

The Joint List

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The newly-founded Joint List, an ethnically diverse parliamentary platform home to highly varied political positions - from socialists to liberals and Islamists - is an exciting political project which bares implications not only for Israeli politics, but for the whole Middle East.

On March 17th 2015, national Election Day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, highly concerned about a political defeat predicted to his *Likud* party by the polls, decided to mobilize Jewish voters with racist fear-mongering. "The right-wing government is in danger," Netanyahu warned in a video posted during the day, "Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polls. Left-wing organizations are busing them out." Eventually successful, this spreading of misinformation about an extreme increase in Arab voting brought many hesitant right-wing voters to the ballot box, making the right-wing *Likud* party the uncontested winner of the election.

Netanyahu's comments were just a small part of a wider wave of legislation and incitement aimed at delegitimizing the Palestinian citizens of Israel¹ and their elected representatives. Since 2009, Netanyahu's administration has pushed for the exclusion of parties representing the Palestinian citizens of Israel in the Knesset and the suppression of political speech of the left in general. Several laws were passed which penalized the commemoration of the *Nakba* and calls for political boycotts, while repeated attempts at an outright ban of some Arab parties could only be stopped by the Supreme Court. More importantly, in the latest move by extreme right-wing politician Avigdor Lieberman, the outgoing government raised the election threshold from 2% to 3.25% of valid votes, obviously to hinder the parties representing the Palestinian citizens from entering the Knesset.

The March 2015 Israeli general elections, which came unexpectedly after a coalition crisis, caught most parties on the political spectrum off guard. Faced with the newly raised electoral threshold, the different parties representing the Palestinian citizens in Israel had only a few weeks to decide on their future, choosing ultimately to run together in a joint platform; the Joint List. The participating parties were: the Arab-Jewish socialist platform, *Hadash* (The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), with its main component being the Israeli Communist Party; the left-leaning nationalist *Balad* (National Democratic Assembly), which upholds the idea of cultural autonomy for the Palestinian citizens of Israel; the conservative United Arab List, with its main component being the Islamic Movement (the Southern branch); and the liberal *Ta'al* (Arab Movement for Renewal), mainly known for its charismatic leader, Ahmad Tibi.

The controversy over a joint candidacy

The decision of these politically diverse parties to consolidate was clearly a necessity in light of the higher election threshold. Nonetheless, the call for joint candidacy of all parties representing the Palestinian citizens in Israel was a popular demand much before; surveys conducted showed 85% of the Palestinian population wanted these parties to run together.

¹ In the aftermath of the 1948 war, some 160,000 Palestinians remained within the borders of the newly created state of Israel and were granted the Israeli citizenship. These Palestinians today represent 20% of the country's population and are sometimes referred to as Israel-Arabs or Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel.

This demand was further enhanced by their voting record and past parliamentary activities; not only in regards to the rights of the Palestinian minority, but also to issues of social justice and civil rights, these parties have almost always voted concordantly.

The popularity of the demand for a joint candidacy notwithstanding, the activists in the different parties were much more hesitant. *Hadash*, *Balad* and the Islamists have been political opponents for decades. The acrimony between the Islamists and secular activists was an especially thorny problem. Daily controversies between the progressive attitude of *Hadash* and *Balad* and that of the Islamic movement involved many topics: women's representation, the visibility of secular or "promiscuous" culture, mixture of men and women in the public sphere, the place of Christian practices in public or gay rights.

Activists of all parties were also concerned that this move might be seen as opportunistic, and perhaps lead to indifference among voters. Specifically in *Hadash*, the objection to the Joint List was explained as a concern for the future of the Jewish-Arab partnership - among the most important planks of their party platform - which would be downplayed in a predominantly Arab list. While some of the leading figures in *Hadash* called to vote against joining the Joint List, the overwhelming majority of the general party assembly resoundingly supported the resolution.

The Joint List's formation – a victory of the left?

The negotiation for the formation of the Joint List began after the elections were announced in December 2014 and ended shortly before the last date for the registration of electoral lists at the end of January 2015. Under this acute time pressure, the different parties had to democratically approve the move and agree on a joint program and on the line of candidates. With these two important questions needing answer, the socialist party *Hadash*, most hesitant to join the List, had the upper hand not only because it was the biggest faction, but also because it had the most common and comprehensive social, political and economic program.

The List's program obviously included the undisputed demands for full equality of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, the end of the 1967 Occupation, the raising of the minimum wage and the rejection of any form of racism in Israeli society. But it also directly broached issues which the members of the Islamic movement had difficulties publicly aligning with, such as full equality for women in all segments of life and a clear rejection of any sectarian strife. Being the biggest party among the four, *Hadash* installed the young and newly elected party-leader Ayman Odeh as the head of the List. The apportioning of seats (of the first 15: *Hadash* five, *Balad* four, the Islamic Movement four and *Ta'al* two) furthermore demonstrated the accomplishments of the secular left in the shaping of the List, while its non-sectarian and feminist character was underlined by the diverse composition of candidates, which included two women, two Christians, two Bedouins, a Druze and a Jew.

