



PODCAST

Israeli Elections and Palestinian Citizens with Amjad Iraqi

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Amjad Iraqi · April, 2021

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Amjad Iraqi 00:00

Citizenship does not imply in any way that they are actually equals. On the country, there's a large structure of discriminatory laws and policies that are inherently designed to make Palestinian citizens unequal. They are effectively colonial laws that continue to expropriate the lands and properties of Palestinians within the state, and that also applies against their political activism, their political identity, and their history, et cetera.

Yara Hawari 00:35

This is *Rethinking Palestine*, a podcast from Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you, so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis, wherever you are in the world.

In March 2021, Israelis went to the polls to vote in their fourth general election in two years. This seemingly endless cycle of elections and political deadlock has



been as a result of a failure by Israeli political leaders to form a coalition government. The most central figure in all of this has been Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister of more than a decade, who, while trying to hold onto his grip on power, is also facing serious political corruption charges. Now a major part of this story, which is routinely overlooked by the mainstream media, is the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up about 20% of the population in Israel. To discuss all of this and more, I'm joined by Amjad Iraqi, Al-Shabaka policy member, political commentator and co-editor of *+972 Magazine*.

Amjad, thank you for joining me on today's episode of *Rethinking Palestine*.

Amjad Iraqi 02:04

Thanks so much for having me, Yara.

Yara Hawari 02:06

So let's start with an overview of what's been going on over the last two years, vis-a-vis the Israeli elections. Amjad, can you give us an idea?

Amjad Iraqi 02:15

So, in a nutshell, what's been going on over these four elections of the past two years is essentially a battle within these Israeli right-wing camp. Just to put this into perspective for our listeners, the right-wing in Israel basically makes up the majority of the political spectrum. If you take, for example, the most recent results of the election just a few weeks ago, if you combine, for example, what we define as anti-Zionist or non-Zionist parties, and also add the "Zionist-left" parties – they essentially make up about a fifth or sixth of the total Knesset. That means, everyone else is essentially from the center-right to the far-right. And this has been the case for quite a few years, and this has been the defining element of these political battles that are going on in Israel today.



Now the main difference between these parties, especially when it comes to issues of the political questions around Palestinians, is that the main thing that divides them is essentially whether or not they're willing to work with and ally with Benjamin Netanyahu, as you explained. Netanyahu, over the past decade, has really reshaped Israeli politics to be centrally around him, and so you end up getting a situation whereby right-wingers, who basically agree with many of Netanyahu's policies, do not want to work with him personally. And the biggest stark example of this is that one of the main challengers to the dominant Likud party – the Blue and White party, led by former army chief, Benny Gantz – essentially echoed Likud policies in all but name, but they just insisted, and almost centered their platform, around ousting Netanyahu. But if you even took that out of the equation, they would basically be allies. And in fact, they were allies after the third election of the current four rounds.

In reality, what we've seen is that there's no real substantive debate or differences between these right-wingers. It really is centered around the prime minister alone. And this is especially the case if you're thinking about what the Israeli political spectrum believes about Palestinians in the occupied territories, Palestinian citizens of Israel – that they do echo a lot of the same racist rhetoric, or the same discriminatory policies, even advocating for annexation. So there isn't really that significant of a difference between them.

That said, what we're seeing is that the ice is very much thinning around Benjamin Netanyahu. If in the past he could rely on a lot of different groups to essentially swear allegiance to him and ally with them in a coalition, now it's much more uncertain. And this is why we're now in a very fragile political moment, whereby if Netanyahu is not able to form a coalition within the coming weeks, then we'll have to see if the sort of "anti-Bibi" camp – specifically the right-wing anti-Bibi camp – is able to oust him from a coalition majority.

Yara Hawari 05:09



Thank you, Amjad, for that. So what is the current situation now? We're still waiting for this coalition to be formed. What are the likely possibilities or outcomes?

