ROUNDTABLE | POLITICS

The Joint List in Israel's Elections: Palestinians in from the Cold?

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Overview

The Joint List launched on February 14, 2015 by four political parties largely representing the Palestinian citizens of Israel may win enough seats to be the third largest party in the Israeli Knesset. But will this really challenge the second-class status of Palestinian citizens? Will it prevent the rapid erosion of the rights they still have if the racism openly expressed by the current right-wing constellation in power continues to be codified into law? Does it represent the rebirth of a collective sense of identity and action? The jury is still out. Al-Shabaka analysts Diana Buttu, As'ad Ghanem, and Nijmeh Ali, themselves Palestinian citizens of Israel, argue different perspectives as they analyze the underlying fault lines as well as the problems and potential of the Joint List whatever its electoral success.

Diana Buttu: Will Palestinian Parties Disintegrate?

Palestinians in Israel have long spoken of the need for a unified list to address Palestinian rights. Despite the political differences between the socialist, nationalist, and Islamist parties, they do not differ in their positions as regards to the rights of the Palestinians in Israel: They all want to see an end to racist laws

and to the military occupation of Palestinian territory and have, throughout history, voted the same way in the Knesset.

However, the coalition was not formed in response to a shared view regarding the issues confronting the Palestinians or to the demands of the public. Rather, the Joint List was formed to respond to two other factors. First, the Knesset, in a move later sanctioned by the courts, raised the electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25%. Faced with the prospect of obliteration, it was in each party's interest to form a unified list. Second, there has been a drop in support for Palestinian political parties. The drop has not only been in voter turnout for national elections: Not a single Palestinian political party managed to secure an election victory in the municipal elections even though voter turnout is still high at that level.

The drop in support for Knesset representation is likely to be the result of a growing sense that the presence of Palestinian political parties legitimates the Knesset's actions. In addition, there is criticism that the political parties are neither advancing the rights of Palestinians in Israel nor fighting the increasing racism in the country.

Even if the Joint List ends up being the third or fourth largest party in the Knesset as surveys show, the list's effectiveness remains in doubt. It is widely assumed that having more seats in the Knesset implies greater political power, whether in building a ruling coalition or in forming a viable opposition. However, neither the Zionist Camp — which supported the disqualification of leading Palestinian politician Haneen Zoabi — nor the Likud Party have any interest in forming a coalition with the Joint List.

At the same time, it is not in the interest of the Joint List to form a coalition with any Zionist party given that they place the supremacy of Zionism and the rights of Jews above the notion of equality or democracy. Indeed, it would be impossible for the list to form a coalition with the very parties that support racist laws, the

colonization of the West Bank and the siege and attack on Gaza, as they would need to support those policies whether as Ministers of the government or as coalition partners. Thus, the parties that founded the Joint List risk remaining as they were before unification: Small parties fighting racism within the belly of the beast.

Moreover, Palestinian political parties will have to continue to push back against the growing tide of disenchantment with the Israeli political system and the sense that it merely serves to legitimate Israel's racism. While the Joint List may increase voter turnout for this election, it may also lead to the eventual disintegration of the parties that formed it if they cannot fulfill their voters' expectations in challenging Israel's apartheid policies towards Palestinians living in Israel and under its military occupation.

As'ad Ghanem: A Way out of the Margins?

The political activism of the Palestinian citizens of Israel has always been understood as being synonymous with the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an end to the occupation of Palestinian territory, and settlement of the refugee question. This understanding was reinforced after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 and the Palestinian Authority (PA) was established as the political nucleus to transition from occupation to an independent state.

The developments since then – including the split in the Palestinian national movement, the effective demise of the two-state solution, and increasing Israeli extremism – have been met by passivity among Palestinian political actors in Israel who remain committed to the illusion of a political solution to ease their hardship as victims of the conflict. In short, they accept the second-class status of a "reserve player" – at best – in the Palestinian national movement.

In fact, the majority of the political leaders believe that their domestic issues take

second place in the context of the larger Palestinian struggle. They accept the blatant interference of the leaders of the Palestinian national movement – including on how to use their votes as Israeli citizens to influence who should govern in Israel. Another example of their subservience includes accepting political money from the Arab Gulf states. Most importantly, by accepting the two-state solution – a Jewish and an Arab state – as set out in the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, they have accepted a secondary status in the Jewish state.

The acceptance of this marginal status has found expression in the Joint List's electoral program. Instead of making a special effort to draft a real program of action to deal with the current challenges facing the Palestinian community in Israel, the list simply did a cut and paste of the positions of its component political parties in previous elections. In particular, the Joint List's program supports ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state. The preamble declares that the list "was established to consolidate unity in the face of racism, and to boost the weight and influence of the Arab masses and all anti-occupation and anti-racism forces." It does not contain a single word about the role of Palestinians in Israel as Palestinians. Rather, it focuses on their role as Israelis. This clearly demonstrates that the Palestinian political parties accept serving as a reserve player role in the Palestinian national movement.

