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‘On the Deck of the Titanic’: Arab Politics in Israel and the 2019 Elections*

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“On the deck of the Titanic,” thus sailed the members of the Joint List of Arab parties on the eve of the 2015 Knesset (parliamentary) elections, according to senior journalist Wadea Awawdy.¹ Four years later, in light of the results of the 2019 elections, it seems that this prophecy has almost materialized, even though the ships have narrowly escaped the iceberg, at least for the time being. The Hadash-Ta’al list attained 193,293 votes, equivalent to six seats in the Knesset, while Ra’am-Balad barely crossed the electoral threshold of 3.25 percent with 143,863 votes, giving them four seats. Arab voters’ turnout declined to a historic low of about 50 percent, as opposed to the overall turnout of around 68 percent.² The sharp drop in Arab voter turnout led to Arab parties’ political representation declining from 13 seats in 2015 to 10. Israeli Hebrew-language media coverage explained this change in terms of Arab alienation and marginalization. However, the mainstream Hebrew media outlets tend to neglect the coverage of Arab politics, including the election campaigns,³ hence ignoring at large an important internal factor: the collapse of the Joint List on the eve of the 2019 elections, and its implications. This article will focus on the rise and dramatic fall of the Joint List, and its repercussions.

The Joint List was formed on January 23, 2015, combining four parties, known by the following acronyms: Hadash (*al-jabha al-dimuqratiyya lil-salam wal-musawah*; Democratic Front for Peace and Equality); Balad (*al-tajammu‘ al-watani al-dimuqrati*; National Democratic Alliance); Ta’al (*al-haraka al-‘arabiyya lil-taghyir*; Arab Movement for Renewal);

* Please note: The Arab personalities’ names in this article were transliterated in line with how they render their own names into English.

¹ Wady Awawdy, “The Joint List on the Deck of the Titanic,” *Bayan: The Arabs in Israel*, Vol. 4, February 2015, p. 8.

² Website of the 21th Knesset Central Elections Committee: <https://votes21.bechirot.gov.il>

³ “Examining: media almost ignoring Arab parties in elections coverage,” *Ha-‘ayin ha-shvi‘it*, (in Hebrew), March 6, 2019.

and Ra'am (*al-qa'ima al-'arabiyya al-muwahhada*; United Arab List). They formed the Joint List on the eve of the 20th Knesset elections, following the statutory change to the electoral threshold from 2 to 3.25 percent, fearing that they would not garner enough votes as separate parties to pass the threshold. The parties remained independent but fashioned a common political platform and acted as one faction in the Knesset following the elections.⁴

After the Joint List was formed, ideological differences emerged between the various components: religious and secular, Islamist, communist, and nationalist, as well as personal and partisan disputes. There were also concerns that the List would increase antagonism between Jews and Arabs, and intensify the tendency among parts of the Jewish public to view the Arab citizens as one monolith, without various and nuanced opinions. Another fear was that voters who opposed one of the List's components would abstain from voting, and that the lack of competition between the parties would result in lack of interest in the election campaign and would not mobilize the voters to go cast their ballots.⁵ However, the results of the 2015 elections proved that some of these concerns were unjustified: the Joint List won 13 seats and became the third largest faction in the Knesset, having received 446,583 votes, an impressive success (by way of comparison, the Likud and the Zionist Camp garnered 985,408 and 786,313 votes, respectively).⁶ Voter turnout in the Arab localities reached 63.5 percent, the highest since 1999 (in the 2013 elections it was 56.5 percent, and in 2009, 53.4 percent). The voting percentage for the Joint List in the Arab and Druze localities was around 82 percent.⁷

Despite the electoral success, doubts regarding joint activity still remained. The so-called idyll, manifested by the elections slogan "a people's will" (*iradat al-sha'b*), began to fray as early as the eve of the elections, when Balad and Ra'am, the more militantly Arab nationalist parties in the Joint List, opposed and thus thwarted a surplus votes agreement with Meretz party, a left-wing Zionist party. Following the elections the List was led, de facto, by a forum of the heads of the four parties: Ayman Odeh (Hadash), who was appointed as Chairperson of the Joint List; Jamal Zahalka (Balad); Ahmad Tibi (Ta'al); and Mas'ud Ghanayim (Ra'am). During the Knesset's term, the List attained several legislative achievements in its parliamentary work, especially in social, gender, and environment issues. Its main achievement was advancing the five-year state program for the Arab society (Government Resolution 922), considered in part a victory for Chairperson Odeh and his civic agenda. However, these gains, largely supported by a shift in the Arab society in Israel towards a civic agenda, such as engaging in social, education, and equal rights issues, led in turn to a

⁴ Nohad Ali, "The Birth Pangs of the Joint Arab List and Arab Public Opinion," *Bayan* 4, pp. 4-7.

⁵ Ibid; Awawdy, "The Joint List on the Deck of the Titanic".

