



ARAB ISRAELI POLITICS AND SOCIETY AHEAD OF THE 2026 ISRAELI ELECTION

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While all eyes are on Iran, the 2026 Israeli election is forthcoming and Arab Israelis facing an unrelenting crime wave are likely to play a decisive role. Ahead of the election, Arab Israelis – including those who identify as Palestinian citizens of Israel – and their Jewish allies are protesting Israeli government discrimination. Under political pressure, the four major Arab parties revived the Joint List electoral alliance, aiming to boost Arab voter turnout and help defeat Netanyahu. The Joint List could potentially help bring down the prime minister with the cooperation of the Zionist opposition. This issue brief analyzes the state of Arab Israeli politics and society, including the revival of the Joint List and prospects for Arab-Jewish political partnership.

Anti-Palestinian Crackdown and Political Persecution

Throughout the Gaza war, the Israeli government [cracked down](#) on Palestinian citizens of Israel who engaged in anti-war activism – or even expressed solidarity for Gazan civilians. The Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel [documented](#) punitive measures, including:

- Mass arrests, detentions, firings, suspensions, and an Israel Police ban on solidarity protests;
- Palestinian students at Israeli universities were [disciplined](#) for their social media posts;
- Arab citizens were [threatened](#) with deportation;
- The Knesset [passed](#) a series of laws that are used to target Arab Israelis;
- Arab Knesset Member Ayman Odeh was nearly [expelled](#); and
- Sally Abed of [Standing Together](#), Israel's largest Arab-Jewish unity group, was [terminated](#) from the Haifa City Council and [told](#) to “go to Gaza.”

Israeli Government Neglect and Arab Israeli Protests

Last month, mass protests [erupted](#) in the Arab city of Sahknin in northern Israel as Arab society went on strike. [Tens of thousands](#) of Arabs in Israel demonstrated against rising crime in the Arab community and the Israeli government's neglect of its Arab citizens. The protests have since [spread](#) to other parts of the country, including [outside](#) the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem, where protesters declared a state of emergency and blamed the Netanyahu government. Many Jewish Israelis have joined the protest movement in solidarity with the Arab community. On January 31, Arabs and Jews [gathered](#) in Tel Aviv for the largest joint protest in Israel's history.

Arab citizens account for about [80 percent](#) of documented murders in Israel. In 2025, **252 Arab Israelis** were victims of murder – the [deadliest year](#) on record for the Arab community. **65 Arab Israelis** have been [murdered](#) already in 2026. On Sunday, the Arab mayor of Arraba in northern Israel and his deputy [were shot](#). Far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who oversees the Israel Police, has grossly [underfunded](#) anti-crime efforts in the Arab community. Furthermore, Israeli government funding for Arab society has been slashed by approximately

[\\$550 million](#) – including [\\$68.3 million](#) for social and educational programs – with Arab citizens receiving less than 4 percent of the latest state budget despite constituting over 20 percent of the population. These extreme budget cuts [exacerbate](#) the disparities between Arabs and Jews in sectors ranging from education and healthcare to housing and transportation.

The Arab Joint List and Arab Voting Patterns

Founded in 2015, the Joint List is a political alliance of the four Arab-majority parties in Israel, reflecting the ideological diversity within Arab society:

- 1. Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality):**
 - Leader: Ayman Odeh
 - Current Knesset Seats: 4
 - Ideology: left-wing Arab-Jewish party that supports a two-state solution
- 2. Ta'al (Arab Movement for Renewal):**
 - Leader: Ahmad Tibi
 - Current Knesset Seats: 2
 - Ideology: secular Arab nationalist party that supports a two-state solution
- 3. Ra'am (United Arab List):**
 - Leader: Mansour Abbas
 - Current Knesset Seats: 5
 - Ideology: conservative Muslim Arab party and political wing of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel
- 4. Balad (National Democratic Assembly):**
 - Leader: Sami Abu Shehadeh
 - Current Knesset Seats: 0
 - Ideology: Palestinian nationalist party that supports creating a binational state

Ra'am prioritizes Arab Israeli communal issues, while the other Joint List parties are more focused on Palestinian national identity and ending the occupation. In the 2021 elections, Ra'am ran independently and ended up playing the role of kingmaker – joining the Bennett-Lapid coalition and securing unprecedented investment for the Arab community. The Joint List ran without Ra'am in the election that year, winning just six mandates. Further splintering in 2022 backfired severely when Balad broke off and fell just below the threshold, costing the Arabs – and the broader anti-Netanyahu bloc – several Knesset seats.

At its peak, the Joint List was the third-largest party in the Knesset, winning 15 parliamentary seats in the 2020 election. Arab Israeli turnout reached a peak of nearly [65 percent](#) in 2020, with 88 percent of Arab voters having voted for Arab parties that year. Due to increased disaffection with national politics among Arab Israelis, combined with family and clan-based dynamics, Arab voter turnout in municipal elections traditionally [exceeds](#) national turnout. This divide reflects

growing feelings of marginalization, political exclusion, and doubt about the effectiveness of parliamentary representation in a system that views Arab citizens as second-class.

