

Averbukh, Lidia

Research Report

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SWP Comment

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Towards Jewish-Arab Normalization in Israel

Israeli Arabs Want a More Pragmatic Politics while Jewish Parties Court the Arab Vote

Lidia Averbukh

In the run-up to the 2021 elections to the Knesset, Jewish parties are actively courting the votes of Israeli Arabs, who constitute 17 per cent of all Israelis eligible to vote. At the same time, Israeli Arabs are increasingly emphasizing the need for a politics that will help improve their living circumstances and allow them greater political participation. While the Joint List alliance of Arab parties continues to follow its traditional oppositionist course and has come to terms with the decision of one of its members, the Islamic Movement (Ra'am), to split away, the election campaign has seen the emergence of new Arab politics, whose actors advocate a more pragmatic approach and are looking to cooperate with Jewish parties. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the identity of the Jewish state of Israel are playing a secondary role. The situation is similar in Israeli local politics, where Jews and Arabs are already engaged in interest-based cooperation.

“For many, many years, the Arab public was outside the mainstream of leadership,” Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said during the 2021 election campaign. But there was no reason for this, he commented, adding that the elections should demonstrate that the Arabs are part of Israel’s success story. With these words, he signalled a remarkable turnaround, since a coalition with Arab parties had been taboo in the election campaigns of recent years. Right-wing Jewish parties regarded their Arab counterparts as the “fifth column”, as subversive actors with whom cooperation would pose an existential threat to the state. In order to keep down the number of Israeli Arabs turning out to vote, Likud

sought to intimidate them. For example, it arranged for cameras to be installed at the polling stations in Arab districts because of what it alleged was fraudulent voting. In 2015 Netanyahu warned about “Arabs going in droves to the polling stations”. Nor were the parties from the Left or the Centre able to duck the impact of the anti-Arab slogans. They distanced themselves from Arab voters and parties for fear of being discredited as anti-Zionist. Both camps – the Right and the Centre-Left – adopted strategies that counted mainly on the Jewish vote. The bulk of the Arab voter was left, virtually uncontested, to the Arab Hadash, Balad, Ta'al and Ra'am parties.



The Rise and Fall of the Joint List

In 2015 four Arab parties merged to form the Joint List in order to circumvent the 3.25 per cent barrier, which, introduced the previous year, was targeted, above all, against them. After having dissolved itself temporarily for tactical reasons, the alliance re-emerged for the election to the 22nd Knesset in September 2019 so that its combined strength could be used to exercise more influence over Arab issues. It remained intact for the election to the 23rd Knesset in 2020.

The Arab parties' harsh rejection by the Jewish parties and their concentrated presence in the Joint List had the effect of gradually mobilizing the Arab Israelis, who traditionally have remained aloof from national elections. Turnout among this segment of the population stood at 63.4 per cent in 2015 (20th Knesset) and 59.2 per cent in 2019 (22th Knesset), which gave the alliance 13 mandates on each occasion. In 2020 (23rd Knesset), it peaked at 64.8 per cent, whereby the Arab List became the largest opposition party in the parliament with 15 mandates. This new-found strength meant that Arab parties – and thus Arab votes – were increasingly perceived as having political relevance. For its part, the Arab List hoped that one day it would be able to cast off the role of outsider.

After the last election, in 2020, the Arab parliamentary deputies used their new situation to publicly throw their unanimous support behind a Jewish candidate – the first time they had done so since 1992 when Yitzhak Rabin won the elections. The Arab parties backed Benny Gantz so that he would be the first to conduct coalition talks. Their hope was that Netanyahu would be replaced as prime minister.

However, although Gantz was able to strengthen his negotiating position with the help of Arab votes, he distanced himself from the Joint List and broke his promise not to join a coalition government led by Netanyahu. The so-called national unity government formed by Zionist parties from the Right to the Centre-Left was aimed at

finally delivering political stability and excluded not only Arab deputies but also extreme right-wing Jewish parties. Thereafter, the Centre-Left camp, which had campaigned as the “anti-Bibi camp”, disintegrated; only some of its deputies had wanted to belong to a coalition under Netanyahu. As a result, the new government remained unstable.

For his part, the head of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh of the Hadash party, lost credibility, having failed with his strategy of putting the entire political weight of the Arab parties at the disposal of the “anti-Bibi camp” in the hope of achieving political concessions in the future. It is true that the strong performance of the Arab List was one of the reasons why, in the last three elections (in 2019 and 2020), Netanyahu did not obtain a majority for a purely right-wing government; but, other than this, the List was unable to reap any benefits from its record number of seats.

