

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Institute of Political Studies  
Department of Political Science

**Bachelor's Thesis**

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**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Institute of Political Studies  
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**Arab Political Parties in Israel: Goals and Obstacles**

Bachelor's Thesis

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Year of the defence: 2022

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2022

Lýdie Vlčková

## References

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## **Abstract**

This bachelor's thesis puts into context the current development of Israeli Arab political representation. It builds upon the existing situation in Israel, where Arabs and Jews do not enjoy equal positions on many levels. The thesis then poses the question, what are the goals the Arab representation seeks to achieve, and what are the obstacles it faces in the Israeli political system. The thesis follows the historical development of Arabs' position in Israel and then continues by examining the goals and behavior of four Israeli Arab parties present in the Knesset. By presenting each party separately, the thesis shows their different positions toward the State of Israel and the strategies they use to advance their goals, which are then categorized as national and civic. The thesis then observes the existing or potential challenges the parties face, identified as legal obstacles, as presented in reports of Adalah or Amnesty International, and delegitimization. The thesis then evaluates their effect on achieving the parties' goals. The limits of Arab political representation are further highlighted in two case studies dedicated to one of its greatest potential obstacles on the one hand and one of its most important achievements on the other. As a result, the goals on the national level were identified as directly contradicting the nature of Israel as a Jewish state but also having a significant influence on advancing the civic demands of the Arab community. Whereas the current situation in Israel does not pose legal challenges specifically targeted on the Arab representation, however as its main challenges were identified as the unwillingness to cooperate and delegitimization from the Jewish political actors, which puts them even more into the position of undesired coalition partners.

## Abstrakt

Předkládaná bakalářská práce se zabývá cíli a překážkami arabské reprezentace v Izraelské politice. Přestože Izrael sám sebe definuje jako demokratický stát, Arabové a Židé v Izraeli nejsou rovnocennými partnery. Práce se proto zaměřuje na to, jak se na tomto stavu podílí arabská politická reprezentace, jaké si klade cíle, a jakým překážkám čelí. Od historického vývoje pozice Arabů v Izraelské politice práce pokračuje analýzou cílů současných arabských politických stran v Knesetu a strategií, které využívají k jejich dosažení. Představením každé politické strany zvláště, ačkoliv jsou tři ze čtyř součástí společné kandidátky, vyvstávají rozdíly v jejich pozicích vůči státu Izrael a jejich cíle, které jsou v práci rozděleny na národní a občanské. Bakalářská práce pak sleduje existující či potenciální překážky, kterým arabské strany čelí vůči státu Izrael. Tyto překážky práce identifikuje jako právní, jak se objevují ve zprávách organizací Adalah či Amnesty International, a delegitimizaci. Práce usiluje o zhodnocení obou typů překážek a jejich vlivu na cíle arabských stran. Hranice, ve kterých se arabská reprezentace pohybuje, jsou zdůrazněny ve dvou závěrečných případových studiích, které analyzují na jedné straně jedno z nejvýraznějších omezení arabské pozice v izraelské společnosti, a na straně druhé jeden z jejich nejdůležitějších úspěchů. Obě případové studie pak poskytují základ závěru, že cíle arabské reprezentace na národní úrovni jsou v přímé kontradikci definici Izraele jako židovského státu, ale zároveň také výrazně ovlivňují jejich možnosti na úrovni cílů občanských, které mají za cíl zlepšit každodenní život arabské komunity. Současné izraelské zákony umožňují Arabům rovnou reprezentaci, jako hlavní překážky v dosažení občanských cílů pro arabskou komunitu byla však definována především oboustranná nevěle ke spolupráci a s tím spojená delegitimizace ze strany židovských politiků, která Araby staví ještě výrazněji do pozice nežádoucích koaličních partnerů.

## **Keywords**

Israel, politics of Israel, Israeli Arab, political representation, Arab political parties

## **Klíčová slova**

Izrael, politika Izraele, Izraelští Arabové, politická reprezentace, Arabské politické strany

## **Název práce**

Arabská politická reprezentace v Izraeli: cíle a překážky

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## **Introduction**

In March 2021, an Israeli Arab party became part of the government coalition for the first time in the history of Israel. Even though Israeli Arab parties represent the biggest Israeli minority, they have until now never been part of any Israeli government, they are subject to practices often called discriminatory, face internal disagreements, and, as a result, struggle to persuade and keep their voters and to make a change in Israel's policy toward their community. In the country deeply marked by the animosity between Jews and Arabs, the ability of Israeli Arab parties to reach their political objectives raises questions. The Israeli position toward Arabs has always been complicated and often misinterpreted, and thus it seems useful to provide context to the recent development in Israeli politics. This thesis seeks to examine the Israeli Arab political representation and their goals, the strategies they employ to fulfill them, and the obstacles they face in the Israeli political system.

To provide an analysis of Israeli Arab political representation, the problem will be presented from three points of view. First, Arab politics will be examined from a historical perspective, focusing on the developing objectives and strategies, as well as changing opinions of the Israeli Arab population on the ways they should be represented. From the beginning, the chapter will follow major political events that paved the path from clientelist relationships between Jews and Arabs, through the development of a distinct Israeli Arab identity, to an attempt to unify and adopt a pragmatic position to better fulfill the needs of the Israeli Arab community. Second, the focus will be on the existing Israeli Arab parties represented in the Knesset, presenting their goals and perceived obstacles they voice. Finally, the third part will be dedicated to two case studies. The first one will analyze the 2018 Nation-State Law and its effect on Israeli Arab representation. There has always been an inbuilt tension between Israel's self-definition as a democratic state and its relationship with the Arab minority, which has become even more visible. The second case study will focus on the politics of Mansour Abbas, leader of the first Arab party in the government coalition, Ra'am. Facing an unprecedented opportunity, he led Arabs for the first time into a space of greater potential but also of higher costs. As a leader of an Islamic party, Mansour Abbas represents the result of 70-year-long Jewish-Arab contacts in Israeli politics. The

case study will examine the meaning of such a step for Arab political representation and the broader relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

### **i. Structure**

The thesis is focused on the Arab political representation in the Israeli Knesset and its relationship with the State of Israel from its establishment in 1948 until May 2022. It does not deal in depth with the problems within the Arab Israeli society, even though it is impossible to omit them completely. Instead, it focuses on Knesset politics as one part of the complex relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel. The Knesset framework was chosen as a focal point for three main reasons. First, the Israeli Arab participation in the Knesset has been, in the long term, one of the decisive elements in the life of the Arab community in Israel. Second, it helps to observe the changing position of the Israeli Arab minority in Israel and the process by which they consolidate as a minority and formulate their goals. And third, the boundaries of the Knesset allow for a more precise framework for analysis. The Arab leadership has its own structures and institutions, but they are perceived as unclear even by the Arab community, lesser known in the international context, and therefore less studied and understood. As a result, the representation in the Knesset attracts the most attention, which, in the end, contributes to its role as the final representative organ. Even though the Arab parties in the Knesset do not always faithfully reflect the opinions of the Israeli Arab community, they are by far the most discussed and thus offer a basis for further study.

### **ii. Review of relevant literature**

Researchers have been trying to repeatedly grasp the complex relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel through their political representation to understand their complex relationship. The earliest study by Jacob Landau (*Arabs in Israel: A Political Study*, 1969) already highlights the fact that the relationship between majority and minority in multiethnic states has always been problematic – he notes that objective study of such a matter is becoming difficult, given that with more political participation, more feelings are involved in discussions with his interviewees. He offered the first political study of Arabs in Israel, covering the period from the establishment of Israel on May 14, 1948, and ends before the “Six-day War” in 1966.

The following periods of Arab politics are then described in a study by Sabri Jiryis (*Arabs in Israel*, 1976), who shows the emergence of Palestinian national consciousness. After the first Intifada in 1987–1992, Alexander Bligh (*The Intifada and the New Political Role of the Israeli Arab Leadership*, 1999) follows by describing the formation of a new political role of the Israeli Arab leadership and its emerging ties with Palestinians in the Territories. The political tendencies of the Arab minority were also described by As'ad Ghanem (*The Palestinian-Arab Minority in Israel*, 2001), who noted the influence of clan politics on its political behavior. This tendency is later examined in a study by Amal Jamal (*The Arab Leadership in Israel: Ascendance and Fragmentation*, 2006). He describes the rise of the second generation of Arab political leaders. In his paper, he observes the growing national consciousness of Arabs in Israel and the ineffectiveness and fragmentation of its leadership. These tendencies are attributed to the Israeli effort to weaken the leadership, but also to the continuing traditional structures within the community based on family ties and patriarchy.

In 2007, Elie Rekhess uses the terms “Israelisation” “Palestinisation” and “Localization of the National Struggle” (*The Evolvement of an Arab-Palestinian National Minority in Israel*, 2007) to name three consecutive periods of Israeli Arab history. This periodization covers well the important milestones and is used also in this thesis. After the 2015, the literature also focuses on the formation of the Joint List and its future implications (notably Harry Darkins, *Finally, a Voice? The Impact of the Joint List on the Palestinian-Arab Minority in Israel*, 2017). A more detailed reflection is then provided by Rami Zeedan, whose most recent book *Arab-Palestinian Society in the Israeli Political System* (2019) examines the lives of the Israeli Arab minority in the twenty-first century, focusing on local Arab politics and the role of kinship in Arab municipalities.

The tensions are also described in literature focused mainly on the Israeli society – as it is in the monograph of Alan Dowty (*The Jewish State: A Century Later*, 1998), but also in recent edited handbooks *Routledge Handbook of Modern Israel* (Dieckhoff (ed.), 2013), *Understanding Israel* (Peters & Geist Pinfold (eds.), 2018) or *Oxford Handbook of Israeli Politics and Society* (Hazan & al. (eds.), 2021), which try to put together the complex image of the Israeli society and its challenges. Whereas the criticism of their status in Israel differs depending on the positions of the author, the

chapters about Arab citizens present a similar idea of integration as a national minority into a state that strives to remain Jewish and democratic at the same time.