Joint List Revival Ahead of the 2026 Election

On January 22, the leaders of the four Arab parties signed an agreement reviving the Joint List. Ahead of the 2026 Israeli election, Odeh, Tibi, Abbas, and Abu Shehadeh gathered in Sakhnin amid the general strike and set aside their differences for the sake of Arab electoral unity. This move was less an expression of profound ideological consensus than a direct response to unprecedented public pressure that reshaped political priorities. Following the signing of the unity agreement, the leaders of the Arab parties emphasized that the new incarnation of the Joint List is not a full party merger, but rather a technical electoral alliance aimed at running in the upcoming election as a single list. This alliance respects the ideological and political differences among its constituent parties and does not obligate any party to specific political positions after the election.

[82 percent](#) of Arab Israelis support a united Joint List; the new agreement, which harnesses the momentum of the protest movement, is likely to boost Arab voter turnout in the 2026 election. A unified list, as opposed to a splintering of Arab parties, signals to Arab citizens that their vote will actually have an impact.

According to the latest polling, the Joint List could win [15 seats](#) or more, and again become the third-largest party in the Knesset. This would preclude Netanyahu and the opposition from forming a 61-seat majority governing coalition without the support of the Arab parties. Hence, the Joint List could play a decisive role in the upcoming election and, if the Zionist opposition cooperates, the Arab parties could [help defeat](#) Netanyahu. After the election, to be held by October 27, former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett – who is running to replace Netanyahu – will almost certainly have to choose between some form of Arab-Jewish partnership or joining Netanyahu.

Prospects for Arab-Jewish Political Partnership

In 2021, Abbas [made history](#) as the first Arab political leader to join an Israeli governing coalition. He served as minister without portfolio in the Bennett-Lapid government (June 2021 - December 2022), [securing](#) an unprecedented multibillion-dollar budget for the Arab community and the authorization of some unrecognized Bedouin villages in the southern Negev. The “government of change” also had two other Arab ministers, Issawi Frej of Meretz (Minister for Regional Cooperation) and Hamad Amar of Yisrael Beiteinu (Minister in the Finance Ministry).

In addition, Meretz and Labor were members of the Bennett-Lapid coalition and both parties had some Arab representation: Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi (co-author of this J Street Policy Center issue brief) was the second Arab MK from Meretz and Ibtisam Mara’ana was the one Arab MK from Labor. While the “government of change” was short-lived, it provided a glimmer of hope for Arab-Jewish political partnership in Israel. Arab ministers partnered with Prime Minister Bennett,

a former director of the West Bank (Yesha) settler council, and together produced both symbolic and tangible outcomes for the betterment of Arabs and Jews alike.

Ahead of the 2026 election, there have been efforts to forge [Arab-Jewish political partnerships](#), with some in the “Standing Together” movement [contemplating](#) a shift from grassroots advocacy to direct electoral participation. Ra’am leader Mansour Abbas has endeavored to boost his party’s legitimacy within Jewish society by [separating](#) the party from the Islamic Movement’s Shura Council and [welcoming](#) Jewish candidates. Shamefully, Bennett has vowed that unlike last time, he would not include Arab parties in his coalition. Blue and White party leader, Benny Gantz, has made the same [racist pledge](#), despite a [willingness](#) by Joint List chairman Ayman Odeh to join forces with Gantz back in 2019.

The prospect of Arab-Jewish partnership in a Bennett-led government has been met with racist incitement by Netanyahu and his allies. Last month, the prime minister [accused](#) Bennett of seeking to form a government with the “Muslim Brotherhood.” Netanyahu’s Likud party was [ordered](#) by the Central Elections Committee to remove from its social media a doctored image depicting Bennett alongside the Joint List party leaders. In another racist display, Itamar Ben-Gvir [posted](#) the original image of the four Arab leaders with the caption, “Alliance of Terrorist Representatives” – using the acronym בני"ט which also spells out Bennett.

Given the post-October 7 political climate, an Arab-Jewish party is unlikely to succeed in the upcoming election, but a post-election governing coalition of Jews and Arabs could. More than [75 percent](#) of Arab citizens support an Arab-Jewish coalition. If the Zionist opposition led by Bennett dispenses with racist anti-Arab pledges and cooperates with the Joint List, Arab-Jewish political partnership could potentially bring down Netanyahu once and for all.

Resolving Arab-Jewish Disparities

In order to resolve the disparities between Arabs and Jews in Israel, incitement against Arab Israelis and their political persecution must end; Arab citizens must be able to vote in the 2026 election without discrimination or concern for their safety; Jewish political leaders must immediately stop campaigning against Arab participation in the next coalition; and the next Israeli government must (1) include Arab representation, (2) urgently restore security to Arab communities, and (3) rescind budget cuts and increase funding for Arab Israelis.

To keep the pressure up, Arabs and their Jewish allies should continue to protest against the Netanyahu government and participate in strategic economic strikes. More of the Arabic-language protest movement materials should be translated into Hebrew in order to sustain and expand Jewish allyship. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for protecting Arab Israelis rests with the government; weapons smuggling across Israel’s borders and theft of arms from IDF bases are the prerogatives of the state and police. The Arab community needs state backing to prevent the flow of weapons and disarm those who possess them. For Israel to live up to its founding egalitarian principles and democratic values, Arab citizens must be protected, represented, and fully integrated into the Israeli political process.