By contrast, successive Israeli governments, particularly Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's current and past governments, have helped push Palestinian unity by ending the illusion of the two-state solution and promoting the Jewishness of the state. Indeed, Netanyahu's positions help to remind us that our cause is rooted in the consequences of the 1948 war that created Israel over Palestine and not in the 1967 occupation as Palestinian leaders and elites would have us believe. Indeed, the colonial and fundamentalist program of successive Israeli governments underscore the need to transform Palestinian national action in a way that addresses the roots of the problem rather than its offshoots, as is

done in the Joint List's program.

We need a real shift both in our understanding of the conflict and of the role of the Palestinians in Israel in shaping the conflict's future resolution. An improvement of the status of the Palestinians in Israel will not be achieved by the illusory two-state solution. Rather, the solution to the Palestinian issue depends on the ability of the Palestinians in Israel to articulate their own project as they once did in the Future Vision document in 2007.

The Future Vision document captured the broad national agreement among Palestinians in Israel regarding the major political issues they themselves face as well as their role in shaping a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian question. It is only by doing so that the Palestinians in Israel can move from the margins to a central political role. Such a role would help move Israel and the Palestinian national movement to a just agreement that addresses the outcomes of the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe) rather than those of the 1967 occupation without leaving the Palestinians in Israel eternally on the margins of the "Jewish state."

The Joint List could have embarked on this project if they had worked in earnest as true leaders rather than as politicians vying for Knesset seats. Yet again, an opportunity has slipped from our grasp to assume our part not just as Palestinians, but as leaders of the Palestinian people, without this in any way conflicting with our role in Israeli elections. Perhaps we can grasp this opportunity in the future if we can produce leaders who see us as central players rather than as subordinates to Israel, the PA, or some other Arab regime that gives us money or hollow nationalist slogans.

Nijmeh Ali: The Beginnings of a Historic Shift

The Palestinians in Israel still heatedly debate the effectiveness of participating in Israeli elections. Some still call for a boycott because they believe participation

legitimates and reinforces Israeli colonization and occupation. Others have simply lost faith in the political system's ability to bring about any change: In 2013, only about 56% of the Palestinians in Israel participated in the elections.

Moreover, the fact that the Palestinians in Israel have the right to participate in elections does not mean that they influence Israeli decision-making. The Zionist political establishment excludes the Arab parties. In other words, they are inside the political game but still outside the political process.

Those that advocate participation underscore the importance of defending Palestinian rights even though they acknowledge the difficulty of creating real change. They consider the Knesset as a path not only to achieving individual rights but also to seeking recognition of collective Palestinian rights as a national minority and an indigenous people. In addition, they want to challenge the Israeli mainstream by "rocking the boat."

At the same time, many Palestinians in Israel are frustrated with the infighting of the past. They know that whatever their ideological beliefs – socialist, nationalist, or religious – they are discriminated against for being Palestinian. This feeling was heightened during Israel's attacks on Gaza in the summer of 2014, when the Palestinian citizens of Israel felt more threatened than at any previous time, whether in the street, on the bus, at university, or in the workplace.

Against this background, the Joint List is a direct response to the Israeli right wing that aimed to push the Arab parties out of the political arena by raising the electoral threshold. This maneuver can be seen as an attempt at a "political transfer," as it were, perhaps as a prelude to the Palesinians' physical transfer. By replacing the existing parties with "Good Arabs" that are members of Zionist parties, the Israeli right wing would be able to showcase Israel's "democracy" without challenging Zionist hegemony.

Foiled in that attempt, the Israeli right wing is now seeking to discredit the Joint

List by warning of the "Arab threat" in Israel and by insisting on labeling it as an "Arab" Joint List, as does much of the media, thus presenting it as Arabs against Jews. It is important to repeatedly emphasize that the list is officially a Joint List and not an Arab list and that it includes anti-Zionist Jews. Although the largest group voting for the list will be Palestinians in Israel, the list also aims to attract Jewish voters: It launched its media campaign in both Arabic and Hebrew.

The Joint List will not erase the differences between its component parties or put an end to the sharp, heated debate among Palestinians in Israel as to how Palestinian society should position and present itself. However, it does emphasize the collective struggle against both discrimination and occupation in partnership between Palestinian Arabs and democratic Jewish forces. Together they form a democratic alternative to the ultra-nationalist camp led by Netanyahu and the Zionist Camp led by Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni.

The belief in a collective struggle is clearly in the list's political program, which is based on eight principles: Against the occupation and for a just peace; for national and civil equality; against racism and fascism and for democracy; for social and environmental justice and the rights of workers; against the oppression of women and their right to participation; for the development of culture, language, identity, and belonging to a nation; against colonialism; and for the elimination of nuclear weapons from the Middle East.

The list faces two main challenges: To raise the percentage of Arabs who vote on election day and to successfully attract Jewish voters. The imperative of working together involves many compromises, but it is a powerful political tactic that will reshape the political behavior of the Palestinians in Israel, not only during these elections but in the future.

The Joint List will provide the experience necessary for collaboration on a wide range of issues and stages, both within and outside the Knesset. It brings the word

"collective" back to the political lexicon of the Palestinians in Israel, something that Israeli governments both left and right, have fought against since the Nakba in 1948. In short, it is a historic act that has the potential to effect change in both the internal politics of the Palestinians in Israel as well as in Israel itself.

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