Amjad Iraqi 05:21

Israeli politics never fails to surprise, and coalition bargaining also never fails to surprise. There've been repeated moments over the past decade whereby political figures and political parties who insisted that they would never ally with Netanyahu end up bending backwards and allying with him. And the most infamous example of this is, of course, Benny Gantz of Blue and White, who eventually split his own party in order to ally with Netanyahu. You even had the Labor Party, which there was a famous thing where the head of the party shaved his mustache to promise and pledge that he wouldn't ally Netanyahu, and in the end he did. So a lot can happen literally within the next few weeks, if Netanyahu was able to provide certain kinds of portfolios or convince even people on the Zionist left to essentially ally with them. So it's a very unpredictable situation.

The kind of hanging thread right now is that you have these two "kingmakers" that could decide whether a coalition ends up forming. Netanyahu basically has the alliances of the more religious Zionists and Haredi parties, and now he has to either be able to persuade Naftali Bennett of the Yamina party, which is also a rather far-right party, to ally with him. And Bennet has also made a case of saying that he didn't want to ally with Netanyahu, but he's certainly not going to ally with Yair Lapid. So, that essentially means that he's trying to bargain with Bibi to get a good government portfolio, and there is a chance that it might happen. And the other potential kingmaker, which I think we'll talk about further, is the party led by Mansour Abbas, the Islamist Ra'am party, which has also said that it's willing to go between the right and left. But essentially the far-right parties are not willing to be in a coalition with the Islamist party, so this is a bit of an unlikely possibility.



So the best case scenario for Bibi, essentially, is that he's able to peel off right-wingers from the "anti-Bibi" camp. This could be Gideon Sa'ar, who is a former Likudnik, this could be Avigdor Lieberman, who dispises Netanyahu, but also echoes a lot of the same policies, yet he has issues with the religious parties. So there's a big kaleidoscopic tight rope that's operating, but it's really hard to predict how it will go. But the surprises are always possible.

Yara Hawari 07:39

I think we'll unpack a bit later the topic of Mansour Abbas and his party, because it deserves some time on it's own. Now, by the time this podcast comes out, we might be closer to a clear outcome. Personally, Netanyahu never fails to surprise me, with his remarkable ability to survive against all odds. But I want to pause here a bit and go back in history and ask you, Amjad what has Palestinian participation in the Knesset been like over the last seven decades, and what have been the key moments?

Amjad Iraqi 08:12

So just to explain to everybody who's less familiar, about 20% of Israel's population today are Palestinian citizens of Israel. And, historically, what this meant was, obviously we know in 1948 with the Nakba, most Palestinians were either expelled or fled during that time, but there was still, in 1948, about 150,000 Palestinians who were able to remain inside what is today the Israeli border on the inside of the Green Line, so to speak. The state decided to grant them citizenship, and Palestinian citizens have effectively been given the right to vote since the first elections of January, 1949. And that voting pattern has continued essentially to this day.

Now, of course, the citizenship does not imply in any way that they're actually equals. On the contrary, there's a large structure of discriminatory laws and policies that are inherently designed to make Palestinian citizens unequal. They



are effectively colonial laws that continue to expropriate the lands and properties of Palestinians within the state, and that also applies against their political activism, their political identity, and their history, et cetera. Now, in terms of how this has manifested in the Knesset – in the Israeli parliament – in the past, especially during the years from 1948 to 1966, Palestinian citizens were placed under military rule. So the military regime that we are familiar with in the occupied territories, that existed inside the state, and it was a very oppressive authoritarian regime. Military orders were constantly issued, essentially to restrict political activity, to continue confiscating land, and again, all this operated inside Israel. In terms of voting, at the time, Palestinian citizens almost effectively weren't allowed to have any kind of national political representation. So the main parties that they would vote for were either what we call like "Arab satellite" parties, that were essentially allied with some of the dominant Zionist parties, especially the Mapai party, which is sort of the precursor to today's Labor party, led by Ben-Gurion. And the other main camp was actually the Israeli Communist party, which sort of identified itself as non-Zionist and included both Jews and Arabs, and it was actually one of the main political engines for Palestinian activism at the time.