Competing for Arab Votes

Because the Joint List remained excluded from any decision-making processes and had no possibility to exercise any influence, there was growing discontent over the course being pursued by Odeh. For its part, the Islamic Movement (Ra'am) began to split away from the alliance – a development that was expedited by Netanyahu's sudden change of course. Faced with a collapsing government coalition, the prime minister found himself looking for new allies. On several occasions, he was able to reach agreement on tacit cooperation with Mansour Abbas, the head of the Islamic Movement. For example, in early December 2020 parliamentary deputies from this party absented themselves during voting on the dissolution of the Knesset in order not to have to vote with other deputies from the Joint List for the resignation of the Netanyahu government. Moreover, Abbas prevented the role played by the prime minister in the submarine corruption affair from being investigated.

After the Knesset had been dissolved in December 2020 and new elections scheduled for March 2021, Netanyahu launched his election campaign by visiting several Arab cities. They included Nazareth, Israel's largest Arab city, where he received a ceremonial welcome from Mayor Ali Salam. For the first time in its history, Netanyahu's party, Likud, is fielding a Muslim Arab as a candidate in the upcoming election: Nail Zoabi is slated to hold a ministerial post for Arab affairs in a future Netanyahu government. Although he ranks only 39th on the party's list of candidates, Netanyahu has promised he will enter the parliament in the event that Likud forms the new coalition. The means to this end is the so-called Norwegian Law, which allows future ministers to give up their parliamentary seats in favour of others.

Netanyahu's radical turnaround is to be explained, above all, by the possibility of his political survival being secured by Arab votes. Amid dwindling support within the ranks of Likud after a group led by his long-time associate Gideon Saar split away and because of the ongoing corruption trials, the prime minister is politically weakened. At the same time, the split in the Arab List serves his strategic goals: if the Islamic Movement makes it into the Knesset, he can hope to enjoy its backing; if it does not, the right-wing bloc of his supporters will be strengthened since the Arab List is likely to lose some mandates. According to the latest polls, it will have only nine or ten seats.

The prime minister's rapprochement with Israeli Arabs has rapidly changed the way in which other Jewish parties are dealing with this group. In the run-up to the March 2021 national elections, political actors from the Left to the Right can be seen competing for the Arab vote.

After three ballots in quick succession, a number of Jewish parties are politically and ideologically spent and are afraid they will not make it into the Knesset. They are dependent on expanding their electorate in order to win enough votes. The idea is that involvement with Arab politicians would open up the Arab electorate to them.

Meretz a left-wing Zionist party, has introduced three Arab candidates in fourth, fifth and ninth positions on the new party list with which it launched its election campaign. In fifth and fourth positions are Issawi Frej, who has already represented Meretz in the Knesset once, and Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi, the co-founder and former director of the Injaz non-governmental organization, which advocates the professionalization of Arab local politics. The order of the candidates on this list is noteworthy as Meretz has never nominated more than one Arab candidate for the top positions. Under the leadership of former General Ehud Barak, it focused entirely during the last elections (in March 2020) on the potential left-wing Zionist Jewish electorate and declined to run any Arab candidates.

The Labour Party (Avoda) is pursuing a similar course. After having participated in the government of national unity through several deputies and even provided two ministers, it has chosen the direct opposite approach for the upcoming election under the new leadership of Merav Michaeli. With the Muslim film director Ibtisam Mara'ana and Amir Khniffes, a member of the Druze religious community, it is fielding two Arab candidates in seventh and fifteenth place. These rankings do not offer very good prospects of entering the parliament, while Mara'ana was almost disqualified from running in the election over anti-Zionist comments. Nevertheless, the line-up has a symbolic significance that is crucial for expanding the party's electorate and underscores the party's renewed overtly left-wing stance. Both Meretz and Avoda hope to make it into the Knesset with their choice of candidates, after having had to join forces with other parties in the previous two elections.

A rapprochement with Arab voters is also under way in the centre of the political spectrum. Yair Lapid, the head of Yesh Atid, which surveys rank as the second strongest party after Likud, is seen as the leader of the "anti-Bibi bloc" of the Left and the Centre for the upcoming election. Lapid,

who until now has kept his distance from Arab politicians and made disparaging comments about them, has said he does not rule out a coalition with Arab parties.