The discussion on the nature of Israel as a Jewish state is also reflected in the thesis, as it provides important context to the Nation-State Law adopted in 2018. One stream of thought in this regard is represented mostly by Arab authors, who put Jewish and Arab identities in Israel against each other. This idea is asserted by Nadim Rouhana (*Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict*, 1997), who concludes that the clashes between the contradicting identities can only cease in a civil, bi-national state. Ilan Pappé, notably in *The Forgotten Palestinians* (2011), and Shourideh C. Molavi (*Stateless Citizenship*, 2018), also work with the notion of a Zionist and Israeli desire for “ethnic supremacy” in the state and oppressed Arab minority. The second stream of thought is represented especially by Sammy Smooha, who introduced the term “ethnic democracy,” to describe the situation in ethnically divided societies, in which Israel can be governed by a Jewish majority but remain democratic (*Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype*, 1997). The right of the Jewish people for self-determination in a Jewish state, which is democratic at the same time, is similarly asserted by Ruth Gavison (*Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State*, 1999).

The most up-to-date information necessary for the analysis of current developments in Israeli Arab society is provided by Israeli research centers. The Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI) features reports by the most visible names in the field, such as Arik Rudnitzky and Sammy Smooha, and issues a bi-annual report on the mutual relationship between the Jews and Arabs (*A Conditional Partnership*, 2022). The Moyshe Dayan Institute of Tel Aviv University, established by Konrad Adenauer Foundation and directed by Arik Rudnitzky, also issues Bayan, a quarterly journal on the developments of the Arab minority in Israel with an important focus on politics. The current political development in Israeli Arab politics and society is also reflected more in-depth by the reports of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and Israeli and international NGOs focused on the Arab citizens of Israel, such as Adalah – a legal center for Arab minority rights Israel, Mossawa Center, Mada al-Carmel, Sikkuy-Aufoq or Amnesty International.

### **iii. Methodology and research problems**

The work is based on a review and analysis of existing secondary literature, primary sources, and media reports on Israeli Arab politics available until May 2022. Since the research provided in the thesis is qualitative and concerns current political developments, there is a possibility of presenting sources that convene a certain viewpoint, instead of being critically assessed. This is even more possible in the case of Israel, since the sources are often polarized, reflecting either the Jewish or Arab narrative and sometimes offering directly contradictory viewpoints. The thesis is therefore focused on available facts and data but, where necessary, presents mainly the Israeli Arabs' perspective. The thesis does not aim to be universal, but rather to offer a complementary point of view to the existing debate. Another limitation is linguistic. The sources are limited to English, French and Czech, with regard to Hebrew and Arabic, but the prevailing language of the sources is English. This means that potentially valuable sources in other languages are left unmentioned, but due to the expansion of English as the language of academia, many of the studies written by Jews or Arabs related to this thesis are written in English.

### **iv. Terminology**

There are many terms that refer to Arab citizens of Israel. The terminology stretches from Palestinian Arabs, the Palestinian community in Israel, to Arab Palestinians, Israeli Arabs, Arab Israelis, Arabs of Israel, or just Arabs. Every term brings its specific connotations and signalizes a different point of view. Many NGOs use the term “Palestinian Israelis”, “Palestinian citizens of Israel”, or “Palestinian”, which implies the identification with the Palestinian national struggle. We will refer to the Arab community living within the Green Line mostly as “Israeli Arabs”, “Arab citizens of Israel”, or just “Arabs” when the context sufficiently clarifies the subject. It reflects the English translation of a standard term used by the Israeli government (עֲרָבֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – *Araviey Yisra'el*<sup>1</sup>), which provides a legal framework for its Arab community, and it is widely adopted by the European and American sources, especially media. This should not signalize any personal opinion, but rather the fact that the thesis observes Arabs in the context of the Israeli system.

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis follows one of the possible English transcriptions, which is not standardized and respects the most used variants where possible.

## **1. History of Israeli Arab Political Participation**

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Israeli Arabs have always been part of Israeli politics, with Knesset (the Israeli parliament) members varying in number from one to more than ten and with political positions that changed over time from radical to pragmatic. Even though the means, the power, and the position of the Israeli Arab representation still change, the leitmotif of unfulfilled demands remains. According to Zeedan (2019, xx), the position of Israeli Arabs has been, until now, largely influenced by Israeli policies, which stem from four central problems:

First, Arab citizens of Israel are considered a security threat to the Jewish majority, being viewed as a “fifth column”. Second, there are persisting disagreements over land use and ownership: “Israel has confiscated hundreds of thousands of dunams of Arab lands that were used for military purposes as well as establishing new settlements for Jewish Israelis,” (Zeedan 2019, xx) and the problem also affects the planning and housing in Arab cities. Third, there are socioeconomic differences between Jewish and Arab citizens. The wages and quality of services (such as health or education) are generally considered lower among the Israeli Arab population. And last, the fact that Israel was established in 1948 as a national home for the Jews created a profound discrepancy between Israel’s Arabs’ self-identification and the state they found themselves in. As an indigenous minority, the Arabs are in constant struggle with the majority Jewish population, and the political sphere reflects it as well. All these four aspects – security, land issues, socioeconomic gaps, and identity, have a significant impact on the position of the Israeli Arab minority in Israel, and they create the basis of their political mobilization.

### **1.1 The 1948: Israelization**

The history of Israeli Arab political participation begins jointly with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. However, the Arab leadership in Israel was created as a product of the *Nakba*, “the Catastrophe”, which had a profound effect on the identity of Israeli Arab citizens. Before the establishment of Israel, about a million Arabs were living in Mandatory Palestine. In 1948, the wave of expulsions and mass flights, later called *the Nakba*, forced around 750,000 of them from the country, including a significant part of the political, economic, and cultural elite (Jamal 2006, 8). The

roughly 150,000 Arabs that remained within the borders of the newly established state became a minority with Israeli citizenship. In a process called Israelization (Rekhes 2008, 1), they were granted the right to vote, and the first government allowed them to be part of the temporary parliament, government, and judicial system. However, their freedoms were curtailed by the imposition of military rule, which lasted until 1968, limiting the Arab community's freedom of expression, movement, and organization and therefore the possibilities for independent political mobilization (Jamal 2006, 9).

The first "Arab lists" in Israeli politics were satellite lists established by and affiliated with the Israeli Mapai party (Brake 2018, 449). They were dominated by young members of large Arab clans, who were offered a seat in exchange for their cooperation, notably with the Israeli intelligence and government or by brokering of land purchases (Ibid.). Thus, the first Arab leadership was deeply pragmatic, traditional, and based on family and religious affiliation (Ibid.). What is more, by encouraging the Arab vote for the Jewish parties and speaking in favor of Israel and its fair treatment of Arabs, they served the Jewish political interests (Ibid.). Two exceptions to this Israeli-controlled Arab leadership were the al-Ard movement, calling for a Palestinian state based on the UN 1947 partition plan, and the Arab-Jewish communist party. Arab leaders in these two lists, comparably with their Mapai counterparts, were relatively young but better educated (Jamal 2006). The al-Ard movement came to an end when its leaders were captured, put under house arrest, or encouraged to leave the country (Ibid.), and the movement itself was prohibited in 1965. The Arab members of the Israeli Communist Party (ICP) were also persecuted, even though they were generally powerless inside a party heavily dominated by Jewish pioneers with good relations with the Israeli establishment (Ibid.). The latter changed only in 1965, when an Arab-dominated group, more in favor of the Arab nationalist demands, split from the ICP to form Rakah. The party won three seats – two Arab – in the Knesset elections that year (Ibid.).

The subsequent development of Arab politics was marked by the end of Israeli military rule over Israel's Arab citizens in 1966 and the June 1967 war. "The end of martial law translated into more freedom of expression, movement, and political organization, while the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip exposed the Arab minority to a wider Palestinian society after nineteen years of total isolation. This development translated into a growing local influence of Palestinian nationalism and indirectly



contributed to the rise of the Islamic movement a decade later, as religious youth began studying in Islamic colleges in the newly occupied territories” (Ibid., 9).

## **1.2 The 1967 War: Renewed Nationalist Tendencies**

The 1967 Six-Day War became a critical milestone in the consolidation of Israeli-Arab self-identity as a national Palestinian minority. After the end of military rule, the Arabs in Israel underwent a major social and political transformation. As the first period was marked by Israelization and the aspirations for their civic integration, the second period showed growing awareness that such an integration wouldn’t be possible. There was an inherent incompatibility between “Palestinian presence and the Zionist enterprise” (Makhoul 2015, 13).

After the 1967 Six-Day War, the renewed contact with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip placed the Arab citizens of Israel in a perplexing situation. They realized they were not fully Israeli, nor did they fit among the Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank. This position, prevailing in the 1970s and until the first Intifada in 1987, is also reflected by a “tripartite consensus” between the Arabs in Israel, the Israeli majority, and the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, that consisted of: “(1) unequivocal support for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under the leadership of the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization]; (2) a demand for full equality as citizens of Israel; and (3) agreement that all forms of political activity be conducted within the limits allowed by Israeli law” (Makhoul 2015, 13). The first component expresses that Arabs in Israel didn’t see themselves as part of the Palestinian liberation movement, whereas the other two emphasize that all their political activity should be conducted within the Israeli political framework.

The political standard-bearer became the Rakah party, enjoying broad support of the Israeli Arab public. The “moderate” camp of the Israeli Arab leadership, affiliated with Mapai or Maki, did not establish an independent political program (Rekheess 2008, 3). The only outcome was expressed by individuals' opinion statements (Ibid., 4). Rakah, on the other hand, was calling Israel to withdraw from the Territories and recognize the PLO, vocalizing the Palestinian nation’s right to self-determination and a state of their own. Such intense identification with the political struggle was further reinforced by the deepening socioeconomic differences between Israeli Arabs and the Jewish population.

The result in the 1970s was a substantial change in Israeli Arab political behavior: a new *modus operandi*, more militant political activism replacing the former, somewhat passive political approach (Ibid.). The voices claiming civil equality and national rights became louder and sometimes merged, resulting in mass protests, demonstrations, and rallies.

In 1977, the visit of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat launched the Egyptian-Israeli peace process (Ibid., 7). The Arabs in Israel, although not unanimously, welcomed the peace, enabling them to reestablish ties with the Arab world, and some of the more moderate Arab representatives in Israel even expected that the peace would eliminate the psychological barriers and security concerns that would enable full integration of the Arab community. However, this expectation remained unfulfilled. What is more, the *intifada*, a wave of violent clashes between Israel and the Palestinians that broke out in December 1987, further incited a sense of brotherhood of Israeli Arabs with the Palestinians in the territories (Ibid.).