Bear in mind, you know, this was a community that was very disillusioned by what had happened in the Nakba and, due to its fear of what might happen if it did not participate in these elections, there was a sort of bargaining to say that, *Okay, if we participate in this Israeli system with our right to vote, then we can secure our citizenship. We can secure our existence on this land.* And there were a couple of other factors. Some people thought that this was possibly an exercise in democracy. Some people thought of it more strategically. But these were some of the considerations that led the community to basically agree to being part of that political regime.

Now the Communist party remained and is still quite a dominant political force in the Palestinian community here. But another key moment actually came in the



1960s with what's known as the Al-Ard movement, and this was essentially one of the first manifestations of a Palestinian nationalist political movement that was trying to mobilize the community within the state to reconnect with its Palestinian identity, which was being aggressively erased by the Israeli state. Al-Ard called for the idea of a state for all its citizens, or the idea of a state for everybody to exist in with equality, and the response by the Israeli authorities was the Israeli defense minister basically banned the movement, and then the Israeli Supreme Court also forbade the movement from running in the Knesset, essentially on the grounds that its stance of trying to demand equality, a state for all its citizens, its Palestinian identity, contradicted the values of the state as the " Jewish and democratic state." They saw it as a political threat to the very identity of the Israeli political system.

Fast forward a bit, Al-Ard eventually kind of died out, but the elements of its identity and its politics persevered in many different respects. And if you fast forward to the 1990s, you had this major political revival among Palestinian citizens. This was under the year of the Oslo Accords. This is at a time where there was a new international language of minority rights and about national minorities demanding equality. And so you did have in the nineties these new political parties, these new movements, these new ways of thinking, new artistic endeavors, new cultural manifestations of Palestinianness. And this really reshaped a Palestinian political identity inside Israel to be more assertive of its Palestinianness while using its Israeli citizenship for strategic purposes.

And what we eventually end up getting was that, within the Palestinian political spectrum for the Knesset, you now have today the descendant of the Israeli Communist party, known as Jabha or Hadash; this is currently led by Ayman Odeh, and still has a communist orientation. You have a party led by Ahmad Tibi, which focuses on the collective rights of Palestinian citizens in general. And then you have the Islamist Ra'am party, which identifies itself as a religious Islamic



party, but also deals very much on the collective issues of the community. And then you have the Tagamoa' or Balad party, which is a more assertive Palestinian nationalist political party, which was formally led by Azmi Bishara, which also had a big impact on the political discourse here in Israel. So this is now the kind of general mapping and landscape of the main political parties that we have today.

Yara Hawari 13:47

Thank you, Amjad, that was incredibly comprehensive.

So the development of the Joint List was quite a significant phenomenon by becoming the third largest party within Israel, and it forced the Israeli public to acknowledge that the Palestinian community does indeed exist. Can you talk to us a bit more about that?

Amjad Iraqi 14:08

Certainly. Regardless of what one thinks of the Joint List, the pros and cons of it and their failures and their benefits, it was a very significant moment for the Palestinian community here. It was essentially the first time that all the Palestinian political parties, which have these different ideological streams, united as a single slate and set forward a set of common collective demands. This was a demand very much by the community for years, to set this united front.

Now to go back down memory lane, this was very much a forced unification. Essentially, right-wing parties raised the electoral threshold in Israel from what was then 2% to 3.25%. And, though this seems like a bit of a technical detail, it was deliberately designed to try to essentially exclude our political parties, which at the time were each getting about between two to four seats in various elections. So it was essentially a smart way to try to exclude them from the parliament. So this was very much promoted, for example, by Avigdor Lieberman, a member of the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu party, who essentially wants to forcibly



transfer Palestinian citizens. And so the party's response to this raising of the threshold was to understand that, in order for them to survive in the Knesset, they had to get together. But even though this was a forced unification, it did fulfill a longstanding community demand.

This was all started in 2015. Now in the five, six years since its establishment, the Joint List has had quite a significant impact. It was the first time that Palestinian citizens of Israel had one single address. That's not just an MK here and an MK there, but there is a united political body representing the community. It also took much more of a high-profile status compared to another institution called the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, which has been a longstanding institution that represents civil society groups, political parties, as well as parties that do not vote for the Knesset. But the High Follow-Up Committee has really reduced in its visibility and impact in the community, so the Joint List took this very important space to say that we are the political leadership and that we are uniting the community around the common political agenda, which essentially boils down to national equality for all citizens in the state – inside Israel – and a complete end to the occupation, no questions asked, for Palestinians in occupied territories, and finding this balance between asserting their Palestinian identity with utilizing their Israeli citizenship.

