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Arab Palestinian Voting Patterns in Israel's Latest Elections

Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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With Arab political participation divided across two proportional electoral lists, March's fourth Israeli general elections in less than two years saw the Arab Joint List and United Arab List (the Southern Islamic Movement) winning a total of 10 parliamentary seats (6 for the former, 4 for the latter), compared to 15 in the previous year's elections. Arab participation in these elections recorded a significant decrease, hence the results: the total number of votes obtained by Arab parties in these elections capped at 379 thousand votes, compared with 581 thousand in the previous elections.

The failure to mobilize Arab voters also testifies to the decline in the power of the Arab parties given a widening gap between the Arab public's expectations of their representatives' ability to influence decision-making inside Israel. Meanwhile Arab national agendas have receded and there is no resolute stance on right-wing Israel.

This paper analyzes the trends in Arab voting, and the repercussions of election results on Arabs in Israel, in more detail.

Arab Voting Rates

Palestinian society's voter turnout in the latest Knesset elections declined to 45%, compared to 65% in the previous elections (March 2020). It is the lowest percentage in the history of Palestinian electoral participation since Knesset elections began in 1949; by comparison, the national turnout was 67.4%.

Table (1): Voter turnout in Knesset elections since 1996

Year	Knesset Session	Overall Participation (%)	Arab Participation (%)
1996	14	77.0	79.3
1999	15	78.7	75.0
2003	16	67.8	62.0
2006	17	63.5	56.3
2009	18	64.7	53.6
2013	19	67.8	57.3
2015	20	72.3	64
2019 April	21	68.5	49
2019 September	22	69.8	60
2020	23	71.5	65
2021	24	67.4	45

Source: Mada Al-Carmel Center (2021). 24th Knesset election results, Palestinian community, Haifa.



Table (1) portrays the steady decline since 1999 in the percentage of Arabs voting in the Knesset elections, until 2015 when turnout increased with the establishment of the Joint List, encompassing all Arab parties taking part in the elections (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, Balad, the Islamic Movement and the Arab Movement for Change). Rising at that point to 64%, the turnout decreased in the April 2019 elections to 49% after the joint list split into two, the Joint List and Ta'al List. However, the turnout again increased successively in the next two rounds (September 2019 and March 2020) when all Arab parties joined the Joint List (60% and 65% respectively), before falling to an unprecedented 45% in the latest elections, following another split in the Joint List.

Voting for Arab Lists

In the runup to the latest Knesset elections, the Joint List divided into two with the departure of the United Arab List following a disagreement with components of the Joint List (Hadash and Balad) on the issue of supporting the Israeli right being a viable option. The Joint list rejected what might save Netanyahu and his right-wing government, while the United Arab List justified lending support contingent on any candidate's acceptance of the Arab community's civic demands: combating crime and violence, putting an end to house demolitions, and allocating larger budgets to local Arab authorities. The United Arab List additionally demanded the Joint List commit to not supporting any social legislation violating "the conservative nature of Arab society".

The Joint List won six seats with 212,048 votes, or 4.8% of the overall vote, while the United Arab List won four seats with 167,132 votes or 3.7% of the total – the two lists so garnering together nearly 380 thousand votes.⁽¹⁾ By comparison, in the March 2020 23rd Knesset elections, the four component parties of the Joint List garnered 581,507 votes or 12.6% of the total returns. The 2021 election outcome thus shows a 200,000 voter decrease for the two Arab lists compared with March 2020.⁽²⁾

Of March 2021's Arab turnout, 81% voted for the two Arab lists, with the remaining 19% voting for Zionist parties. In March 2020, the tallies for Arab lists and Zionist parties were 87% and 13% respectively, hence the majority of those not voting for the Joint List in 2021 did not get involved in the election.

¹ Data provided by the Central Elections Committee website for the elections for the 24th Knesset (March 2021), accessed on 5/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3moCqN9>. (in Hebrew)

² Data provided by the Central Elections Commission website for the elections for the 23rd Knesset (March 2020), accessed on 5/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/39IE7jm>. (in Hebrew)

**Table (2): Arab Voting Patterns after the Joint List's Formation (2015)⁽³⁾**

	2015	April 2019	September 2019 ⁽⁴⁾	March 2020	March 2021 ⁽⁵⁾
Joint List Votes	446,583	337,108	470,212	581,507	379,647
Number of Seats	13	10	13	15	10
Arab Participation Percentage	64%	49%	60%	65%	45%
Joint List Votes	82%	70%	80%	87%	79.5%
Zionist Parties Percentage	18%	30%	20%	13%	19.4%
Percentage not voting	30%	51%	40%	35%	55%

Source: Mada Al-Carmel Center (2021). 24th Knesset elections election results, Palestinian community, Haifa.

Voting for Zionist parties

Zionist parties intensified electoral campaigning directed at the Arab community in the last election cycle. Zionist lists placed Arab candidates in prominent locations in their electoral lists: the left-wing Meretz party put Arab candidates in the fourth and fifth places on its Knesset list; the Labor party listed an Arab candidate in the seventh place; Likud included an Arab Muslim candidate for the first time in its history, albeit positioned 36th on its list; and Arab Druze candidates figured in these and other lists. Netanyahu devoted portions of his election campaign to the Arab community, visiting Arab towns in which he conducted election meetings with local Arab authorities. Moreover, the Knesset's Central Elections Committee composed of party representatives and headed by a Supreme Court judge did not, this time around, eliminate any Arab list or Arab candidate from Arab lists and force a recourse to the Supreme Court to reverse such actions, as occurred in previous electoral rounds.