### **1.3 The 1993 Oslo Accords: Localization of the Palestinian Struggle**

The year 1993 marks the beginning of a peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization which eventually resulted in the signing of the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993. For Arabs in Israel, it had a far-reaching impact on their political and ideological orientation (Rekhess 2008, 8). Since the Oslo Accords did not treat the Israeli Arabs as a part of the solution, they found themselves with a deepened sense of exclusion. Such a result came as a surprise, given the fact that it was the five Arab votes that gained a slim majority of 61–50 for the Yitzhak Rabin government and thus made the peace process possible (Rettig Gur 2014).

The period of the Oslo Accords, therefore, made another shift in the Israeli Arabs' position. They became focused on their own status within Israel, directing all the action inwards in a process by Rekhess (2008, 8) called "The Localization of the National Struggle". The focus became the internal problems – the widening socioeconomic gap, the failing claims of the Jewish parties to improve Israeli Arabs' situation, and, most importantly, the definition of Israel as a Jewish state (Ibid.). From the 1990s, the Arab political discourse addressed the implied contradiction between Israel's definition as a

liberal democracy and its nature as a Jewish state, and they opened the dilemmas of Israeli Arabs' identifying themselves with Israel's Jewish state symbols.

In the effort to tackle the issue of equality, the Israeli Arab leadership put forward three models of Jewish–Arab coexistence: “a state for all its citizens”, “autonomy” and a “binational state”. All these actions underscored an important shift in the self-perception of the Israeli Arabs as a national minority deserving distinct collective rights. As opposed to the term “immigrant minority” or counting Arabs with other Israel's minorities, they began to define themselves as an “indigenous minority” or a “homeland minority”, highlighting their indigenous status in the country (Rekhess 2008, 9). One of the most important aspects of the process of self-identification was the reclamation of the *Nakba* – the expulsion of Palestinians from Israel in 1948 – as a collective historical memory. It was influenced 1) by a new generation of Arabs, choosing to highlight their national identity, 2) by the implications of the Oslo process 3) by the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State of Israel in 1998, which further incited the Arabs' discontent (Ibid.).

The next significant moment for Israel's Arabs' self-identification came in October 2000 with violent clashes in Galilee and the Triangle area<sup>2</sup> between the Israeli police and Arab demonstrators. The eruption of violence later referred to as “the second intifada”, started after the visit of then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount and resulted in violent clashes in the Palestinian territories that lasted, according to some sources, until 2005. This time, however, it was also widely supported by Arab citizens of Israel. This showed that alongside with a distinct national identity, the Arab citizens also began to openly support the struggle of the Palestinians in the Territories (Rekhess 2008, ).

Although protesting simultaneously, the support for the Palestinians was, according to Rekhess (Ibid.), more in the act of protest. The complaints of Israeli Arabs concerned budgetary deficits in the Arab communities, related unemployment, and living conditions in the unrecognized villages,<sup>3</sup> but from the political point of view also disappointment with Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who won about 95 % of the Arab vote

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<sup>2</sup> The Triangle area refers to the concentration of Arab municipalities adjacent to the Green Line in the north of Israel.

<sup>3</sup> Unrecognized villages are mostly Bedouin settlements in the Negev desert, unrecognized by the Israeli law, and thus lacking basic services as water or electricity.

in 1999, but later many felt betrayal, as he did not invite them to join his coalition (Rekhess 2008, 10). The 13 Palestinians killed during the riots by the Israeli security services heightened the importance of the Israeli Arab cause, and a state commission was established to investigate the October 2000 events. The commission, presided by Supreme Court Justice Theodor Or (“The Or Commission”), identified the origins of those events as “government discrimination, police behavior, and radicalization of the Arab sector” (Or 2004 cited in Rekhess 2008, 10). It condemned the discriminatory treatment of the Arab citizens and called for immediate rectification of the situation (The Official Summation of the Or Commission Report 2003). Despite its recommendations, the government did not do much to address the problem in the following years (Waxman 2013, 217 cited in Darkins 2017, 21), and the inaction increased the urgency of the issue (Ibid).

#### **1.4 The 2006–2007 “Future Vision” Documents**

Another milestone in the development of the national consciousness of the Arab minority were four position papers published between December 2006 and May 2007. Assembling Arab intellectuals and public figures, the documents aimed to analyze the current situation in the Arab sector and propose solutions for improvement. “The ‘Future Vision’ documents, then, developed as a ‘collective outcry in the political darkness’ [were] designed to ‘bring the Jewish society in Israel to a real and sincere handling of the social and political deformations it created over the years’” (Rekhess 2008, 14).

To follow the development of Israeli Arab political representation in the Knesset, the most important is the first and most extensive document, *The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel*. It was proposed by a group of forty Arab academics and intellectuals and published by The National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel in 2006, under the auspices of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee for the Arabs in Israel. The document represents a first attempt to formulate demands of the community vis-à-vis the State of Israel in a representative manner, marking a significant advance in the Israeli Arab political discourse.

The document's proposals encompass six distinct spheres of Arab Israeli society. (Rekheiss 2008, 15–17): a) It requires acceptance of the “Palestinian historical narrative” by the state of Israel. In the document, Israel is described as a “colonial state”. It is called to recognize the “historical injustice” done to Palestinians by erasing various events from the “official Israeli versions of the country’s history” (Ibid., 16), recognize unrecognized villages, return confiscated land and accept responsibility for the *Nakba* of 1948; b) It rejects Israel’s definition as a Jewish state which places Arab citizens in an inferior position; c) It requires recognition of Arab minority as an “indigenous group with collective national rights” (Ibid.); d) It calls for a bi-national state model – a “consociational democracy” with full power-sharing; e) Requires full equality in “civic, national, and historical spheres” (Ibid., 17), including equal immigration and citizenship quotas; and f) The document calls for the autonomy of Arab citizens in the matters of education, religion, culture and media, and an elected representative national body.

The document calls for separate national institutions for Arab citizens, headed by the High Follow-Up Committee<sup>4</sup>. According to the “Future Vision”, the Committee should initiate discussion in the political sphere and coordinate communication between political factions representing the Arab citizens of Israel: “The current coordination between the political factions is restricted to reaction activities initiated by the High Follow-Up Committee. The parties refrain from developing a coordinating framework to face the government policy and discuss general national plans as a central goal. It is important to create this framework which does not depend on temperament in its work but initiates the discussion process within the Israeli political sphere.” (The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel 2006, 37)

As the “Future Vision” document shows, the Israeli Arab community in the tumultuous years after the second intifada only slowly searched for unified leadership. The best solution, according to the intellectual elites at that time, was to elect the High Follow-Up Committee as a supreme decision-making organ and to separate the Israeli Arab leadership from the Jewish Knesset (Rekheiss 2008, 17). The Israeli Arab political representation in the Knesset was supposed to be directly subject to the decisions of the Committee.

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<sup>4</sup> The High Follow-Up Committee (HFC) is an extra-parliamentary organisation established in 1982 and acting as a coordinating and representative body of the Arab citizens of Israel. (ECFR 2022)

## **1.5 The 2015 Joint List: Unification of Arab parties**

The publishing of the “Future Vision documents” in 2006 marks the beginning of another transformative period for Israeli Arab politics. According to an interview with Ayman Odeh conducted by Harry Darkins, the Palestinians have been expressing a strong desire for a united Arab list “for at least twenty years” (2007, 27). The desire was made even stronger by the frustration of Arab voters and the lingering fears that the unrest of Arab spring of 2011 could spill over to the Palestinian community (Ibid.). In 2014, Israel also passed “The Governance Law”, which raised the original electoral threshold from 2% to 3.35%. Smaller parties with fewer voters, and Arab parties among them, were therefore pushed to unify. The Arab parties formed a joint list in January 2015, uniting the four major Arab or majority-Arab parties represented in the Knesset – the secular and Arab-nationalist Balad and Ta’al, the far-left Hadash, and Ra’am (The United Arab List), representing the southern branch of the Islamist Movement in Israel. The leader was elected Ayman Odeh from Hadash.

On December 30, 2015, the Knesset approved the most favorable budget for Arab Israeli citizens to date (Haddad Haj Yahya 2019). The Arab parties in the previous Knessets were often criticized for focusing on the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict rather than addressing the needs of the Arab Israeli citizens. Its desire to increase its representation on the Finance Committee was, therefore, a signal to its voters to focus on solving the economic problems of the Arab community (Lis 2015). According to the budget’s five-year plan, the Arab municipalities received NIS 15 billion, which was called a historic step toward closing the social and financial gap between the Arab and Jewish populations (Darkins 2017, 33). Although not originally a Joint List initiative, the Joint List was according to its leader Ayman Odeh able to influence some of its aspects and as such called it its most important success to date (Ibid.).

However, reports issued during the five years showed important shortcomings on the local level, suggesting that the achievements on a national level can be easily thwarted by ineffective local governance and bureaucratic complications (see Elran, et al. 2017 and IATF 2020). The report of the Institute for National Security Studies two years after the plan’s approval notes that even though significant resources have been allocated, there were important obstacles to its full implementation (Elran, et al. 2017, 3).

According to the report, most Arab localities do not have effective governance and lack experience, and on the national level, such a large-scale plan often encounters transfer delays. However, the report also notes a principal problem on the national level. On the one hand, the government appears to be acting to advance the plan, but on the other hand, “the same government and some of its ministers have sent messages of exclusion to the Arab community, (which have) severely damaged the trust of the Arab community (and encouraged) anti-Arab groups” (Ibid., 4). In the end, such stances harm the relationship between Arabs and Jews and future prospects of cooperation.

Aside from the budget, the Joint List’s position as the third largest party has brought greater international media attention to the Arab citizens. When interviewed by Darkins, Ayman Odeh told the author that the ultimate goal of the Joint List in Israeli politics is to serve as a peace bridge between the Jews and Palestinians in the Territories. Pointing out the Israeli Arabs’ unique situation between the two groups, with the knowledge of both languages and cultures, he hoped that Israel would recognize them as valuable partners in the peace dialogue (Darkins 2017, 49). However, such a goal was rather seen by other public figures as unrealistic at that time (Ibid., 50).