There's been positive impact, for example, in international advocacy: the way that, not just Israelis, but also internationals are now aware that there's a such thing as Palestinian citizens; for people to hear and listen to a political party in Israel that's not just talking about the idea of a Jewish and democratic state, but that they're asserting themselves as the *sole* democratic camp in the Israeli political spectrum. The biggest irony of the list was that, you know, that there was only one political cap promoting true equality and end of the occupation, and that political party was led by Palestinians. So that had enormous impact for international understanding. It really shook, I think, much of the Israeli political understanding of



Palestinian citizens, you know, even if they disagreed with it. So they forcibly asserted themselves in that respect. But ultimately the list, for all of these kinds of added benefits, still suffered from a huge amount of flaws and internal issues, and as I'm sure we'll also go into now, this major political project which was desired may have come to its rather dreadful end.

Yara Hawari 17:39

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Something that I find quite ironic about the Joint List is that it's essentially become the only alternative for the Israeli anti-occupation left, if we can call it that, which I think is quite an interesting development. Now, in the last election round, we saw some developments on the Joint List front. Indeed, joint it was no longer, and there was a split with the United Arab list, the Islamic party headed by Mansour Abbas, whom we mentioned earlier. We then later saw Mansour Abbas flirting with Likud and Netanyahu, which I think was incredibly odd for a lot of people to see. But is it really that odd? Is it out of character for Mansour Abbas to do this? Or is it a logical move?

Amjad Iraqi 18:44

There will always be something very bizarre about seeing an Arab Islamist being at the center of the political stage of the self-described Jewish State. It will always be very strange, and there's something about that spectacle, as well, which makes it very appealing for analysts to talk about it as this major moment in Israeli history. But I think what you're asking is actually a good question: *how different is this exactly?*

On one level, there's a historical take, whereby it's not the first time that Arab



political representatives or political parties are open to dealing with Jewish Zionist parties – and that includes the right-wing. I mentioned earlier about the idea of the Arab satellite parties that existed, and though Ra’am is certainly not *that*, there is something kind of eerie about hearkening to those days, whereby the identity of the political movement is so enwrapped in the politics of the Jewish State and of Jewish parties. Now, if you bring it to the more recent years and the political developments, especially around the Joint List, one can argue that it’s not a huge leap for someone like Mansour Abbas to say that we should get into an alliance with Benjamin Netanyahu, and with the Israeli right in general.

Now, since the 1990s essentially, there’s been a sort of political consensus, a very abstract political consensus, about how Palestinian citizens should engage with Zionist parties and in the Israeli political spectrum. And what this essentially meant was that the Palestinian parties should, that their closest allies – strategic allies, I should say – belong to the Zionist left. That even though our political ideals were not represented by these Zionist parties, which still essentially demanded the inequality of Palestinian citizens, that there could be ways to strategically ally with them. This was seen also in the 90’s with the Yitzhak Rabin, who at the time was pushing forward with the Oslo Accords and Arab parties essentially gave their support to have a coalition government. So it’s not unprecedented per se that Palestinian political parties would want to throw their support behind an Israeli prime minister.

In the past two years, with these recent elections, the Joint List really made what was a rather daring move to actually recommend Benny Gantz of the Blue and White Party, to essentially try to strategically oust Benjamin Netanyahu. The Joint List was under no illusions about who Benny Gantz was, who really is a center-right – if not hard-right – military general, who literally boasted about bombing Gaza back to the Stone Age. They had no illusions about who this man was, and



what his politics were, what his party represented. But for them, there was a strategic element to at least getting Netanyahu – who has really been a linchpin in the Israeli political system for the past decade-plus – to try getting him out and then to try holding some kind of bargaining chips over Benny Gantz. And even though Palestinians really debated how wise this move was, there was an understanding that the Joint List was trying to occupy this blurred line again, between asserting their Palestinianness and especially bringing issues of the occupation, with trying to achieve the basic needs of Palestinian citizens here.

