflected this new approach, known in Arabic as *al-Nahj al-Jadid*. It can be summarized in three slogans: political realism, effective political action, and preservation of the conservative character of Arab society in Israel. Abbas’s new approach can be situated within the local and regional context. It is consistent with trends that are becoming increasingly entrenched in Arab society. At the same time, it cannot be divorced from the effects of the Arab Spring in neighboring Arab countries. These trends view the Israeli

⁴ Shari Makover-Belikov, [“I Don’t Rule Out Sitting with Netanyahu’: MK Mansour Abbas Changes Course,”](#) *Maariv Supplement*, December 18, 2020. [in Hebrew]

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

citizenship of Arabs in Israel as an alternative political framework to the Arab national discourse that prevailed for several decades in Arab society.

The results of the elections for the 25th Knesset, held on November 1, 2022, confirmed the growing popularity of the local civic discourse in Arab society. Ra'am established itself as the largest party in Arab society with 194,047 votes (5 seats); the Hadash-Ta'al list headed by Ayman Odeh received 178,735 votes (5 seats); while Balad, which represents the national discourse, failed to cross the electoral threshold (138,619 votes, 2.91% of the valid votes).⁷ The results of those elections illustrate the extent to which the local civic discourse is gaining ground among the Arab public in Israel at the expense of the national discourse.⁸

It can be said that we are witnessing the emergence of a new political discourse that places the local interests of Arab citizens at the top of the agenda. This change is reflected in the diminishing prominence of Palestinian identity as an issue. This trend reached its peak when Ra'am joined the Lapid-Bennett government in 2021. For the first time in the history of Israeli politics, an Arab party was part of the governing coalition, albeit without receiving any ministerial appointments. This development was consistent with a widespread trend among the Arab public in favor of integration into the Israeli decision-making process through participation in the governing coalition. This trend has been consistently reflected in public opinion polls in recent years, which show that growing segments of Arab society support such participation.⁹ The local civic dimension of Arab political discourse is also reflected in other patterns of behavior within Arab society in Israel, such as breaking the taboo against joining the security services, the substantial increase in the number of those entering national service, and even the first signs of non-Druze Arab youth enlisting in the IDF.¹⁰

⁷ Central Elections Committee for the 25th Knesset, *Results of the Elections for the 25th Knesset: National Results*.

⁸ Mada al-Carmel, "Qira'a fi Nata'ij Intikhabat al-Knesset al-25 fi al-Mujtama' al-Filastini fi Isra'il" [Analysis of the Results of the Elections for the 25th Knesset in Palestinian Society in Israel] (November 2022), pp. 2–4. [in Arabic]

⁹ See in this regard the [surveys conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation](#), Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University.

¹⁰ Etta Bick, *Citizenship and Service: The Politics of Civic National Service in Israel* (SUNY Press, 2020), pp. 151–152.

Against the backdrop of various processes, foremost among them the Arab Spring, the Arab minority in Israel is seeking to strengthen the discourse of citizenship based on utilitarian considerations, since the national discourse has not led to an improvement in its status nor to a substantive change in the relationship between it and the state and between it and the Jewish majority. Thus, in view of the impasse in these relations and the disintegration of the Arab space centered around the state, the Arab minority is attempting to derive maximum benefit from its Israeli civic identity. The strengthening of the civic discourse also stems from frustration and a growing sense that the external Arab space no longer serves as a psychological or moral anchor for the Arab minority in Israel. Amal Jamal aptly put it as follows: "The currency of youthful subversion against the theory of citizenship offered to young Arabs is nonconvertible among many of the disadvantaged in Arab society who feel that their everyday reality compels them to compromise their true aspirations and to accept, albeit with great reluctance, the dictates of the cynical reality in which they live."¹¹ Nevertheless, the strengthening of the civic discourse in Arab society is not merely the product of frustration, but also reflects a genuine desire to integrate into Israeli society in all spheres of activity that have the potential to improve their standard of living. The civic discourse in Arab society has not displaced the mobilizing national discourse, as was evident during the events of May 2021 (Operation "Guardian of the Walls"), but trends in Arab society in Israel over the past decade clearly demonstrate that the discourse competing with the Palestinian national discourse has gained a solid foothold.