Zionist parties obtained some 80,000 Arab votes – 19% of the total – from Arab/Druze Arab towns. However, in the March 2020 elections Zionist parties received some 92,000 votes from the Arab community, equivalent to 13% of the total Arab votes. The gap between percentages and vote totals derives from the decline in Arab community voting rates. Although Zionist parties won 19% of the Arab vote in last month's elections, they received fewer votes in total compared with the March 2020

³ Mixed cities are not included in these results.

⁴ The numbers relate to voting for the two Arab lists.

⁵ The numbers relate to voting for the two Arab lists.



elections. *Likud* won the largest percentage (26%) of Arab votes going to Zionist parties, followed by *Meretz* with 19%, Avigdor Lieberman's *Yisrael Beiteinu* with 17%, Yair Lapid's *Yesh Atid* with 11%.

Table (3): Zionist Party Shares of Arab Votes

Party	Percentage
Likud	26%
Meretz	19%
Yisrael Beytenu	17%
Yesh Atid	11%
Others	27%

Source: Mada Al-Carmel Center (2021). 24th Knesset elections election results, Palestinian community, Haifa.

Data on the voting of Arab Palestinian community in Israel shows the following:

1. The 55% Palestinian Arab non-participation in the Israeli elections was the stand-out feature of the pattern of electoral participation, no doubt produced by: election fatigue; division of the Joint List; political confusion amid attempts to legitimize support for Netanyahu and the Israeli right in forming the government; and (most significantly) the failure to convert the numerical increase in the number of Arab representatives into increased political influence to forge a better social, political and economic reality for Palestinians. This failure looms large in the Joint List's inability to build on its major 2020 electoral win of 15 seats and confront the calamities of the Arab community that have only become more dire in the past year such as, for instance, the increase in crime and violence rates and the Covid-19 pandemic's economic and societal devastation. With improved internal organization and concerted political action, things could have been different, since voter suppression and harassment of Arab voting masses and representatives on the part of Zionist parties had become diminished, something seen particularly in Netanyahu's adoption of novel electoral tactics aimed at reducing the percentage of Arab List voters and attracting them to Likud -- succeeding in the first while failing in the second.

The decline in the voter turnout does not indicate an endorsement of boycotting elections, and 20% of the voting age public did not greatly change position on the elections over the space of a year. Resignation and reluctance to participate may involve complex factors, including despairing of having any influential impact, lodging a *de facto* vote protesting division in the Arab ranks after a short-lived unity, and political disorientation.

2. The number of voters for Arab lists decreased by 200,000, and representation of Arab lists in the Knesset from 15 to 10 seats. This decline is attributable to the division of the Joint List and absence



of a serious political program, when Joint List discourse was limited to challenging a United List program that had compelled it into an arena of social issues, with any other discussion limited to recommending a prime ministerial candidate to the head of state or to bringing down the extreme right. The two Arab electoral lists began to appear exactly like stereotypical Israeli electoral lists. The issues of *agency* and impact on government formation and toppling the right wing were derailed by the bitter experience of the previous elections, when in March 2020 the Joint List claimed it could bring down Netanyahu and form an alternative government with assistance from other parties. Indeed, the Joint List nominated Benny Gantz to head the government; he preferred, however, to join Netanyahu in a power-sharing government rather than form a government with Joint List support, even a Joint List that refrains from joining the government. The Arab lists and those who counted on their parliamentary vote to legislate Israeli policies were evidently not sufficiently cognizant of the depth of Zionist ideology in the Jewish state's structure and culture. No extreme-right nor centre-right Israeli party is prepared to form a government with a minority of Jewish Knesset representation, supported by the votes of Arab representatives to sustain it in power. Even were that to occur, such a government would be unable to resolve any important issue or remain long in power.

This is no strategy for *dealing* with Likud, but rather for meeting concrete demands for daily rights that were generally achieved in the past through militant struggle, including on the part of parliamentarians; *deals* are not meant to be central to parliamentarians' efforts to realise such basic rights. This kind of political behaviour is part and parcel of a populist discourse holding *any alliance* to be acceptable, no matter with whom, if it fulfils the condition of achieving the demands of the masses: *even* with Netanyahu if push comes to shove. Experience has shown, however, that Arabs Israelis have achieved demands more important than these – without recourse to abandoning their national identity, and everything they stand for.

3. The Zionist parties did not receive the large number of Arab voters they had expected. Despite the increase in overall share of the Arab vote share (from 13% Arab voters in 2020 to 19% in these 2021 elections), there was a decline in absolute numbers of Arab voters. The two main options presented in March 2021 to the Arab voter appeared to be either to vote from the two Arab lists or not vote at all. Despite all the political constraints upon Palestinian society and its disillusionment with the Arab lists, only a very small minority granted them their vote. This follows the intensive campaign propaganda to which the Arab community had been subjected by Zionist parties (and especially the Likud).

Conclusion

The results of the Knesset elections in Palestinian society engendered great disappointment among Palestinians in the discourse of the Arab electoral lists, both in political terms and in terms of their parliamentary performance. This was manifest in the unprecedented increase in election boycotters and voting abstainers. The rate of non-participation in the elections and refusal to vote for Zionist parties despite the intense propaganda targeting the Arab community showed that the Arab



public seeks a patriotic parliamentary political discourse and performance on civil issues, dealing with Palestinian Arabs in Israel as a group in their homeland, not as a group of immigrants. The decline in Arab political action in the last five years, and in the confidence of Arab citizens in their parties in the wake of the disintegrated Joint List (with all the hope it had sparked among Palestinians in Israel) also showed up prominently in the election results.

It seems that the time has come to develop a political discourse building upon the national upsurge of the 1990s, which combined a civil discourse with citizens dealing with issues of citizenship and rights without a Palestinian national discourse abandoning the challenge of the Israeli state policies and dealing with its Jewish essence. If this does not happen, a major misstep may arise: giving a pass to “conservative Arab-Israeli” discourse veiled in populism.