The Arab Discourse: Between Ideology and Pragmatism

That the Jewish parties are now showing an interest in Arab voters is not the only new development. There is also a growing desire among the Arab population for political integration and participation, although the picture is somewhat mixed. Until now, the Arab population has been represented mainly by the Joint List, which, however, comprises actors of different political hues: communists, moderate and more radical nationalists and, until recently, Islamists. Points of friction have emerged within these parties. For example, in the summer of 2020, the List threatened to break up over a vote on LGBT rights. And there was also discord over whether the alliance should pragmatically adapt to the political circumstances. Because the Islamic Movement wanted to cooperate with right-wing Jewish parties, it took the decision to leave the Joint List.

The three remaining parties in the Joint List – Hadash, Balad and Ta'al – continue to act, above all, along traditional ideology-based political lines. They emphasize the affiliation between the Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian nation. Moreover, they regard the political struggle to secure democratic rights in the state of Israel as directly linked to the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They reject the state of Israel's self-designation as "Jewish and democratic" and advocate a full-fledged Arab-Palestinian identity in a state of equal citizens. While these principles serve as a common denominator for different ideological starting points, they cannot be enforced within Israeli politics.

Furthermore, the influence of the Israeli Left has been dwindling for a long time. Thus, if the Arab List were to continue to work together with the Left over the next few years, it would likely mean cooperating

with a weak opposition that has no chance of gaining power. Although the Arab List and the Left have fundamentally the same view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the issue seems to be losing political relevance for Israeli society as a whole and for large parts of the Arab population. A survey carried out in December 2020 showed that the conflict ranks only seventh among the issues that are important for Arab Israelis, while the top six concerns of this group are all related to their immediate living situation. Occupying first place by a wide margin is the problem of crime and violence in Arab towns and villages: in 2020 alone, more than 100 murders were recorded there – a new high in the level of violence. Other crucial issues are improving the economic situation, the regulation of planning and building, and integration into the Israeli labour market.

Amid declining popular concern about the Palestinian issue, the views of many Arab Israelis and their political representatives in the Knesset are drifting apart. While representatives of the Joint List, for example, unanimously condemned the normalization of relations between Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, on the one hand, and Israel on the other, the majority of the Arab population (61.8 per cent) sees this development as positive. The reasons include the new tourist and economic opportunities that had been opened up for Israeli Arabs as well as for all other Israeli citizens. Only 35.5 per cent reject normalization because they believe it could disadvantage the peace process.

Moreover, the very real concerns of Arab Israeli voters – such as security and economic prosperity – do not seem to have received enough attention, judging at least from public comments by the Joint List. Satisfaction with the party alliance has decreased in recent years. What has become important for Israeli Arabs is the implementation of measures to improve their living situation. The majority of the population believes that the Arab List has not made any significant contributions in this area. That is why the number of non-voters

in the Arab community appears to be growing again. In particular, it is the hopes of young Arab Israelis that have been dashed, as a February 2021 survey showed. Above all, the younger generation wants to be involved in political decision-making; and, in this respect, it is becoming more and more like its Jewish counterpart. The social integration now under way runs counter to the isolationism of Arab politics to date. The young Israeli Arabs of today are well educated and represented in almost every profession. They play a much more visible role in public than their parents and grandparents and display a new political self-confidence. They want to use the available democratic opportunities to increase the political weight they carry in the state. During the current election campaign, this trend is morphing into a new direction in Arab-Israeli politics.

The New Type of Arab Politician

Some of those Arab politicians with whom Jewish parties are engaging ahead of the upcoming election represent the shift from ideological to pragmatic politics and stronger political integration. The common destiny of the Palestinians and the Jewish identity of the state are no longer fundamental to their political agenda. Rather, their focus is on improving the immediate living conditions of Arab Israelis. And their aim is to achieve this from within, namely through cooperation with Israeli institutions and the Jewish political establishment.

An example of such a politician is Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi, an Arab candidate of the left-wing Zionist party Meretz. While she frequently refers to her Palestinian identity, her focus is on domestic issues. By her own admission, her political agenda is to raise the status of Arab women, improve the quality of Arab local administration, establish distributive justice and address the issues of construction, social assistance, as well as education and development. Rinawie Zoabi has decades-long experience in nego-

tiating with the Israeli government. Her political demands are anchored in a civil discourse according to which the Arab population is entitled to equal rights on the grounds of having equal democratic Israeli citizenship. By this, she means not only the equalization of living conditions but also the right to have a say in politics. In an interview with the Israeli daily newspaper *The Marker*, she said: “Today there is a young Arab generation that sees itself on equal terms with Jews and demands equal citizenship. People [...] want to influence [not only] what happens in [the Arab towns of] Umm Al-Fahm and Rahat but also the decision-making processes in the state of Israel as a whole.”