In the end, the political power of the Joint List was assessed as merely symbolic (Ibid., 34). Even the original unification was not much of a change, according to some, since the Arab parties in the Knesset have already been traditionally voting together (see Ibid.). However, their unification has also shown the profound ideological differences between them. Since its creation, the party did not gain enough power to oppose any laws in the Knesset and eventually lost momentum. Its inability to oppose the Nation-State Law in 2018, declaring “Israel as a Jewish state”, translated into even greater frustration of the Arab citizens (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). The 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset existed for three and a half years when then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for early elections in April 2019.

The period from 2019 to 2021 of four subsequent parliamentary elections reflects the stir around Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s several indictments and the attempts to replace him. The April 2019 election saw the Arab parties running as two separate lists of Hadash–Ta’al, and Balad–Ra’am, which both crossed the threshold, but in total gained only ten seats. However, due to the inability to form a government, the

parliament was dissolved ten days later. New elections were called for in September 2019 and for similar reasons again in March 2020. In both cases, the Joint List ran together again, in March 2020 gaining 15 seats in a record voter turnout, but not being able to change much since the Knesset dissolved again with following elections taking place in March 2021. The voter turnout however showed a significant will to participate in the political process, especially to remove Benjamin Netanyahu from his function and respond to delegitimizing discourse (Agbaria 2020).

On the side of the Arab representation, the Joint List constituent parties were often splitting, either before the elections or during the term (Knesset n.d.). As a result, the elevated electoral threshold functioned to join the Arab parties before elections, but in the Knesset, the unity was not permanent. Finally, before the April 2021 elections for the 24<sup>th</sup> Knesset, the Ra'am party split from the Joint List, probably over LGBT rights in the Arab society (Hasan 2022). Some claimed that by splitting the Joint List loses its weight in the Knesset (see Hitman 2021), but both Ra'am and the Joint List passed the threshold. What is more, Ra'am was also able to become the first Arab party that joined a government coalition. Whereas the achievements and goals were mostly symbolical since the Joint List creation, the unprecedented step of Ra'am, and the willingness of a Jewish parties to accept it mark another important milestone in the Arab political representation in the Knesset.



## 2. Goals of the Arab Political Representation

As of May 2022, there are two separate Arab parties. The Joint List of Arab Parties, and Ra'am (The United Arab List). As it was written in the previous chapter, all the Arab parties have been running together as the Joint List until the last election in March 2021, where Ra'am won four seats separately and joined the government coalition. Such a situation is novel in the Knesset. Not because Arabs and Jews have never cooperated in the past – there have been Arab ministers, deputy Knesset speakers, and judges, but for the first time, there was an entire Arab party joining the coalition. The situation may indicate an attempt to unify the different parts of society in a new way, but it also created new tensions. This chapter will explore the goals the parties try to promote and the obstacles they face on the Knesset level. The Joint List is presented as a whole, but I also present every party separately, in order to show the roots of the differences between them.

### 2.1 The Joint List of Arab Parties

The Joint List of Arab Parties (Hebrew: הרשימה המשותפת, lit. “The Joint List”, Arabic: القائمة المشتركة) was created in 2015, as a reaction to the elevated Knesset electoral threshold from 2% to 3.25% and an attempt to gain more power in the Knesset. It originally unified four Arab parties – Hadash (Arab-Jewish, communist), Ta'al (Arab nationalist), Ra'am (religious Muslim), and Balad (Palestinian nationalist). As the Ra'am separated from it prior to March 2021 elections, it now consists of the remaining three. Its first leader was elected Ayman Odeh, a lawyer from Haifa.

As it was said earlier, the unification of Arab parties has been largely symbolic because of inner differences that interfered with setting clear goals and achieving them. Nevertheless, the Arab public welcomed the step. When some parts of the Arab community called to boycott the elections to the 21<sup>st</sup> Knesset in 2019, most Arabs opposed it. It proved “that those calling for a boycott were unable to present an alternative to the Joint List” (Zaher 2020, 4). What is more, a subsequent investigation showed it was an initiative of a Jewish settler<sup>5</sup> (Ibid.). According to Rana Zaher, the Joint List was prior to the 2020 elections able to present clear objectives due to “reaching a point of maturation that enabled them to rise above their differences in

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<sup>5</sup> A “settler” is a term used to designate Israelis, mostly Jews, living in settlements in the Occupied Territories.

opinion,” (Ibid., 4) which made them more attractive to voters (Ibid.). The most important among these objectives was to avoid Benjamin Netanyahu from being re-elected Prime Minister and to influence the “livelihood of the Arab minority” (Ibid.). Thanks to this, the party was able to win 15 Knesset seats, became the third largest party, and marked a historical success.

Additionally, the Joint List’s success was not only political, but also social. It sent the message that the Arab minority has “overcome numerous difficulties to achieve unity,” (Ibid.), and the campaign showed an unprecedented step toward inclusivity. The party’s campaign addressed the Israeli citizens in Russian and Ethiopian communities and even reached out in Yiddish to the Ultra-Orthodox, not mainly to gain voters but to present a “democratic alternative to all citizens” (Ibid.). There was also an increase in the Druze vote for the Joint List in the election of 2020 (Ibid., 5), which also supports the increasing unity, since they are traditionally perceived as those who vote for Jewish parties and strive for integration. The party has nevertheless decided not to negotiate a place in the government and instead support Benny Gantz as a candidate for Prime Minister (Ibid.).

This development ultimately led to contrasting results in the elections in 2021. The Joint List won only six seats.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the Joint List has “increased the public profile and political engagement of Arab parliamentary members and boosted its international advocacy including in the United States and the European Union,” (About Palestinian Citizens of Israel n.d.), “the list also faced various internal disputes, including over seat rotations, political language, and partnerships with left-wing Jewish parties” (About Joint List n.d.). Other reasons cited are lack of influence on legislation, lack of trust in the Knesset’s ability to achieve results in the Arab community, disappointment with Arab MKs, and ideological boycott (Abu Habla 2021). Thus, it seems that even when the party promotes civic goals, its position in the Knesset opposition and internal disagreements did not allow for substantial legislative gains for the Arab community. In the following chapters, I will focus on each Arab party separately, which will allow to see the differences between them.

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<sup>6</sup> The seats were divided as follows: Hadash (3), Ta’al (2), and Balad (1).

### 2.1.1 Hadash

Hadash (Hebrew: חדש, lit. “New”; Arabic: الجبهة)<sup>7</sup> is a communist political party, currently led by Ayman Odeh. It was created in 1977 when the Israeli communist party Maki and the Arab party Rakah merged and changed their name to Hadash. It presents itself as an Arab-Jewish party but there are also voices who view it rather as an Arab one (Meklenberg 2021) since as a traditional left-wing party, its program is not specific to the Arab cause, but its objectives to promote status of Arab citizens take up a significant part of it.

In its ten-point program, the Hadash party promotes social justice, building a shared society between Jews and Arabs, the end of the occupation of the Territories, and a two-state solution with East Jerusalem as capital. It requires recognition of “the Arab-Palestinian population as a national minority, with the right to equal national, political, social and cultural equality” and the “complete abolition of the discriminatory and racist Nation-State Law that establishes an apartheid regime” (Hadash n.d.). The goals for the Arab community, as presented on the party’s website, call for secular goals, promoting equality and the betterment of the conditions in Arab localities. In the current Knesset, Hadash holds three seats within the Joint List. It has been winning between 2 to 5 seats since its establishment, and this number did not change even after it became part of the Joint List in 2015.

### 2.1.2 Balad

Balad or National Democratic Assembly (Hebrew: בל"ד, Arabic: بلد, lit. “country”) is a secular nationalist Arab political party created in 1996 and currently led by Sami Abu Shehadeh. It presents itself as a “Palestinian Arab national party” (Balad, 2018).<sup>8</sup> In its eight-point program, the main goal is to “combine the protection of national identity with the advancement of the principles of democracy and to build a free, modern and progressive society while striving for a just solution to the Palestinian issue and for the realization of the historical rights of the Palestinian people (Ibid.). The most important

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<sup>7</sup> An acronym for *HaHazit HaDemokratit LeShalom uLeShivion* in Hebrew, or The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality. In Arabic, it is often called “Jabha”, an acronym for *al-Jabhah ad-Dimuqrāṭiyyah lis-Salām wa'l-Musāwah*, with the same meaning.

<sup>8</sup> The last program of the Balad party on its official webpage was published in 2018, before the Knesset elections of 2019. This could signalize the decrease of interest of Arab voters in their Knesset representation, the disinterest of the representatives themselves, the incapability to create a concise program, or a lack of need for it.

requirement of Balad is for Israel to be a binational “state for all its citizens”, with equal national and civil rights for Jews and Arabs, which is, according to its program, in direct contradiction to Zionism.<sup>9</sup>

When first presented, the proposal was rejected as subversive by right-wing Israeli-Jewish circles and called its author, Balad’s former leader Azmi Bishara, to be put on trial (Haaretz 2002). Another core objective of the Balad party is autonomy in certain matters “which distinguish the minority from the majority in, for example, education, culture and media” (Balad 2018). It mentions the withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and requires cessation of confiscation of Arab lands, which is common to all Arab parties but also directly mentions in point 6 that it is willing to “cooperate with Jewish individuals and groups in Israel who support the same principles, to ensure equality and mutual respect among the citizens of a democratic state” (Balad 2018). The coexistence with the Jewish majority is further specified: “Coexistence with the Jewish majority is desirable, but only on the understanding of equal citizenship and equal individual and collective rights.” (Ibid.) According to its website, Balad requires that “the state recognizes the special bond of Arab citizens with the Palestinian people as they are an integral part of it, as well as its right to communicate with it and with the rest of the Arab people” (Ibid.). Based on this statement, Balad demands an Arab university, which could be also seen as part of the autonomy requirement, since while Israeli Arabs manage their own municipalities, the Ministry of Education oversees public education also in their communities (Ragson 2019). It also calls on Israeli authorities to develop a plan to fight crime in Arab society (Ibid.).