⁶ Website of the 20th Knesset Central Elections Committee:
<https://www.bechirot20.gov.il/election/Pages/HomePage.aspx>

⁷ Arik Rudnitzky, "An Analysis of the 20th Knesset Election Results in the Arab Sector," *Bayan* 5, June 2015, pp. 3-4.

growing pressure by the radicals to engage and focus on nationalist Palestinian-Arab activism.⁸

Following the arrest of Member of Knesset (MK) Basel Ghattas (who was caught attempting to smuggle cellphones to Palestinian prison inmates, and then resigned and was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison), the internal disputes in the Joint List grew worse. Chairperson Odeh refrained from publicly supporting Ghattas, and clearly, he and his party were deeply embarrassed by this affair. However, the Ghattas case had even more far-reaching implications for the Joint List, since it undermined the MKs rotation agreement, signed on the eve of the 2015 elections. Two MKs of the Ta'al and Hadash parties, Osama Sa'adi and 'Abdullah Abu Ma'aruf who entered the Knesset in the 12th and 13th places on the Joint List, were to resign midterm and allow the next two members on the list, of the Balad and Ra'am parties, to serve as members of Knesset. Ghattas' resignation led to Jum'a Azbarga of Balad, number 14 on the Joint List, replacing Ghattas. Azbarga was slated to enter the Knesset in the rotation, and his early entry thus created complications for the Joint List. After the resignations of Abu Ma'aruf and Sa'adi as the rotation demanded, number 15 on the List, Sa'id al-Harumi of the Ra'am party, did become a member of Knesset. However, the next Balad candidate, Niven Abu Rahmoun, was only number 19 on the List. Several candidates of the other parties, who filled the 16 to 19 slots on the List, were reluctant to concede their place for Abu Rahmoun. This controversial affair shook the foundation of the Joint List. While some of the parties maintained that the rotation did not mean necessarily a swap of seats between the parties, mutual accusations exposed disputes between the parties and led in turn to a general mistrust in the Arab public, who tended to perceive the affair as motivated solely by personal interests.⁹

MK Ahmad Tibi's secession from the Joint List on January 2019, following the announcement on the 2019 election date, plunged the list into a maelstrom that led to its collapse. Tibi, head of Ta'al, armed with polls that showed that he is the most popular and appreciated politician among Arab citizens, announced his separation and demanded, as a precondition for his return before the elections, that the internal distribution of seats between the parties would be decided according to polls. He displayed confidence that his party could pass the election threshold alone, if his demand wasn't met. At the same time, he conducted negotiations to run jointly in the elections with other groups, such as mayor of Nazareth (the largest Arab city in Israel), 'Ali Salam, and his movement "Nasrati" ("my Nazareth"). Salam is known as a proponent of the civic agenda. Furthermore, in interviews with journalists, among them Jewish, Tibi expressed his willingness to join a bloc with Jewish parties after the elections (similarly to Arab parties in the 14th Knesset, 1992-1996, which supported Yitzhak Rabin's government without joining his coalition). Thus, Tibi

⁸ Gadi Hitman, "The Joint Arab List for the Knesset: United, Shared or Split," *Middle East Policy* 25:4 (Winter 2018), pp. 146-158.

⁹ ["Reconciliation Committee's announcement does not establish Balad's right to four seats and deepens the dispute between the parties in the Joint List \(Arabic\),"](#) *Kul al-Arab*, July 31, 2018.

attempted to position himself as head of the “civic camp” in Arab politics, as opposed to the “radical camp.”¹⁰

However, Tibi’s announcement did not get much attention, in either the Jewish mainstream media or the political arena, nor in the Arab public where he was perceived, despite his popularity, as having left the Joint List solely for personal interests. This public impression intensified after the failure of negotiations to reunite the Joint List, which lasted until the last possible moment.¹¹ While Ra’am and Balad announced an alliance, Hadash and Ta’al reached an agreement only on the last day to submit the lists to the Central Elections committee, 21 February 2019. Odeh and Tibi, probably through mediation of Muhammad Barakeh, head of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee of the Arabs in Israel, bridged their personal disputes and agreed to jointly lead their list, by rotation.¹² Odeh denied spreading rumors of pressure from the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah that allegedly brought the two parties together. Despite Ramallah’s involvement in the Arab politics in Israel, going back to Yasir ‘Arafat’s days, it was the fear that they would not pass the electoral threshold that finally brought Hadash and Ta’al back together.¹³

The collapse of the Joint List left a grave impression on the Arab public. Amal Jamal, professor of Political Science at Tel Aviv University, and one of the most prominent public intellectuals in Arab society, maintains that the Joint List was a “historical missed opportunity.” According to Jamal, Arab politicians were to blame for not setting aside their egos, and “had devoured the enthusiasm that had been generated by the establishment of the Joint List.” Jamal argued that the reasons for establishing the Joint list were the rise of an Arab middle class, bent on a higher standard of living, “not by antagonistic nationalist discourse that alienates the [Israeli] decision makers, but through a balanced discourse that does not ignore identity and the Palestinian question and historical [collective] memory.”¹⁴