Similarly, the political demands of Mansour Abbas, the head of the Islamic Movement (Ra’am), which was part of the Joint List in the Knesset until the end of January 2021, no longer have to do explicitly with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather with everyday life. Abbas cultivates real-politik rhetoric. On the pro-government television channel Arutz 20, he defended his new course in a speech that urged the Israeli Arabs to be “pragmatic and no longer nationalist.” In this way, he hopes to gain support from the Israeli Right for local issues such as the fight against organized crime and violence in Arab towns and villages. On 1 March 2021, Netanyahu’s government approved a budget of 150 million NIS for this purpose.

In the Israeli daily newspaper *Ma’ariv*, Abbas explained that his new course involves not an ideological but a strategic change. He himself belongs neither to the Left nor the Right, he said, but is merely being pragmatic in the face of a right-wing government that is likely to remain in power. At the same time, Abbas points out that as regards close collaboration with the Right, there is common ground on socio-cultural issues between the Jewish religious right wing and the religious and conservative Arab politicians of the Islamic Movement and their voters.

While Rinawie Zoabi’s programme could inspire young and urban voters, the Islamic

Movement under Abbas wants to win over disconnected Arab groups, including the Bedouins of the Negev. On the one hand, this group belongs to the conservative electorate; on the other, they have long been frustrated by the desolate state of their villages and what they perceive as the lack of action on the part of the Arab List.

The political analyst Mohammad Darawshe, who in January introduced his newly founded Arab-Israeli party Ma'an, is another embodiment of the new type of Arab politician. Ma'an means "together" in Arabic and alludes to the partnership and coexistence of Jews and Arabs. From the outset, Darawshe has made it clear that his party recognizes Israel as a "Jewish state". However, while he has confirmed his obvious interest in a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he has explained that – unlike the parties of the Joint List – Ma'an will devote itself entirely to domestic Israeli issues rather than pursuing an "ideologized" regional and foreign policy.

There are strategic advantages to this new direction in Arab politics. In contrast with Arab candidates who strongly emphasize their affiliation with the other party to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and who stand in opposition to the state, the new-style Arab politicians identify themselves, first and foremost, as Israeli citizens and their agenda is compatible with that of other actors in the Israeli political system. They are more easily accepted as partners not only by Jewish parties but also by the Jewish majority. They themselves hope that their new rhetoric and purely domestic Israeli agenda will improve their chances of exercising political influence and becoming close to decision-making. At the same time, they are signalling a willingness to assume responsibility. Thanks to this approach, two concerns of the Arab-Israelis are being addressed at once – namely, their growing desire for political integration and their demand that more attention be paid to their concrete problems.

That the new Arab political approach can be successful in the longer term is shown by the experience gained in local politics.

At this level, Jewish-Arab cooperation functions across the various political camps because ideologically divisive issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are excluded from the agenda.

Local politics lead the way

As elsewhere in the world, local politics in Israel are characterized by the virtual absence of ideology. In contrast with national politics, there is no coupling of issues to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or questions of state identity. Not even the Nation-State Law – which, passed just a few months before the 2018 local elections, established Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people – was a subject for discussion during campaigning in the Arab sector.

Local politics in the Arab communities are concerned mainly with the domestic issues that affect this segment of the population. These are the same issues on which Arab politicians such as Rinawie Zoabi, Abbas and Darawshe are focused at the national level. They, too, are pursuing not an agenda for society as a whole but an Arab-Israeli agenda. They want to see real improvements in the living conditions of Arab Israelis. The most pressing issues are security, housing, education and urban infrastructure, all of which are typical areas of local politics.

Just as the practical focus is not new, so the basis for argument is familiar, too. Local politicians understand that emphasizing equal Israeli citizenship for Jews and Arabs is the most reasonable strategy to improve their own negotiating position vis-à-vis state institutions. The pragmatic and targeted approach of Arab local politicians is to point out how Arab citizens are materially disadvantaged compared with their Jewish counterparts and to underscore the state's interest in doing away with this imbalance in the long run. For example, in 2015, following intensive negotiations between Arab actors, including Rinawie Zoabi, and the Israeli government, a five-year plan for the economic development

of Arab municipalities was adopted. Its aim was to redistribute state funding so that the amount received by Arab municipalities was proportional to the 20 per cent share of Arab Israelis in the overall population. The plan provided for a budget of up to 15 billion NIS and was extended for another year in the autumn of 2020.