Balad members have been in the past tried or wanted for various illegal activities regarding participation in demonstrations or terrorist organizations. Balad’s founder Azmi Bishara was accused of sharing sensitive information with Hezbollah in 2007 (Kais 2017). He left Israel after the accusation and refuses to return, claiming he would not receive a fair trial. Another Balad MK, Haneen Zoabi, serving in the Knesset from 2009 to 2019, participated in a demonstration in 2010 that aimed to break Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip (Azoulai 2011). Basel Ghattas, another party member and former MK, was in prison for two years for smuggling cellphones to Palestinian security

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<sup>9</sup> Zionism in general is an ideology that promotes the existence of a Jewish state.

prisoners (Hesketh and Adalah 2011). Haneen Zoabi has also been repeatedly banned from the Knesset for anti-Israel remarks and in 2021, she and 12 other officials tied to Balad were convicted of financial fraud. According to Israel's Attorney General, there were "legal grounds to file criminal charges (on the whole) political party", however, he announced he would not put it on trial since it would also "harm (...) a wider circle of citizens who have an attachment to the party and identify with its goals and public positions" (Times of Israel 2021).

### 2.1.3 Ta'al

Ta'al (Hebrew: תע"ל, Arabic: الحركة العربية للتغيير)<sup>10</sup> is a secular Arab political party founded and led by a senior Arab politician and public personality Ahmad Tibi. It ran first in the 1996 Knesset elections but did not pass the threshold and entered Knesset only in 1999 as a part of the Balad list. As a small party, it has never got to the Knesset on its own. After the alliance with Balad split, it joined forces with Hadash in 2003 and then in Ra'am in 2003, 2006, and 2013, before the creation of the Joint List in 2015, and then parted with it in January 2019 and rejoined in September the same year prior to 2019 elections. As of May 2022, it is part of the Joint List.

Ta'al does not have a functioning website at this moment (May 2022), but it frequently shares posts on its Facebook page. According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, Ta'al supports the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It works to reduce the social and economic gap between the Jewish and Arab society and promote civil equality of Jews and Arabs (Ta'al n.d.).

The central personality of the Ta'al party and a key author of its agenda is its leader and founder, Dr. Ahmad Tibi, who has served as a member of the Knesset since 1996. He is often cited by media polls as the most popular Arab member of the Knesset (Haaretz, 2022) and currently, with Mansour Abbas, serves as one of two Arab deputy Knesset speakers. In 2009 Ra'am, Ta'al and Balad have been banned by the Knesset committee from elections, on the grounds of an accusation that the parties do not recognize Israel as a Jewish state. The decision was then overturned by the Israeli High Court of Justice (Haaretz 2022). Tibi also gained popularity when Benjamin Netanyahu featured him in

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<sup>10</sup> An acronym for *Tnu'a Aravit LeHithadshut* in Hebrew, literally *Arab Movement for Renewal*.

the slogan “Bibi or Tibi” during his electoral campaign to mobilize voters. The slogan was denounced as an incitation against the Arab minority (Ynet 2019).

The views of Ahmad Tibi remain controversial. Despite his popularity among the Israeli Arab public and respect among the Jewish representatives, he is criticized for serving as an advisor to Yasser Arafat and honoring Palestinians who carried out suicide attacks (Sipzner 2021). However, in spite of his “Palestinian patriotism”, according to his own words, he does not deny Israel’s right to exist, as he was accused of, but represents the minority position: “I don’t represent the state of Israel. I represent my party and Israeli Arabs. I oppose the state’s policies, not the state itself. And yet, despite my opposition, my reproach, and my critical positions and speeches, I really do think it is necessary to extend a hand to the majority population because it is in the interest of the minority” (Eldar 2013). Tibi also receives criticism based on his support of the Palestinian issue to the detriment of the Israeli Arab population. However, he has been an active member of the Knesset on various internal issues of the state. His claim that over 80% of bills he submitted focus on socioeconomic issues (Ibid.) is supported by his profile on the Knesset website (Knesset, 2022).

## 2.2 Ra’am

Ra’am (Hebrew: רע"מ, lit. “Thunder”, Arabic: القائمة العربية الموحدة)<sup>11</sup> or United Arab List is a conservative Islamist Arab political party, created in 1996 and led by Mansour Abbas. Ra’am was created as a political wing of the Southern Islamic Movement. Its current 80-page charter, updated in 2018, is not publicly available but has been provided to the Times of Israel (Boxerman 2021), which will therefore serve as a basis for further analysis.

Regarding the state of Israel and the conflict with Palestine, it calls Zionism a “racist, occupying project”, and demands the so-called right of return for the Palestinians who left or were expelled in 1948. The charter then promotes a two-state solution, a Palestinian state alongside Israel, “in the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem,” (sic, Ibid.) or alternatively one, binational state between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean Sea: “Remove your hands from the Palestinian people so they might establish their own free and independent state, next to Israel, and that the expelled and displaced might

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<sup>11</sup> Ra’am is an acronym for *HaReshima HaAravit HaMe'uhedet*, literally The United Arab List.

return to their homeland and their houses and their land. Or, accept one state from the river to the sea, in which the two peoples may live under the heavens in freedom and equality and safety and peace” (Ibid.).

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its solution has however not been Ra’am’s priority since the last election campaign in 2021 (Ibid.). The charter, on the one hand, includes harsh rhetoric toward Israel: “There can be no allegiance to [Israel], nor any identification with its Zionist, racist, occupier thought, nor any acceptance of any of the various forms of ‘Israelification,’ which would shed us of our identity and particularity and rights” (Ibid.). On the other hand, it signals the Movement’s engagement in “nonviolent civil advancement”, which it chose to promote. The address of its leader Mansour Abbas focuses on the needs of the Israeli Arab community and called for Arab-Jewish cooperation: “Our most important goal with regard to the State of Israel, regarding Palestinian Arab society, is to maintain our presence in our homeland, to preserve our identity, and the Arab, Islamic, and Christian identities of our country, and to enable our community to achieve its rights in civil, national and religious spheres, and in the sphere of daily life,” the charter declares (Ibid.).

The Ra’am party has traditionally joined forces with other Arab parties and never run alone in the elections. Its decision to split from the Joint List in 2021 has therefore come as a surprise, but eventually brought an unprecedented result when the party joined for the first time the government coalition. The political “experiment”, that focused on secular and civil advancement has proved as a potentially viable solution to the deadlock of Israeli Arab Knesset representation. From the civic goals, the party has identified as most important a higher budget, to address violence in the Israeli Arab communities, recognition of unrecognized Bedouin villages and the co-called Electricity Law, which would allow Arab homes built without permission to legally connect to electricity.

As of May 2022, Abbas has been able to secure an important budget of NIS 30 billion for the Israeli Arab community (Boxerman 2022), but the finances have yet to go through the bureaucratic approval to get to the communities (Ibid.) The party has also

achieved recognition of three Bedouin villages<sup>12</sup> but the total number only in the Negev desert is 35 (IWGIA 2022). The violence in Arab communities, which has been marked as one of the top priorities of the voters, has been also addressed, but despite increased police presence in Arab cities, the murder rate is reaching the same rates as last year (Boxerman 2022). According to some, this approach of Abbas has indeed achieved more for the Israeli Arab community, but the shift to pragmatism has also received criticism from other Arab members of the Knesset, as well as the Arab public. Abbas received particular criticism for his claim that Israel is a Jewish state. To understand his declaration and the political position of Mansour Abbas, it will be further treated in a separate case study.

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<sup>12</sup> Khašim Zannah, Rakhamah and ‘Abdih



### **3. Obstacles of the Arab Political Representation**

In order to discuss the obstacles faced by the Israeli Arab political representation, I am going to work within the framework of the Knesset. This means that the High Follow-Up Committee, which is also an Israeli Arab representative body, will not be examined, nor the relationship between the Arab representatives and their voters or separate Arab Knesset Members serving in parties that are not majority Arab. The chapter will therefore focus on the laws and Knesset decisions that affect the work of Arab Israeli political parties and compare them with the goals those parties want to achieve according to their programs. It also ought to be mentioned that the political programs do not always faithfully reflect the real situation, where the politicians do not have to follow their programs but rather their own values.

#### **3.1 Legislative Obstacles for Arab parties**

##### **3.1.1 Knesset Regulations**

Section 7a of The Basic Law: The Knesset, “Prevention of participation in the elections”, states, that the Central Elections Committee (CEC) may disqualify a candidate or a political party from elections if they (i) deny the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; (ii) incite to racism; or (iii) (offer) support of armed struggle, of an enemy state or of a terrorist organization against the State of Israel. The Arab parties (except Ra’am) at the same time claim they support the existence of Israel as a “state for all its citizens”, and that “the Jewish and democratic state” is a contradictory statement, as seen in the previous chapters.

There were multiple occasions, where there were motions to disqualify certain Arab members of Knesset or Arab parties based on this law (Hesketh and Adalah 2011, 52). In 2003, the CEC voted to ban Azmi Bishara of Balad and Ahmad Tibi of Ta’al from running in the elections based on their ideological positions. Similar motions were submitted in 2006 and 2009,<sup>13</sup> but in all cases, the indictment was overturned (Ibid.). The Law of Political Parties (1992), Amendment 12 (2002), similarly prohibits registration to parties whose “goals or actions deny the existence of the State of Israel as

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<sup>13</sup> In 2006 a group of right-wing MKs and the Likud party submitted an accusation against MK Sheikh Sarsour from Ra’am. In 2009, the CEC voted to ban Ta’al–Balad, Ra’am and the United Arab List, and Arab Movement for Change from the elections, based on the demand for a “state for all its citizens” or traveling to “enemy states” (Hesketh and Adalah 2011, 53).

a Jewish and democratic state and directly or indirectly ‘support armed struggle of an enemy state or of a terror organization, against the State of Israel’” (Ibid., 53).

In 2008, the Knesset approved an amendment of The Basic Law: The Knesset, “Candidate who Visited a Hostile State Illegally”. The amendment prohibits running in elections to the Knesset to any citizen, who has visited one of the “enemy states” of Israel<sup>14</sup> without a permission of the Interior Minister in the seven years preceding the submission of the candidate list. Such a law could in reality apply to Arab MKs more than to Jews (Ibid.), which makes it a significant legal obstacle to participating as candidates for a Knesset seat. However, there was only one Arab MK, Sa’id Naffaa from Balad, who was stripped of parliamentary immunity based on this law and imprisoned for one year (Wootliff 2015).

