

# Israel's Palestinian Parties Face Test of Unity

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Global Research, February 15, 2015

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*A new coalition of Arab parties running in next month's Israeli general election faced its first serious test on Thursday when one of its most prominent members was disqualified.*

Haneen Zoabi, a member of the Israeli parliament since 2009, was barred from the campaign by the Central Elections Committee, a highly partisan body dominated by the major Israeli political parties.

As expected, the right-wing parties of prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman petitioned for her disqualification, accusing her of making statements in support of armed struggle.

But, more surprisingly, they were supported by the Zionist Camp, which has positioned itself as a centre-left alternative to the Netanyahu government. It is currently the second most popular party after Netanyahu's.

The committee members ignored the advice of the country's attorney-general, Yehuda Weinstein, that there were no legal grounds for banning Zoabi from parliament, known as the Knesset.

Zoabi is one of 11 MPs representing the 1.5 million-strong Palestinian minority in Israel, who avoided expulsion when Israel was created in 1948 and today have Israeli citizenship.

Her disqualification is the culmination of a campaign by the right-wing parties that accuses the Arab MPs of being "terrorists" and "traitors" who have no place in parliament - or in Israel.

One of Lieberman's campaign slogans is "Haneen to Jenin", suggesting she should be expelled to a Palestinian city in the occupied West Bank.

The coalition of Arab parties - formed last month under the title the "Joint List" - is will appeal to the supreme court next week to overturn the ban.

Fortunately for the list, the judges are likely to intervene on Zoabi's behalf. If they do not, the Arab coalition will face a crisis - probably the first of a series over the coming weeks and months.

If Zoabi is excluded, the other parties in the list will have to decide whether to refuse to run in a show of solidarity. If, as seems more likely, they chose to ignore her disqualification and stand anyway, that could send a troubling message to their voters - that Lieberman and Netanyahu get to decide who represents Palestinian citizens in the Israeli parliament.

## An uncomfortable alliance

The list was established late last month after weeks of difficult negotiations as the Arab parties tried to set aside long-standing personality clashes and ideological disputes.

Traditionally, the parties have argued that their political differences – representing nationalist, socialist and Islamic outlooks – are important and needed to be preserved.

But the parties were forced into an uncomfortable alliance by two developments that threatened their survival in the parliament.

The first was a decision last year to raise the electoral threshold to a level that none of the Arab parties could expect to surmount separately. The move was widely interpreted as an effort by the right to rid the 120-seat chamber of Arab MPs.

Compounding their problems, the Arab parties have faced flagging support from the Palestinian public in recent elections, with turnouts falling to barely more than half the electorate.

According to a [report on the election](#) published this week by the Nazareth-based Human Rights Association (HRA), the decline in voting represents two trends.

One, based on principle, argues that elections should be boycotted to avoid conferring legitimacy on “the Zionist parliament”. That position has adherents in a small secular party, the Sons of the Village (Ibnaa al-Balad), and the more influential northern wing of the Islamic Movement, led by Sheikh Raed Salah.

But much of the recent drop-off in voting can probably be ascribed to another trend: growing disenchantment with parliamentary politics as a whole.

Mohammed Zeidan, the director of the HRA, said an increasing number of Palestinian citizens felt that Arab politicians had no hope of being effective in advancing the minority’s rights, given both the current right-wing climate and the infighting that has beset the Arab parties.

## Hopes of more seats

Many supporters criticised the discord between the parties, pointing out that they shared common ground on the biggest issues facing the Palestinian minority. All want an end both to the racist laws and practices that enforce discrimination inside Israel, and to the occupation suffered by millions of their Palestinian kin across the Green Line.

Surveys showed that the parties could significantly raise voter turnout if they united – which in turn would lead to more seats in the Knesset.

When the Joint List was announced last month, its leaders said they expected to increase their tally of seats to as many as 15 in the next parliament, making it the third or fourth largest bloc in the Knesset.

The list’s campaign slogan, to be unveiled in Nazareth this weekend, is “the will of the people”, suggesting that the party leaders have finally listened to their electorates.

But indications so far are that any unity is only paper thin. The clue may be in the use of the word “joint” to describe the list rather than “unified” or “unity”.

The term was preferred for two probable reasons.

The first is that the socialist Hadash party prizes its primary identity as a Jewish-Arab party, even making sure that it has a Jewish candidate in one of its top slots. This tradition is deeply entrenched in the party’s philosophy, even though only a small proportion of its members and voters are Jewish.