At the same time, local politics show that Arab Israelis are very keen to make use of the political means at their disposal. While their participation in national elections is still below the average for the population as a whole, turnout in local elections in Arab towns and villages is much higher than in Jewish municipalities: an average of 85 per cent compared with just 61 per cent in 2018. If, in future, national politics were to pay as much substantive attention to the needs of Arab Israelis, voter turnout among this segment could increase at the national level, too.

Arab-Jewish Cooperation

While it is true that since the state of Israel came into existence, Arab parties have never participated in government, coalitions of Jewish and Arab parties can be found in local politics. Joint administrations exist in large mixed cities such as Tel Aviv-Jaffa and Haifa, the mayors of which belong to the traditionally centre-left Labour Party. At the same time, the number of Jewish-Arab administrations has grown in cities where the mayors are from right-wing nationalist Jewish parties such as Likud and the Russian-speaking party Ysrael Beitenu. Since the 2018 local elections, more Jewish-Arab administrations have emerged — a surprise result of that ballot. They include such diverse mixed towns as Acre, Lod, Ramla, Nof HaGalil and Ma'alot Tarshiha. Besides demography, it is, above all, common interests that speak in favour of this new cooperation.

Municipal affairs such as the funding of housing construction, road transport and sports and recreation facilities affect all groups of the population equally. In local

politics, Jews and Arabs can focus on issues in which they have a common interest and which do not polarize.

This practice could serve as a model for national politics, especially if there are benefits for both sides. For Arab local politicians, the advantages of cooperation outweigh the disadvantages, as they gain better access to the budget and are therefore able to act more effectively on behalf of their constituents. However, in mixed Jewish-Arab cities, the chances of electing an Arab mayor are virtually nil. For this reason, Arab politicians often have no choice but to cooperate in order to ensure that the Arab population receives roughly as much funding as the Jewish population. Bearing this in mind could also be relevant in the Knesset, where there is a similar power constellation.

For Jewish coalition partners, too, there are pragmatic reasons for the involvement of Arab parties. It makes sense to involve as many parliamentary deputies with the same local political goals as possible for the sake of more effective government.

However, increased cooperation between Jewish and Arab local politicians does not necessarily mean that the two sides are becoming closer ideologically. This cannot be expected to happen at the national level, too. Rather, it is easier to smooth over ideological differences at both the local and national levels when pragmatic actors work together.

In local politics, the quality of cooperation varies from place to place depending on the respective politicians and political circumstances. On the one hand, Arab politicians hold high office in many of the cities where there is Jewish-Arab cooperation: Acre, Ma'alot Tarshiha and Nof HaGalil, among others, have an Arab deputy mayor. On the other hand, coexistence between Jews and Arabs continues to be marked by conflict, as, for example, in the city of Lod, whose mayor, Yair Revivo, has often attracted attention for his anti-Arab remarks. But given the segregation of the two groups — even in mixed cities, they live in different neighbourhoods — any

cooperation is to be regarded as positive. And that remains the case even if working together is pragmatically justified and says little about the actual relationship between the two groups.

Outlook

For the first time ever at the national level, it is possible to observe, in this election campaign, a process that has long been taking place both at the local level and in the Arab discourse. Arab-Israeli politics are becoming diversified, and this has the potential to change the overall political landscape in the longer term. Alongside the traditional politics of the Joint List, which focuses on disputes within society, there are Arab politicians coming to the fore who put more emphasis on substantive issues. By doing so, they are following the growing wishes of those parts of the Arab-Israeli population that want greater political participation and an active politics that serves the concrete interests of Israeli Arabs — above all, improved security and better living conditions.

While it is likely that in the upcoming election, many Arab Israelis will remain loyal to the shrunken Joint List and political isolationism, it is already possible to speak of a gradual “normalization”. This manifests itself in Israeli Arabs wanting to integrate more fully into the state and thereby prevent their interests as Israeli citizens being overshadowed by an overarching Palestinian identity and solidarity with Palestinians in the Middle East conflict. At the same time, Zionist parties are making efforts not seen before and at times unimaginable to win Arab votes for themselves or even to cooperate with Arab parties.

The forthcoming election will show just how successful these first steps towards normalization might be. The willingness to engage in this process is now evident both in Israeli politics and among the population.

Lidia Averbukh is a Research Associate for the project “Israel and its regional and global conflicts: Domestic developments, security issues and foreign affairs”. The project is part of SWP’s Middle East and Africa Research Division and is funded by the German Foreign Office.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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