In 2016, the Knesset passed an amendment to the Basic Law: The Knesset, which allowed the Knesset to expel an elected MK through a majority of 90 out of 120 Knesset members (Knesset, Basic Law: The Knesset (Amendment 44) 2016). The conditions were specified as “incitement to racism” and support for an armed struggle by an enemy state or of a terrorist organization against the State of Israel”. Similarly to the Section 7a of the Basic Law mentioned above, the law could pose an obstacle for Arab MKs in their freedom of expression. It has also a direct connection to Arab MKs since it is seen as a response to certain claims of Haneen Zoabi from the nationalist party Balad, who allegedly expressed support to Hamas (Amnesty International 2019, 12). A petition filed against the law was rejected. Another Arab MK, Aida Touma-Suleiman from Hadash described the law as having a “chilling effect” on the freedom of expression (Ibid.).

In January 2018 the Knesset adopted an amendment to the parliamentary Rules of Ethics, which allow the Knesset’s Ethics Committee to proscribe an MK to travel abroad, if the trip funds an organization or a body calling for a boycott of the State of Israel (Knesset, Rules of Ethics for Members of the Knesset (Amendment 14a) 2018) The Knesset Ethics Committee has also in the past expelled three Balad MKs for up to four months when they observed a minute of silence during a meeting with Palestinian families whose children were killed by the IDF, after allegedly attacking Israelis (Weiss

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<sup>14</sup> Among enemy states are for example Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran.

2016). Finally, in July 2018 the Knesset adopted the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, which defines Israel. The law is widely perceived as facilitating further discrimination of the Arab minority (see The Israel Democracy Institute 2018; Amnesty International 2019; Adalah 2020) and it will be discussed in more detail in a separate case study. During the adoption process of the Basic Law, the Israeli Arab MKs proposed a bill offering an alternative definition of Israel as “a country for all its citizens” (Amnesty International 2019, 15). The proposition has been rejected before reaching the parliamentary discussion, which emphasizes the fact that the central requirements of Arabs are undesirable within the Israeli system.

### **3.1.2 The Governance Law**

In March 2014, the Knesset passed a bill to raise the electoral threshold from 2 % to 3.25 %. Also known as “The Governance Law”, the bill was promoted as a means to stabilize the Israeli democracy by eliminating the fragmentation by decreasing the number of present parties, and thus improving the government’s executive power (Rettig Gur 2014). However, considering that the Arab Israeli parties have been winning between 3–4 seats until then, the bill was widely interpreted as an attempt to eliminate them from the Knesset by the Arab Israeli public as well as political figures. With further criticism coming from the left-wing Zionist parties, the bill was finally seen as an anti-democratic attempt to force the Arab Israeli parties from the Knesset (Darkins 2017).

As pointed out by Darkins (2017, 28), the reasons for the formation of the Joint List were more complex than just raising the electoral threshold, as it is sometimes interpreted. Therefore, calling the bill “discriminatory” raises questions, especially given the initial support of the Israeli Arab public (also see Darkins, *Ibid.*). The interviews of Darkins show that the central reason for the creation of the Joint List was rather symbolic (Darkins 2017, 29), with a united Arab ticket seen as a response to the “oppression of the Palestinian people”. However, the Governance Law accelerated the process. The elections following in March 2015 marked an unprecedented success. The Joint List won 13 seats and became the third largest party in the Knesset. The voter turnout among Arabs was 63.5 % – an important increase from 56.5 % in the 2013 elections, out of which 83.2 % of the Arab vote went to the Joint List (Rudnitzky 2015). Most importantly, the unification greatly improved the Joint List’s position. Thanks to

its newly gained seats, the party qualified for an average of two members on all parliamentary sub-committees. One of the first demands of the Joint List was to exchange seats on the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee (FADC) for another two seats on the Finance Committee (Lis 2015).<sup>15</sup>

The threshold could therefore be seen both as an obstacle and as a gain. On the one hand, the budget approved for the Arab communities was not insignificant, and the Arab parties are ideologically similar enough to vote together. On the other hand, with decreasing voter turnout, the threshold of 3.25% could indeed be seen as an obstacle to getting elected. This is however disputable since Ra'am was able to pass the threshold on its own.

### **3.2 Delegitimization and ideological differences**

Lastly, an important obstacle for the Arab representation is delegitimization<sup>16</sup> and ideological differences. The Arab representatives face delegitimization by Jewish politicians on numerous occasions. Entities formally legal can still through delegitimization be excluded from the decision-making process. As it is also mentioned in the Amnesty International report (Amnesty International 2019, 16) it makes acceptable a certain type of intolerant behavior toward the Arab minority, which may in response widen the gap between Arabs and Jews and facilitate the approval of more harming policies in the future. Numerous statements by Jewish representatives have been passing the message that Arab citizens are rather not welcome as legitimate and equal participants (Brake 2018). According to Brake, verbal attacks on Arab MKs have increased after the formation of the Joint List.<sup>17</sup>

In the March 2015 election campaign, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu used the claim that "Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls" to mobilize his voters (Netanyahu 2015). In 2019, he again accused another two Knesset members, Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, of forming a coalition "relying on Arab parties who not only don't recognize the State of Israel, but want to destroy it" (Haaretz 2019).

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<sup>15</sup> Historically, the Arab parties do not sit on the FADC, since it is involved with planning for IDF attacks against Palestinian targets and is politically sensitive. (Darkins 2017, 32).

<sup>16</sup> According to the Collins dictionary, to delegitimize means "to make to make invalid, illegal, or unacceptable."

<sup>17</sup> for example, Yisrael Beiteinu Avigdor Lieberman claiming that Arab MKs should be executed, or Yaron Mazuz telling an Arab MK should return their ID card (Azulai 2015).

In 2020, Netanyahu's Likud party issued billboard ads picturing a photograph of a concurrent Prime Minister candidate Benny Gantz sitting next to Ta'al leader Ahmad Tibi, who is known to have advised Yasser Arafat in the past (Kampeas 2020). According to the director of Israel Democracy Institute, Yohanan Plesner, Benjamin Netanyahu "has stigmatized the Arab parties in a way that intimidated most representatives of the center-left parties into disavowing even the possibility of political cooperation with Arab parties (sic)" (Plesner 2021). Benny Gantz also later renounced cooperation with Arabs, even though they have supported him as a Prime Minister candidate. Delegitimization, stemming from picturing the Arabs as a threat, therefore contributes to lower chances for Arab-Jewish cooperation and advancement of the civic needs of the Israeli Arab minority. The delegitimization also echoes in Israeli society, as only 24 % of Jews in 2019 thought that Arabs should be appointed to senior governmental positions (Hermann, et al. 2019).

#### **4. The limits of Arab representation**

##### **4.1 Case study: The Nation-State Law**

The "Basic Law: Israel – The Nation-State of the Jewish People" (known as the Nation-State Law) can be seen as the most significant example of the attitude of the State of Israel to its Arab minority. The Nation-State Law is a Basic Law that anchors in law Israel's status as the "national home of the Jewish people" (Israel Democracy Institute 2018). It consists of 11 clauses that define among others Israel's state symbols, the official language, national holidays, Jerusalem as capital, and relations with the Diaspora Jewry. Since Israel does not have a constitution nor a bill of rights, the Basic Laws have quasi-constitutional status and serve as a base for judicial interpretation and future legislation. Nevertheless, a basic law can still be amended or repealed by an absolute majority in the Knesset (at least 61 members).

The Nation-State Law was adopted under the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition on July 19, 2018, by a margin of 62 to 55 votes. While Netanyahu's party Likud welcomed the law as "a pivotal moment in the annuals of Zionism and the State of Israel" (Knesset 2018), the members of the Joint List called it "apartheid" (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). The bill was however not unanimously accepted even by the Jewish parties. Many Knesset members representing the Israeli Jewish opposition, as

well as the Israeli president Reuven Rivlin argued that it discriminated against minorities and opposed democratic values and the principle of equality (Times of Israel 2018). The main objective of the bill was to strengthen the Jewish nature of the state and place the Jewish collective rights above individual ones (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). The law does not mention the state's democratic character or the equality of all its citizens. However, the nature of Israeli democracy is specific. The basic laws exist, because there has never been any agreement on what precisely should be meant by a "Jewish state", and how it should concur with its democratic character (Ibid.). The main issues raised by the law that concern the Arab minority are three – the codification of Israel as a Jewish state, the democratic principles, and the regulations on minorities.

The most criticized was Section 1 of the law, which defines Israel "as the historical homeland of the Jewish people and exclusively grants the Jewish people the right to national self-determination in the country" (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). "Jewish" in this case is understood as "the character of Judaism as a nation", as formulated by Zionism (Ibid.). The proclamation of Israel as a Jewish state isn't new and has been expressed in many other laws and jurisprudence, but the declaration still raises controversy. According to the Israeli Arab minority representatives, such a definition highlights the division between Arab and Jewish citizens. The law determines the character of the state according to the national majority, which means that minorities automatically gain secondary status. This has particularly concerned not only the Arab minority but also Druze and Bedouin. Whereas Bedouins traditionally support Arab parties in the elections, the Druze minority identifies itself as Israeli, strives for full integration (Zeedan 2020, 153), and usually votes for the political center (Shanan and Eilat 2021, 7).

The criticism or support of the law follows different definitions of the state. Israel is not the only state which defines its identity according to the ethnicity or religion of the majority. European countries such as Latvia, Spain, or Croatia also define the nation-state through the majority, and even the Council of Europe declares that nationality does not equal citizenship (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). Arab politicians, however, call for a "state for all its citizens".

For the Jewish and Arab critics alike, the law also calls to question the democratic principle of equality. Since this principle has never been incorporated in any of the existing Basic Laws, they argue that the Nation-State Law weakens basic democratic principles of the state (Ibid.). The question of whether Israel can be democratic and Jewish at the same time has been until now subject to debates. Ruth Gavison and Sammy Smooha show that both the Jewish and democratic nature of a state can be reconciled (Gavison 2004), in particular through the notion of an ethnic democracy (Smooha 1997). However, Gavison also points out that this does not justify any discriminatory behavior toward minorities (Gavison 2011). This counters the declaration of Adalah, the legal center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, that called the bill openly discriminatory, with “distinct apartheid characteristics” (Adalah 2020). The Nation-State Law in this regard contrasts with the Declaration of Independence of 1948, which claims Israel is a Jewish state, but guarantees to all its citizens political and social equality. As mentioned above, Israel is not the only country drawing its identity from the majority. However, as Israeli historian Alexander Yakobson points out, the principle of equality is excluded only by Israel (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). Yet, omitting the notion of equality was not a coincidence. It was argued that equality could be interpreted as a collective, rather than an individual right. One of the authors of the law called general equality “the exact opposite” of what he wanted (Ibid.). Furthermore, the Nation-State Law subordinates the democratic principle to the Jewish character of the state, but the definition of the relationship between Jewish and democratic was left out. It was pointed out that the relationship between democracy and Judaism is included in the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Freedom, passed in 1992. However, according to then-Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, the Nation-State Law’s purpose is to “protect the Jewish character of the state, even if that means sacrificing human rights” (Ibid.). By such re-definitions, Israel moves from a more liberal democracy to a majoritarian (Ibid.), or, in the terminology of Smooha, stays within the borders of an ethnic democracy (Smooha 1997).