That has often put it at odds with the more nationalist Balad party, to which Zoabi belongs. Balad’s key demands are that the minority be allowed educational and cultural autonomy to help preserve a Palestinian identity under constant threat from Israeli state policy, and that it begin to develop national political institutions to create a more accountable local Arab leadership.

Hadash reportedly preferred a “joint” list, conveying the impression of cooperation with the Jewish population, over a “unity” list that would have suggested an exclusive Arab identity.

Ready to bolt

The second reason is that the looseness implied in a “joint” list leaves the parties with the option to split immediately or soon after polling day. Again, this seems to be an option Hadash prefers, fearful that the confrontational style of Balad and the religious impulses of the Islamic party would damage it in the eyes of some supporters, particularly Jews.

That danger was highlighted just before the negotiations for the list began, when Hadash landed a small coup. It recruited to its ranks Avraham Burg, a distinguished Jewish politician. Burg is a former senior member of the Labour party, a former speaker of the parliament and a former chairman of the international Zionist organisation the Jewish Agency.

Burg has grown disillusioned with Zionism over the past ten years, and his move to Hadash was logical. But he was forceful in expressing a concern probably shared by many of the Jewish members of the party about a unified list.

“I left the Jewish national arena because it turned nationalistic,” he said early last month as Hadash voted to negotiate an alliance with the other parties.

He added that he did not want to replace it with Palestinian nationalism.

Hadash looks ready to bolt the political alliance soon after polling day. Such a break-up, demonstrating that the Joint List was simply an opportunistic vehicle for bypassing the obstacle of a raised threshold, would be difficult to reconcile with “the will of the people”.

“There is a danger that the Joint List creates false expectations,” said Zeidan. “Voters will feel betrayed if the coalition breaks up after the election, and that could have damaging long-term consequences for the parties.”

Rather than reversing the decline in turnout among the Arab public, the list – if it fails to hold much beyond polling day – could dramatically accelerate it.

Defeating Netanyahu

Another problem for the list is that, to revive interest in voting, it has argued that the Arab parties together in an electoral alliance will win a larger share of seats.

The unstated assumption is that this will give them a new influence in the coalition-building negotiations after election day and force the government, whatever its hue, to listen to the Palestinian minority's concerns.

The centrist Zionist Camp also wants to exploit this implication. Given the opinion polls, its only hope of persuading potential voters that it can defeat Netanyahu is by suggesting that it can rely on the Joint List's support.

Both therefore have had an interest in subtly suggesting to their electorates that they may work together after polling day.

The reality, however, is that there is no possibility of such cooperation. In private, Joint List officials were saying even before the Zionist Camp's vote in favour of Zoabi's disqualification that they could never support a faction that places its Zionism above all else.

The Zionist Camp too has shown its hand by voting to bar Zoabi. Maintaining its image within the Zionist consensus is clearly more important to it than courting the Arab parties.

But if the Joint List cannot convert a higher number of seats into political influence, even with the centre-left, it is in trouble. It is simply proving right those who have been arguing that there is nothing to be gained from being in the parliament.

Again, the Joint List's likely ineffectuality after election day may accelerate the long-term trend towards a falling turn-out among Palestinian voters.

A mini-parliament

According to some Balad officials, this scenario may be avoidable, but only given a set of specific conditions: the Joint List holds together after polling day; its number of seats increases; and it harnesses the greater unity between the parties to build national institutions.

Primarily, that would require overhauling the Follow-Up Committee, the only national political body representing the Palestinian minority.

In the past, the committee's effectiveness has been seriously undermined by the same political discord that besets the parties, together with the weight it gives to local mayors, representing extended families rather than political programmes.

Balad has been arguing for the committee to become a mini-parliament, with its members directly elected, thereby making it truly representative.

However, such an outcome still appears a long way off.

Israeli governments have always deeply opposed such a move by the Palestinian minority, claiming it would be tantamount to sedition. Israeli officials could be expected to fight it tooth and nail.

They may be joined by the socialists of Hadash, both its Jewish and Arab members. They have labelled efforts to change the Follow-Up Committee into a parliament as “secessionism” - in their eyes, an abandonment of joint Jewish-Arab struggle.

The Joint List may drive up the turn-out at this election. But over the long term the Palestinian minority will probably expect more radical solutions than a unity of short-term political convenience.

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