Now Mansour Abbas, in his opinion and apparently in the opinion of people who voted for him in his party, it's not a big leap to recommend someone like Benny Gantz and not recommend someone like Netanyahu – who essentially echoes the same politics, who is allied with religious parties which the Islamists believe that they actually have a lot in common with, especially in regards to social and religious services within the state – and that, strategically speaking, in the end, the real people who are in power are Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli right. And so, in Mansour Abbas' mind, the idea is: *Don't just stop at this myth of a center-left bloc, which a lot of people are arguing doesn't even exist anymore. If we really want to achieve some benefits for Palestinian citizens – who are suffering from major internal issues like gun violence and organized crime, who are still experiencing discriminatory land policies and confiscations, we're demanding all kinds of social services, especially in the time of Corona – all these needs can only be met by the Israeli state.* And so for Mansour Abbas, it's logical to go with those who are actually in power.

Now, this is from his perspective, essentially. But the ramifications of what Mansour Abbas is doing, and the breaking of the political consensus – that it's not just a center-left, but that we should ally with the Israeli right as well – it really sets a very different tone for what Palestinian politics in Israel is trying to achieve. And the fact that Mansour Abbas was able to accumulate now four seats in the Knesset versus the broken Joint List's six seats shows that this might be a viable



political option, which has very concerning implications for the community and also for the wider Palestinian people.

Yara Hawari 23:48

Yeah, and Mansour Abbas is clearly an opportunist politician through and through, and it is indeed very concerning. So building on this topic of possible Palestinian collaboration with Netanyahu, we have statistics from this latest election round that there were more Palestinians voting for Likud than ever before, which is just mind boggling for so many. So how can this phenomenon of Palestinians voting for Likud be explained? You touched upon it briefly in your previous thoughts, but perhaps you can unpack this mind-boggling phenomenon a bit more.

Amjad Iraqi 24:24

I would note that, though there was a slight spike, it wasn't like a major voting spike per se, so there's some positivity in knowing that was the case. But to put it both, again, in the historical and more present scene, historically, Palestinian citizens have also voted for Zionist parties. This is all the way back to the early years of the state, whereby a lot of people voted for Mapai, for example, again, the precursor to Labor. And even to this day, for example, you have some Palestinian citizens voting for Likud who basically vote for it, not because you necessarily believe in all their principles and ideologies, but it could be something as basic as thinking that Likud is better for economic policy; that they think that they support small businesses or have a more free market thinking, which gives me the idea that Likud is able to economically manage Israel in a better way, which inherently benefits them.

There are those who, like Mansour Abbas, think that if you're going to vote for someone, vote for those who are actually in power. So the Likud party essentially is that camp. So it's not like an unprecedented phenomenon per se. It's not a major one. And the biggest struggle when it comes to the Palestinian citizens



voting for Zionist parties, actually, is more along the Zionist left – so parties like Meretz, parties like Labor, which has drastically, drastically shrunk from what it once was. And this is because sometimes there's an idea amongst certain segments of Palestinian society that you're better off voting for an Arab-Jewish Zionist party that will have the ear of other members of parliament. There are those are actually very disillusioned with their own Arab political representatives, because they see them being targeted and excluded and discriminated, and that they can't really achieve much because they're Arab basically, and so they think they'll have a better shot at some kind of influence and shaping their political platforms if they vote for these center-left Zionist parties.

In the end, the vast majority of Palestinian citizens who vote, vote for Arab political parties. In the previous incarnation, the majority voted for the Joint List, and now it's very much split between Ra'am and the List itself. So it's not a huge phenomenon, but it is an indication of the extent to which, especially as the larger Palestinian question kind of shrinks in the minds of Palestinian citizens, they're going to continue looking inwards to the Israeli Zionist political spectrum, and that they'll try to find more answers to meet their basic needs through the Zionist parties to provide for them, and to try to channel the policies that they require. This is again very concerning, in terms of the effect that this will have on Palestinian identity, on keeping the occupation as a central pillar also of their politics, or if this will entail a kind of return to an Arab Israelification, so to speak, of the community here.