Concerning other aspects of the Arab minority, Article 7 of the law promotes Jewish settlement around the country. It does not specify the relationship between the Jewish and Arab settlements, but the critics argue that concerning the neglected Arab settlement and infrastructure, such formulation can lead to further discrimination (Israel Democracy Institute 2018). Similarly, Section 4 of the law also amends the status of the

Arabic language. According to the Nation-State Law, Arabic should retain the same special status it was given before. Some oppose it, claiming that it has in fact been degraded from the second official state language to a language with special status (Ibid.), but as a matter of fact, the position of Arabic has never been clearly defined by Israeli law before (Wattad 2021).

Finally, some of the proponents claimed that the Nation-State Law was largely declaratory (Lintl and Wolfrum 2018). It enshrines some of the already existing facts, such as an Israeli flag, anthem, calendars, and the whole of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which has already been done by a separate Basic Law in 1980. Regarding the many definitions of national identity in democratic states, the Nation-State Law is not discriminatory in itself. Moving from a more liberal democracy to a majoritarian one, Israel keeps a balance between being a Jewish and democratic state at the same time. What is important, however, is that despite the fact that Israel is still Jewish and democratic, the Nation-State Law expresses a tendency of Israeli politics to privilege a "right of the majority", in Netanyahu's words (Ibid.)<sup>18</sup>. As it will be shown in the case of Mansour Abbas' Ra'am party, it did not put any legal obstacle to Israeli Arab political participation, but it widened the gap between the Arab and Jewish population.

## **4.2 Case study: New Approach of Ra'am**

The Nation-State Law demonstrates one of the most visible obstacles in the Arab integration to Israeli society. Contrastingly, Mansour Abbas represents one of its biggest achievements by leading his party into the government coalition for the first time in Israel's history. Through the lens of his political path, the case study explores what can his political turn mean for the Arab minority in Israel.

Mansour Abbas came into politics through his teacher, Abdullah Nimar Darwish (Sheikh Darwish). In 1971 Darwish founded the Islamic Movement in Israel, based on the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood; he also created a terrorist cell "Usrat al-Jihad", which aimed to topple the "Jewish political order" (Rubin 2014, 6). In the 1970s, the organization tried to burn a textile factory owned by a Jew and "killed a suspect collaborator" (Ibid.), and the members, Sheikh Darwish included, were arrested. After

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<sup>18</sup> When defending the bill, Netanyahu claimed "We will continue to protect the rights of the individual and the group, but the majority also has rights, and the majority rules." (Azulai and Tvizer 2018)



being released in 1984 after three years in prison, he began to advocate nonviolence and the “need to work in the state of Israel by Islamic values without breaking the law” (Ibid.). The Oslo Accord in 1993 brought a peace agreement between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel. However, the Arab citizens of Israel were not mentioned. In response, the Arab citizens’ Israeli identity strengthened (Mia’ri 2021, 223) As they understood that their political representation is now possible only through the Knesset, new parties began to form (Margalit 2021). The Islamic Movement split into two branches. The northern one continued to deny the Jewish state’s right to exist, but the southern one led by Darwish accepted the need of political engagement within the Knesset framework as the only tool to act against entrenched inequality between Jews and Arabs (Ibid.). In 1996, Darwish helped to form the Islamic Movement’s political representation, the United Arab List, or Ra’am (Ibid.).

Mansour Abbas was not deeply religious by upbringing but began to study Quran at the age of 16 and a year later became an imam at his local mosque (Margalit 2021). He got invited to join the discussion group of Sheikh Darwish and eventually became his disciple. The approach of nonviolence and change through dialogue moved him. As he told in an interview with Ruth Margalit “When you try to change someone, you threaten them (...). Why should they change? But when you say, ‘Let’s talk, let’s try to reach an understanding, come get to know me and my history and my hardships and my narrative, and I will do the same’ – then both sides will change. This isn’t some mystical belief. I see it daily” (Margalit 2021). In 2010, Abbas was appointed deputy head of the Islamic Movement, and in 2018 he was elected to lead Ra’am, at that time a part of the Joint List of Arab Parties that ran together in the Knesset elections. The Joint List, though ideologically different, was united in the support of the Palestinian resistance, but Abbas wanted to focus on the problems of Israeli Arabs (Ibid.), which meant sometimes to act against the interests of Palestinians. When it was proposed to grant working visas to Palestinian construction workers, Abbas was against, arguing that it would harm the Arab Israeli laborers. Subsequently, that also meant he was willing to cooperate with right-wing Jewish parties if it could bring more opportunities to influence Israel’s policy toward Arab citizens (Ibid.).

Prior to the elections in March 2021, Mansour Abbas removed his party from the Joint List. “He cited ideological disagreements, centered on the alliance’s endorsement of gay

rights, but he later acknowledged that this was just a pretext – a ‘catalyst’,” which allowed Abbas to abandon the traditional Arab politics of opposition (Margalit 2021). The polls were showing low support for Ra’am, but in the end, Ra’am won four seats on its own, whereas the Joint List lost nine. After the elections, Mansour Abbas showed a willingness to cooperate with anyone who would offer his party a place in the government. Israel is a multi-party system, and because of the large number of parties and a relative fragmentation of the political spectrum, the winning party has almost never enough votes to form the government on its own. Its leader is thus obliged to form a coalition with the smaller ones to get the parliament majority. Historically, Arabs have mostly rejected to serve in the Israeli government<sup>19</sup>. The traditional Arab role was to be a “safety net” for the ruling coalition, as was the case for Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin during the Oslo process. However, even though there have been Arab individuals serving in ministerial positions before, as parties they have refused to support the Jewish government mostly for ideological reasons, such as the government's need to decide over military engagement in the occupied territories.

After the last elections in 2021, Benjamin Netanyahu proposed Abbas to join his coalition. This also was an unprecedented step, given the history of Netanyahu’s attempts to delegitimize the Arab minority. His government passed the 2018 “Nation-State Law”, proclaiming Israel a Jewish state – and implying, according to many, that the national minority of Arabs is now second-class. On the other hand, Netanyahu also passed an unprecedentedly high budget for the Arab communities, the Government Resolution 922. The place in the coalition would give Abbas a significant influence on the government agenda, and he was willing to trade ideology for practical achievements for the community (Margalit 2021). In the end, Netanyahu was not able to get enough support and his attempt failed, but even as such, he legitimized the cooperation with Arabs in politics. When Netanyahu did not succeed, Yair Lapid, the leader of the second largest party, who had another 28 days to form a government, started to negotiate with Abbas again.

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<sup>19</sup> They traditionally refuse, but they have also not been invited to participate. Arabs have been perceived as a potential threat, whereas Jews as oppressors (Zeedan 2019). The status is slowly beginning to change, as this thesis suggests.

In the negotiations with Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, the leader of the third largest Yamina, Abbas demanded “almost 10 billion dollars for education, welfare, and transportation in Arab communities, with separate funding for the Druze and Bedouin populations and nearly a billion dollars to target crime and violence” (Margalit 2021). Apart from that, he asked for a legalization of nine Bedouin villages and a cancellation of a law that allowed the police to demolish illegally built houses (Ibid.). The negotiations were interrupted by a series of violent clashes between Israel and Hamas, but in the end, Yair Lapid agreed that the government would recognize three of the nine Bedouin villages and the law allowing the demolitions would be “frozen” until the end of 2024.

At the end of 2021, Ra’am has already achieved passing of a USD 14.85 billion plan to develop Arab communities, and the recognition of three Bedouin settlements in the Negev desert. The electricity bill, passed in January 2022, allowed tens of thousands of Arab homes built without permit to connect to electricity and water (Abu Sharkia 2022). The step of Ra’am in the coalition is seen by many Arab citizens as a gamble. He is called a “traitor” by the Palestinians, and a “supporter of terror” by his fellow members of the Knesset (Margalit 2021). However, the last poll from Israel Democracy Institute has shown that 77% of Ra’am voters would vote for it again (Hermann and Anabi 2022).

The Ra’am’s strategy, referred to as “The New Way”, is rooted in its “theological pragmatism” (Abu Sharkia 2022). “As Ra’am sees it, the harm to Muslim worshippers would have been greater had it been outside the coalition.” (Ibid.) In December 2021, Abbas broke the traditional stance of Arab parties with a declaration that Israel will always be a Jewish state. As Arik Rudnitzky shows, the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state is not novel in the Islamic Movement, and similar declarations have been made by other Islamic leaders before (Rudnitzky 2022, 3). Rather, the controversial statement, interpreted as a legitimization of the Nation-State Law, is one of the three “revolutions” introduced by Ra’am’s “New Way” (Milshtein 2022, 9). Instead of confronting Israel’s Jewish character and trying to establish “a state for all its citizens”, Abbas focuses on the recognition of the Arab community in Israel as a national minority with equal rights and at the same time promotes recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. The second “revolutionary turn” is breaking ties with the “old Arab politics” in opposition and

instead seeking influence by joining the ruling establishment. The third “revolution” is a fact that Ra’am is not affiliated with any parliamentary group or ideology, and “independent of nationalist decision making” (Ibid., 10).