The pragmatism and rationalization characterizing the Arab minority's attitude toward the State of Israel over the past decade do not resolve the problems inherent in the existence of an Arab-Palestinian national minority in a Jewish nation-state. Nor does this pragmatism reflect recognition of the state's ideological foundations or acceptance of Zionist ideology. It indicates acceptance of reality, but not acceptance of Zionism: The Arab minority is displaying remarkable pragmatism in its behavior and

¹¹ Amal Jamal, "Dual Consciousness and Deferred Revolution: On the Political Dilemmas of Palestinian Citizens in Israel in the Shadow of the Arab Spring," *The Public Sphere*, 13 (2017), p. 135. [in Hebrew]

political discourse, but this does not signify a repudiation of its national identity or of its fundamental positions regarding the Zionist narrative.

It is, of course, always important to situate the local civic discourse within the framework of asymmetric power relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel.¹² The model underlying this approach is integration without identification, intended first and foremost to benefit the Arab minority in Israel. This is not a cut-and-paste of the Druze model, under which the Druze have tied their existence to that of the State of Israel and are willing to accept its Jewish character despite their opposition in principle to the Nation-State Law. Inherent recognition of the state's right to exist, on the one hand, and identification with the state's ideological foundations, on the other, are absent from the political realism approach. It is doubtful whether this distinction would have emerged were it not for the conflict-ridden reality in which the State of Israel finds itself.¹³

The Upcoming Elections for the 26th Knesset: The Point of Convergence between the Two Schools

The formal institutional expression of the two political schools in Arab society can be seen in the formation of two electoral lists: the Joint List, which brings together three ideological parties—all secular or semi-secular—and Ra'am, which continues to rely on the support base of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement. This is not merely a political rivalry but a fundamental disagreement over the direction that Arab politics should take. Ra'am systematically and consistently seeks to become part of the governing coalition without imposing any conditions on national and ideological issues, whereas the Joint List continues to adhere to the linkage between the national and civic discourses, maintaining that the underlying causes of all discrimination in the civic sphere are connected to the national identity of the state. Despite the

¹² Amal Jamal, "Ontological Counter-Securitization in Asymmetric Power Relations," *International Studies Review*, 22/4 (December 2020), pp. 932–956.

¹³ Yusri Hazran and Muhammad Khalaily, *Palestinians in Israel after the Arab Spring: The Political Impact of Regional Protest and Fragmentation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025), pp. 215–216.

fundamental and political disagreements between the two schools, they are expected to converge on at least one point: a strong desire to replace the current government.¹⁴

It can safely be said that both lists are determined to recommend, without any conditions, any candidate other than the current prime minister to form the government. There is currently a consensus within Arab society that the country has never had a government as anti-Arab as the present one, and therefore the overriding political and national task is to replace it without imposing any prior conditions. The current mood in Arab society attributes full responsibility to the current government for the loss of governance in Arab cities and towns and for the unprecedented deterioration resulting from the rise in crime there.

Arab politics in Israel has never been as divided as it is today. Both the formal political arena (i.e. the political parties) and the popular arena are divided between two schools: one that views the nationalist issue as the key to normalizing relations between the state and Arab society, and another, represented by Ra'am, that has emerged over the past two decades and which is impatiently seeking change. They demonstrate an unconditional pragmatic willingness to join any coalition in order to advance the local interests of Arab society. This school does not deny its Palestinian national identity, but it does not regard that identity as the decisive factor in determining the nature of Arab society's relations with the state. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is no consensus among the Jewish opposition parties seeking to form the next government on whether to cooperate with Arab parties in forming a coalition after the elections.

¹⁴ See the interview with MK Dr. Ahmad Tibi on Channel 12, "[Tibi Reveals the Plan: This Is How We Will Bring Down the Right-Wing Government after the Elections](#)," *Mako*, September 19, 2026 [in Hebrew]. See also Ahmad Tibi's interview with *Al-Ghad*: "[Al-Tibi: We Seek to Bring Down the Netanyahu Government and Remove It from Power](#)," September 16, 2026 [in Arabic].