Yara Hawari 27:13

So it's clear that the phenomenon of Palestinians voting for Likud has been sensationalized by the Israeli media, and perhaps even by Palestinians elsewhere because it does seem incredibly bizarre. But when we put this in the context, the historical context, as you did, Amjad, of Palestinian participation in the Knesset, I think it becomes less of a phenomenon. And in general, Palestinians voting for



Zionist parties always needs to be understood in the context of settler colonialism, and that indigenous people have long been co-opted as common practice. And for many of them, it seems as a mechanism of survival and perhaps the only mechanism of survival.

Amjad, I want to end on something that we haven't talked about yet, and that's that not all Palestinian citizens of Israel do vote. Indeed, there is a small but significant group of people that have long boycotted the Knesset elections, such as Abnaa el-Balad, but also individuals not particularly affiliated with political parties or groups. And for many of them, it comes from a principled stance of not wanting to legitimize the Knesset, or not wanting to recognize the colonial entity. But I think it also comes from a place of recognizing – and even frustration at – the limited achievements of the Palestinian presence in the Knesset and the high political costs of that presence. We know very well that Israel frequently uses Palestinian participation in elections and the existence of Palestinian members of Knesset as an example and manifestation of Israeli democracy. This boycott campaign has gone through its ups and downs, in terms of popularity. Perhaps it will gain more traction since the split of the Joint List. But I wondered if you could share your thoughts about the campaign and the tactic to boycott?

Amjad Iraqi 29:12

Yeah, it's a very complex subject. I would start, first and foremost, by recontextualizing why Palestinian citizens vote in Israel. It's not because they necessarily believe that Israel is a democracy, and in fact, Israel for all intents and purposes is not a real democracy. Any country that defines its citizens' rights and its political identity based on their ethnic, racial, religious identity is inherently undemocratic, and the legal system and political system is designed to ensure that that stays that way. Most Palestinian citizens aren't under any illusions of it. For them, I'm speaking very broadly, but voting is a method of survival; it's a method of trying to achieve some influence over your basic needs.



But then another significant part of why they would vote is not because they're trying to legitimize the Knesset or legitimize the state, but because voting in the elections is a mechanism for the community itself to decide its own national representatives. So, in a way, it's kind of taking this institution provided by the state but for the community to tell itself, *Who are we voting in to speak for us? To speak for us in front of the Knesset? To speak in front of us, in our towns and communities? To set our demands for international audiences and international actors?* That it's almost like this system that the committee uses entirely for itself. And this is kind of an implicit understanding, because we don't really have any other mechanisms at the moment, or any other institutions to ensure this kind of democratic method. We have the High Follow-Up Committee, which was supposed to be this external body unassociated with state that was supposed to represent all segments of Palestinian society. But they're not elected. They're mostly these older men who are completely unrepresentative of the society; no one really knows who is in it either. And so, in an ironic way, the Joint List is more democratic for Palestinian citizens than the High Follow-Up Committee, which is supposed to be the main representative of the community.

Now, what this kind of leads to is the question of, *If we're not going to vote, then what are the other institutions and political mechanisms in place to channel our political grievances, our political demands, and ensure that there is some representation in our society and some kind of political leadership?* The boycott movement has very, very strong points, a very strong case, essentially – and it's growing almost by the year – to say that, you can keep voting for the Knesset, you can keep doing all this, you can try to shape it, but, like you pointed to, Yara, it's never really going to achieve your full equality. You might get a few budgets here or a small block in a policy there, but in the end, your inherent inequality will always exist. And the evidence completely justifies that and proves that.

And I think, especially over the recent period, there's been a lot of disillusionment



with the Joint List, which achieved 15 seats in earlier elections – the highest amount that Palestinian citizens ever accumulated – and that even having those 15 seats, literally the third largest party in the parliament, that that was not enough to get you political bargaining chips. That was not enough to force the Zionist parties to treat you as an equal partner or to listen to your demands. In fact, Benny Gantz literally broke his sole campaign promise to ally with Bibi in order to avoid being equal with the Joint List.