Mansour Abbas’s strategy has been a political breakthrough for the Arab, but also for the Jewish community in Israel. He still faces suspicion and delegitimization from the Jewish side due to his ties to the Islamic Movement (Shemer 2021), and the Arab side, on the opposite side criticizes that he was willing to set aside the Arab national struggle to cooperate with a Jewish government for civic wins for his community (Times of Israel 2022). The strategy is yet to be tested. He has secured an important budget for the Arab community, but the funds have to pass through the Israeli and Arab bureaucracy in the municipalities. Amidst repeating outbursts of violence, it is not entirely possible to overlook the Palestinian national issue. Abbas has made clear that the ultimate goal of his party are not small wins, but the improved Israeli-Palestinian relationship (Keller-Lynn 2022). Even though it is not possible to predict many future outcomes, the step into the Jewish coalition already set an important precedent for the relationship between Jews and Arabs. It shows that Israel is still a democracy, albeit ideologically disparate, and if the model of cooperation proves functional, it could eventually bring a dialogue between Arabs and Jews in Israel, and perhaps also the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The goals of the Israeli Arab political representation have two levels – the civic goals of improving the everyday life of the Arab community, and the struggle for equal national rights and Israel as a state for all its citizens, where every citizen regardless of their nationality has the right to self-determination. On the national level, the goals are directly contradictory to the Jewish majority's will, and the Arabs have not reached any concessions in this regard, despite their lasting struggle. Some laws, such as the Governance Law or the amendments to the Knesset Law, could potentially limit free expression of Arab representatives or their ability to submit bills, however, the laws are seldom used, and most indictments against Arab MKs are overturned. More reachable goals for the Arab representation are the civic ones, which do not trespass on the national interests of the Jewish majority. The violence in Arab communities, infrastructure, housing, and education are problems that ought to be addressed, but the obstacle is twofold. The parties can quite well cooperate on issues related to national problems, but, when it comes to civic goals, each has a different approach, which makes it difficult to collaborate and push for a tangible result. The Joint List has marked significant progress in the effective political representation of the Arab minority. It seems that the party is willing to work for the civic betterment of the Arab community, but prefers to stay in opposition, where it does not have enough influence on legislation. The situation is further complicated by the fact that both Ta'al and Balad seem to focus on the national struggle of Arabs in Israel and their connection to Palestinians in the Territories, and the internal differences do not allow the Joint List to effectively cooperate with Jewish parties, which is necessary.

Both Jewish and Arab parties for the most part refused to work together, mostly for the contradictory national goals. A new approach was introduced by Ra'am when it took part in the coalition in 2021. However it was still widely criticized by Arab MKs that Ra'am cooperates with the oppressors (Ben-Shimon, Shlezinger and Etti 2022), and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett received criticism from the Jewish opposition on the fact that he was "cooperating with terrorists" (Halper 2022). The Ra'am's entering the coalition further emphasized the problem. As an Islamic party, it was able to propose a new, pragmatic approach that permitted them to accept the framework of Israel as a Jewish state. The Jewish parties at the same time were willing to cooperate with Arabs

in order to form a coalition against Benjamin Netanyahu. Ra'am was then able, thanks to its strong blackmail potential, to achieve the approval of an all-time highest budget to be invested in the Arab communities in the next five years, push through a bill that allowed Arab homes to connect to electricity, get three illegal Bedouin villages recognized, and put forward the problem of violence in Arab communities, which was reported numerous times by Arab citizens as the most important problem they want their representatives to address. However, it should be also added that for Ra'am, it often meant to vote for bills harming the Arab citizens.

It seems that despite Israel identifying as a state for Jewish people, when it comes to the advancement of civic goals, the Arab parties do not face an obstacle larger than the others. The presence in Knesset committees or the number of bills submitted by individual Arab MKs which were adopted proves that the Arab party members are free to work on legislation and participate fully in the political life in Israel. However, the adopted laws offer only a partial picture. The internal disagreements and the voter turnout, which is influenced by the growing disinterest of Arab voters who don't see changes as important enough, but also delegitimization in the public discourse, used widely by Benjamin Netanyahu and right-wing parties and reflected by the Israeli society, weakens their legitimacy as coalition partner.

The thesis also shows that it would be oversimplifying to draw a direct correlation between the achievements of Arab politicians or parties and real advancements on the ground. As the previous five-year budget show, there is also an important role played by the Israeli bureaucratic apparatus and Arab municipalities. Both could slow down and delay a decision that has been taken in the Knesset, rendering the work of Arab parties inefficient. These topics have not been a central part of the thesis but offer a broader image of why the Arab communities don't enjoy equal status in Israeli society. Another topic complementary to this work is also the relationship between the Israeli Arab political leadership and the Arab minority. There have been important changes in the opinions of the new generation of Arab Israelis, as shown by Michael Milshtein (2022), but drawing the connection between them and the political representation shows another facet of the problem. Some of the MKs are serving over 20 years in the Knesset, and their rhetoric has not much changed, so a fresh view of the society they represent would offer another important means of a deeper understanding of Israeli society and politics.

## Summary

The thesis poses the question, what are the current goals and obstacles of Arab representation in the Israeli political system? Through the historical development of Israeli political history, it continues by putting into context the current position of Arabs in Israeli politics. As far as their goals are concerned, each Arab political party in Israel has its own, which is only partly compatible with the other Arab parties. This makes it difficult to cooperate on the internal level, and it is also emphasized by the fact that they have been obliged to run together as a Joint List of Arab Parties. The goals of Arab representation then could be separated into two categories – national and civic. On the national level, the main demand of the Arab representation has been that Israel should change its definition from a Jewish state to “a state for all its citizens”, and recognize Arabs as a national, homeland minority. This goal is directly contradictory to the Jewish interests. On the civic level, the Arab parties require civic improvements for the Arab community, which is also in the interest of Israel as a Jewish state. However, for the contradictory national goals, Arab parties have not been able to reach important achievements in this regard. This approach was changed in 2021 by the approach of Ra’am, an Islamic Arab party, which ran separately from the Joint List. It succeeded in becoming the first party to join a government coalition in Israel, and during the year saw a number of achievements. However, although that shows that on the legislative level, the Arab parties in Israel do not face greater obstacles than the Jewish ones, they also face delegitimization in the Israeli society, which puts them in a challenging situation in the Knesset. Problems on lower levels of governance in Israel then also contribute to ineffective implementation of their achievements resulting in decreased voter turnout, lowering further their chances to make a change in the Arab community.

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## **Bachelor's Thesis Project**

**Student:** Lýdie Vlčková

**Preliminary title in Czech:** Arabská politická reprezentace v Izraeli: cíle a překážky

**Preliminary title in English:** Arab Political Representation in Israel: Goals and Obstacles

**Academic year of topic announcement:** 2020/2021

**Thesis language:** English

**Department:** Department of Russian and East European Studies (23-KRVS)

**Supervisor:** Dr. Irena Kalhousová

**Thesis program/specialization:** Political Science and International Relations

**Key words:**

Israel, politics of Israel, Arab politics, Arab-Israeli, Raam, political representation, political parties

### **A. Research problem**

The topic of Arab citizens of Israel and their representation in Israeli politics is not a new one, however, it still deserves serious attention in the academic discussion. Researchers like Sammy Smooha or Arik Rudnitzky from the Israeli Democratic Institute have been focusing on many aspects of the Arab Israeli reality in Israeli society for a long time. The problem of their non-participation in the political process is quite well-described. There is, however, a very limited number of studies focusing on the topic of Arab interests and needs and their reflection by the Arab political representation. Are Arabs in Israeli politics willing and able to advance the interest of their people? Under the current circumstances, this question needs to be asked again.

There are voices from the Arab Israeli public, as well as other Arab Israeli politicians, condemning the act of cooperation with Jewish-led parties as a counterproductive approach without any visible positive impact in sight (source), but many others see this political step as necessary for advancing the needs of Israeli Arabs (source), that are still socially and economically in an inferior position compared to their Jewish neighbors. When in May 2021 Ra'am as an Arab Israeli party not only became a part of a coalition for the first time in Israeli politics, but also had a decisive role in the election results, it became even more important to shift the academic focus to Arab politics in Israel.

### **B. Research questions and goals**

*What does the Arab Israeli representation look like? What are its focuses and goals and how is it implementing them? How did their political position change over the years? Are they reflecting the needs of Arab Israeli population?* The goal of the thesis will be to present the Arab representation and its programs with the emphasis on how it is able to carry them out with regard to an academic and Arab Israeli public opinion where possible.

*Is the Arab inability to push their goals made worse by any kind of boycott or boycott-like practices?* There are voices claiming that the elevation of the electoral threshold lowering the chances of small parties to get into the Knesset was a step to decrease the chances of Arab-Israeli parties, that were in reaction forced to form the Joint List and

candidate together, however ideologically different, which in turn made them less able to communicate with the voters.

*Are the Arab Israelis now really or just seemingly in a better position when Raam took place among the election winners?* The fact that the Arab Israeli party played a kingmaker in the recent elections does not necessarily mean that it will have more power over the government decisions. The coalition agreement promised a higher budget for financing the improvement of Palestinian living conditions and the fact that Raam took part in the victory is also a marker of future bigger publicity, that can improve their position, but its position is far from ideal.

The main point of research is the analysis of the Arab parties' politics in Israel today, focusing on the goals of the representative parties and the real and possible outcomes. A special attention will be given to the problem of cooperation from Israel and the recent political turn saw in the 2021 elections.

### **C. Preliminary research design**

The thesis is largely based on descriptive and analytical methods. To analyze the goals and obstacles of Arabs in Israeli politics, there will be much need to draw upon available academic and expert analyses, and the research will be, where possible, complemented by journal articles or public opinion polls led by organizations like B'Tselem or Israeli Democratic Institute, or any other, that might appear during the period of writing.

The thesis outline may look as following:

1. Introduction to the topic, based on available literature review and historical changes in the Arab position in Israeli politics, glossary
2. Arab-led parties in Israel and their political programs
3. Position of Arabs politics – obstacles, discrimination, media coverage, etc.
4. Raam as a new point of view, facing new challenges? Possible solutions.
5. Conclusions, discussion of results.

### **D. Possible research problems and solutions**

There is of course the threat of confirmation bias, that may stem from too one-sided, left or right-oriented sources or media. This effect will be considered and diminished by making the sources as varied as possible and discussing the source's background where possible. The other concern is that, when it comes to Raam participation in the current government (albeit without a minister), the topic is relatively new and less described, there might be therefore a higher emphasis on a very theoretical discussion or media coverage, that is not always opinion-neutral. The third problem is of course a language barrier. The sources are limited to English, French, Czech, with regard to Hebrew, but the latter might also need to be translated, it will therefore be used only occasionally, mainly because some of the studies from Israeli Democratic Institute are not fully available in English. However, given the relatively small language group of Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel, and the expansion of English as a language of the academia, many of the studies written by Israelis or Arabs related to this thesis are written in English.

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