Between a popular front and national unity

The formation of the Joint List as an ad-hoc candidacy, without independent structures, created several challenges to leading a coordinated, bilingual campaign during the brief seven weeks left in the election. As past animosity between members of different parties didn't just vanish in thin air, smaller arguments led to emotional quarrels that endangered the appearance of unity. To grapple with this issue, campaign rallies and most public events included representatives of at least two parties from the Joint List to convey the message of unity to

local branches. This notwithstanding, there existed a much more fundamental disagreement about the nature of the joint candidacy. The one approach, mainly propagated by the members of *Hadash*, perceived the Joint List as an anti-racist popular front against the threat of fascism, and sought to work together with the left and center Zionist parties to topple Netanyahu's rule. On the other side, most members of *Balad* and the Islamic party viewed the List as a viable step for enhancing Palestinian autonomy and national identity inside Israel and were thus strictly against forming bonds with the Zionist left and center parties, or even contemplating the far-fetched possibility of joining a future government.

The head of the Joint List, *Hadash* leader Ayman Odeh, clearly embodied the more "integrationist" tendency in his numerous public appearances, often invoking Martin Luther King Jr. as a role model. In his many interviews, his main message was twofold – on the one hand he insisted on the demand for complete equal citizenship for the Palestinian citizens of Israel as part of a progressive discourse of civil rights, and on the other he invoked the end of the occupation as the only possible road towards of a peaceful future in the relations between the two nations. Receiving considerable attention from foreign journalists, several international media outlets pointed out that his resemblance to the Kurdish HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş in style, content and appearance was undeniable.

Odeh's discourse, however, raised discomfort among some Palestinian activists. His non-confrontational and pleasant demeanor in public discussions was considered by some as a weakness. His preference to speak about the discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel and the need to end the occupation in a pragmatic manner, without constantly questioning the legitimacy of Zionist ideology, earned him popularity amongst Jewish Israelis, while alienating the more radical anti-Zionist members of the Joint List.

A significant win faced by the revival of Netanyahu

Despite widespread resentment against the *Likud* party and its social policies, the racist and extremely divisive campaign led by Netanyahu was successful in mobilizing his home base in great numbers, ensuring his party a quarter of the seats in parliament. The results for other right-wing and religious parties ensured the continuation of Netanyahu's reign and eliminated any possibility of a center-left coalition, which might have been supported by the Joint List.

In the face of such menacing developments, the strong achievement of the Joint List received less attention, despite its historic success. It had auspiciously increased the voting rates among the Palestinian citizens of Israel, with participation in the general elections climbing from 57% to 64%, and it received 85% of all votes of the Palestinian citizens of Israel. As for the Jewish voters, while their numbers were symbolically crucial for *Hadash*, they had already been few in recent elections and were only slightly impacted by *Hadash* joining the Joint List. The 13 seats - out of 120 in the Knesset - gained by the List meant the biggest parliamentary representation of Palestinian citizens in Israel's history. The Joint List became the third largest political power in the Knesset.

A game-changer in the Knesset

Sworn in in May 2015, the fourth Netanyahu government, his most right-wing and religious to date, was endorsed with the smallest majority possible; 61 Knesset members. The Joint List, as the second biggest party in the opposition, was thus put in a critical position in the coordination of oppositional maneuvers and was able to influence policy in an unparalleled manner.

Due to its size, the most important position the Joint List was entitled to was Chair of the Knesset Committee for the Advancement of Women and Gender Equality, an appointment taken up by the feminist activist and Communist Party member, Aida Touma-Suleiman. This was the first time in Israeli history that a Palestinian led a statutory committee with actual legislative powers. As chairwoman of the committee, Touma-Suleiman was able to present feminist struggles from an intersectional position, addressing issues that were never before dealt with in the committee, being deemed irrelevant by former chairs. These were for example the impact of house demolitions on women and children, the segregation between Palestinian and Jewish women in delivery wards, and sexual violence accusations against police. That she was able to direct legislative attention to “general” women’s issues and merge them with the specific concerns of Palestinian and working class women and LGBTs attests to the great potential of the Joint List to impact Israel’s regnant segregation politics.

Another positive effect of the Joint List included improvement of other parties’ approach towards its own members. The List cooperates with other parties on specific issues of mutual interest and other parliamentarians started asking more often for their input on various topics. Yet, probably the most outstanding success credited to the Joint List was the governmental approval for a five-years budget plan aimed at minimizing the gaps between Arabs and Jews, redirecting around 4,5 billion Dollars to projects in Arab municipalities. The adoption of the proposal was widely recognized as influenced by the intensive work of members of the Joint List, the committee of Arab mayors and several leftist NGOs. The parliamentary force of the Joint List also enables them to critically monitor the implementation of the plan, which risks being diluted by several extreme right-wing ministers.