The question that's still not being answered, or that still doesn't have an answer, is, *if not to vote, then what?* The alternatives aren't very clear to the Palestinian community. The High Follow-Up Committee, unfortunately, is not a decent leadership alternative, and the grassroots movements that might've once existed in Palestinian society don't exist as strongly anymore. In fact, the Palestinian community has really looked very much inwards more and more, especially to the issues of organized crime and violence and guns, to the point that there's almost a desperation to just have anything.

Now, for me as an analyst, a big question, a big part of the equation that's often ignored is, *what if the alternative comes in Palestinian national politics itself?* What we've been seeing over the past decade, through the split with Fatah and Hamas, with the growing decline of the PLO, is that Palestinian citizens don't know where they're heading. As I was alluding to earlier, if the Palestinian movement doesn't know where it's going, then how are Palestinian citizens supposed to know who to turn to or what they're trying to fight to achieve? At the moment, the only option they have in front of them is the Israeli political system, whether it's justified or not, or whether it's beneficial or not. But as long as the Palestinian national movement itself is in this current chaos and in this internal fragmentation, then not voting or boycotting the Knesset will only – the fear is that it will only increase this demise and fragmentation of the Palestinian community inside Israel as well.

Now this could potentially be revived. We'll see if it happens, we're supposed to be



having Palestinian elections this year, and though there is a lot of skepticism and pessimism, maybe this might help to reawaken some sense of redirection for where the Palestinian people are trying to move towards. But again, I know there's also a debate about whether or not one should even vote in *those* Palestinian Authority elections, for all the justified reasons. But the concern is that, if we do not even strategically use the tools that we have in front of us, even just to organize ourselves – forget about influencing Israeli parliament, forget about legitimizing the states – *how do we organize ourselves?* If the right to vote is one of the most trusted, most established ways for us to do it, and to hold our leaders accountable, then I'm not sure that it can be so easily abandoned.

If I may bring in myself personally, I've voted in and out, sometimes did, sometimes didn't. And for me, for example, I was a pessimistic believer in the Joint List opportunities. But even I didn't vote in the last election, essentially to hold my political representatives accountable. I think that, no matter what my differences were about their decisions to recommend Gantz et cetera, it was worth trying to shift the political cards a little bit: *With the internal fighting, the complete lack of alternatives when the approach with Gantz failed, what was your alternative? Did you communicate with the public? Did you come up with a different strategy that's outside of the Knesset, which I think is ultimately the answer?* Sitting in the Knesset is meant to be a strategy for the community. If you're only using it to achieve better budgets, better policies, then you're there for the wrong reasons. And, unfortunately, the Joint List was increasingly digging itself there into the wrong reasons. And so, by me not voting in the previous election, I'm holding my leaders accountable. And I, for one, don't have any other method to properly do that. I don't know whether this is right or wrong, and this is essentially the dilemma that's faced by many Palestinian citizens.

The idea of boycott is paramount and it's fundamental. But the key question in the end is, *what is the strategy that goes behind it, and can we rally the community behind*



that strategy? Otherwise you will only see fragmentation, as we're seeing now. The fact that you have the List, and the Ra'am party, and the people who haven't voted, is just an illustration that, if we're not clear on where we are, where we want to be heading collectively, then we're only going to weaken ourselves for the future.

Yara Hawari 36:54

I'm also glad that you brought in the Palestinian national movement. I think as long as it continues to marginalize and ignore the Palestinian citizens of Israel, many will see the Knesset elections as the only vehicle. And that is one of the many failures of the Palestinian leadership.

Amjad, I'm afraid we'll have to stop here. This has been brilliant. Thank you so much for your concise and nuanced analysis on this topic. I hope that you will join us on one of our future episodes of *Rethinking Palestine*.

Amjad Iraqi 37:27

Thank you so much, Yara, it's a real pleasure. And thank you to Al-Shabaka, as always.

Yara Hawari 37:33

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