Indeed, it seemed that the two lists that were born from the ashes of the Joint List had striven, under pressure of Arab public opinion, towards a civic and less nationalist-antagonistic agenda. Balad and Ra’am, considered more radical, underwent makeovers before the elections. Balad replaced its veteran Knesset candidacy with a new leadership, who expresses a more pragmatic approach. Ra’am is the political representative of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement, which is experiencing profound changes. Its

¹⁰ Meiron Rappaport, “Tibi after the dramatic secession from the Joint List: ‘I will lead the establishment of the bloc [with Jewish parties] (Hebrew),” *Siha Mekomit*, January 15, 2019.

¹¹ “The Joint List enters a dangerous stage: Hadash did not answer yet and Tibi reassures his readiness to run independently” (Arabic), *al-Sinara*, February 20, 2019.

¹² “Negotiations continued: news on principles’ agreement between Hadash and Ta’al for a bi-partisan list headed by Odeh and Tibi (Arabic),” *al-Sinara*, February 21, 2019.

¹³ Rami Younes, “Interview with Ayman Odeh” (Hebrew), *Siha Mekomit*, March 7, 2019; On the Supreme Follow Up Committee and the PA’s involvement in Arab politics in Israel, see: Itamar Radai, “Between Palestine and Israel: the Significance and Implications of the Supreme Follow-Up Committee’s Chair Election,” *Bayan* no. 6, December 2015, pp. 16-20.

¹⁴ Meiron Rappaport, “The Joint List was a Historical missed opportunity (Hebrew),” interview with Amal Jamal, *Siha Mekomit*, February 28, 2019.

political manifestation was a new leadership, including women, for the first time, in the Movement's institutions and on the Knesset list (but not in realistic places for being elected, yet). On the other side, Odeh had announced his willingness to consider political cooperation with Jewish parties within a bloc (not a coalition), on the conditions that it included the "abolition of the Nation-State Law, waging a war against the violence and crime in the Arab society, and halting house demolitions." Mansur Abbas, who represents Ra'am as chairperson of the Ra'am-Balad list, followed suit by stating that in principle it was willing to take part in a bloc on conditions that included a larger political component: "equal rights, cancellation of the Nation State Law, and leading a process towards reconciliation and a two-state solution."¹⁵ In this respect, the political leadership of the Arab lists were responding to the "people's will", as manifested in a series of polls that reflect the desire of the majority of the Arab public, in support of a civic agenda, to back parties that will strive to join a political bloc, and perhaps even a coalition with Jewish parties.¹⁶

However, these changes were too little and too late, it seems. The disappointment and even disenchantment of the Arab public vis-à-vis Arab politics, following the fiasco of the Joint List, led to the steep decline in voter turnout on April 9. The rejection of the bloc idea by Jewish parties surely contributed, but Arab pundits still lay the blame mainly on the internal disputes and personal interests that led to the disintegration of the Joint List.¹⁷ Yet despite the growing criticism of the politicians who are perceived as responsible for the disintegration of the Joint List, both Ta'al and Hadash have preserved their political representation in the former Knesset: Hadash with four seats and Ta'al with two in the forthcoming Knesset (prior to the previous problematic midterm rotation, Hadash had five MKs, and Ta'al had two). The two Arab parties that came out on the losing side, therefore, were Ra'am and Balad, each losing two seats, from four in the previous Knesset. Nonetheless, while Ra'am has maintained its main base of support in strongholds of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement, it seems that Balad's secular and highly educated supporters abstained from supporting the party at the ballot box this time, perhaps due to its political alliance with the socially conservative Ra'am. It remains to be seen whether this phenomenon was unique, or a symptom of decline. The Arab political parties narrowly escaped a decrease from 13 seats to 6 (if Ra'am-Balad would not have passed the threshold); another reason why this nearly occurred was that there was a significant increase in the number of Arabs voting for Jewish parties.¹⁸ Arab political parties will probably try to tackle this challenge, as well trying to restore the confidence of large parts of the Arab public, in order to steer their boats through the stormy waters of Israeli politics.

¹⁵ Meiron Rappaport, "Chairperson of Ra'am-Balad does not disprove of a block (Hebrew)," *Siha Mekomit*, March 24, 2019.

¹⁶ Yusri Khaizran and Muhammad Khalayla, *Left to Its Fate: The Arab Society in Israel in the Shadow of the "Arab Spring"* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2019) (Hebrew), pp. 174-177.

¹⁷ Wadea Awawdy, "[That is the result when the leader becomes more important than the party. let alone the nation/people](#) (Arabic)," *Kul al-Arab*, April 10, 2019:

¹⁸ Website of the 21th Knesset Central Elections Committee: <https://votes21.bechirof.gov.il>

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