Outside of the Knesset, the presence of the Joint List also brought positive effects. The lower tension between the political fractions enabled cooperation in the fight against gun violence and violence against women in particular, which plague Palestinian society in Israel. After the organizer of the first women’s marathon in the Arab town of Tira received death threats from extreme Islamists and her car was shot at, a solidarity visit by members of all of the Joint List’s parties, including the Islamic movement, was quickly organized. The existence of the Joint List also paved the way for the more progressive amongst its members to meet Palestinian conservative communities and have direct contact with them. Aida Touma-Suleiman reflected on this point when publicly asked about the negative implications of joining forces with Islamists. She told the crowd that the cooperation with the Islamic movement enabled her as a feminist communist to sit down for the first time with Bedouin women and listen to them, a situation unimaginable before in the highly religious communities of the Negev.

Keeping unity in a period of upheaval

The last cycle of violence, sparked by the killing of a Palestinian family in an arson attack in the summer of 2015 in the west bank, led to mass demonstrations in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) and to a wave of knife attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians. Although the participation of Palestinian citizens of Israel in these attacks was not substantial, Arab-Jewish relationships inside Israel severely deteriorated, leading to frequent mob attacks against people presumed to be Palestinians. In social networks and in public campaigns supported by government officials, human rights organizations, left-wing activists and members of the Joint List and the left-liberal *Meretz* party were portrayed as a threat to the security of Israel.

The unequivocal rejection of violence by the Joint List notwithstanding, after speaking out against state-violence their members were publicly accused of betrayal and aiding terrorism. A meeting of *Balad* members with Palestinian families of slayed attackers in the oPt, in order to coordinate the returning of their children's bodies for burial, made Netanyahu himself call for their immediate expulsion from the Knesset and promptly advanced a new law which makes it possible for a parliamentary majority to expel members of the house. Despite these vicious attacks, including violent threats against its members directly from the floor of the Knesset, the Joint List has managed to continue to stand strong and unified, with Ayman Odeh defending the members of *Balad* who faced legal persecutions for their political activities. The steep increase in home demolitions in Arab towns within Israel again put the Joint List in the spotlight. In the beginning of 2017, the police demolished parts of the unrecognized Bedouin village Umm al-Hiran, also shooting and killing one of its residents and injuring Ayman Odeh, who was there to support local protest and actions against the upcoming house demolitions. The Joint List's persistent political campaign exerted pressure on the Minister of the Interior to - at least partially - retract its false allegations of terrorism and connections to ISIS conveyed to impugn the slayed village resident.

Conclusion

Contrary to many critical predictions indicating its disintegration in the aftermath of the election, more than two years into its existence the Joint List continues to successfully operate as a platform for the non-Zionist left and the Palestinian minority. The concerns of secular and left-wing activists that a pact with the Islamic movement would damage the more progressive elements of the Joint List did not materialize. Quite to the contrary, one could perceive the Joint List as a highly productive hegemonic endeavor of the Arab-Jewish left - determining the political agenda for the entire community of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, leading social changes from a power position unthinkable without the electoral consolidation. Moreover, the dialog between left-wing activists and the Islamic movement might show a way for future productive involvements with various Islamic groups in the region.

One of the most encouraging impacts of the Joint List is the hopeful message it emanates to the Palestinian people in particular, and to the Arab world at large. The democratic and respectful partnership of religious and secular forces - Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Jews - all in the same political project, has embodied and enacted the possibility of resolving conflicts democratically and coordinating a joint strategy for the better good. This message is even more relevant in the context of the rise of sectarian violence all over the Arab world, prompted by the war in Syria.

Nonetheless, there are still many difficulties hindering the Joint List from reaching its full potential: the non-existence of joint structures for the parties composing the List and the lack of daily coordination between members have both already caused several media embarrassments and intensified existing conflicts. More importantly, the lack of joint structures impedes the development of a long-term strategy. However, the main threat to the future of the Joint List remains the extreme right-wing attempts to legalize its members and ban it from the Knesset. The legal and public campaign to delegitimize the left and the Palestinian minority, as well as the government's repeated and varied gestures to hamper the rule of law, all present a real danger for democratic forces inside Israel.

As threatened as they are by the current situation, the members of the Joint List advocate a perspective which sees the struggle for equal rights and social justice in Israel as connected to the Palestinian struggle for independence, viewing the current wave of repression directed

against the left and the Palestinian minority in Israel as deeply entwined to the intensification of military and settler violence in the occupied territories. That is why international support for the Joint List and the Israeli left in general must heed this call to fight not only against rising discrimination inside Israel, but more fundamentally to confront the West's deep complicity with the ongoing Israeli occupation.

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