



Potential Transformation:

Implications of United Arab List's Participation in the New Israeli Government

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The Israeli newly-formed 'government of change' - what is better described as a hodgepodge of political parties- agreed on the one common goal of unseating now-former Prime Minister Netanyahu. A significant development marks the formation of this coalition government. For the first time in Israel's history, Arabs became part of the Israeli government, with the Islamist 'United Arab List', or Ra'am, led by Mansour Abbas playing a crucial role in helping the new coalition government led by Naftali Bennett win the vote. This spared Israel the dilemma of having to hold elections for the fifth time. The development will have direct repercussions for the position of Israel's Arab community as well as at the social and political levels in Israel.

Crises facing the Arab Citizens of Israel

More than 80 percent of the Arab Palestinians, who make up more than 20 percent of Israel's population, are Muslims. They won 10 seats in the Knesset, Israel's parliament in the recent elections. But the Arab parties are not united, causing the following:

1- Deep social divisions: Arab citizens of Israel enjoy more rights and privileges than Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Yet, a percentage of them consider themselves second-degree citizens. Additionally, the Israeli government is accused by human rights organizations of pursuing policies of policies of apartheid and persecution against

Palestinians - and against its own Arab minority - that amount to crimes against humanity.

Additionally, Israel's escalation of settlement policies and the recent clashes in Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem, coupled with practices by extremist settlers including their attacks on Arab private properties and holy places, led to a military stand-off between Israel and Palestinian factions in May. This triggered violent clashes between Israel's Jews and Arabs, which exposed the simmering tensions inside Israel.

2- Divided loyalties: Arab and Muslim parties in Israel are facing a dilemma. That is, they have to choose either having civil rights through integration into the society and Israel's political system, or

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clinging to their Arab national identity and not the civil identity within the Israeli state.

The Muslim and Arab parties in Israel continue to fail to form a front to come up with a united stance on political participation and how to deal with Israel's political system. On the one side stands a movement that supports political participation, while on the other an ideology-driven movement calls for resistance and jihad and opposes Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel.

This rift impacting the Arab parties was evidenced in the participation of the United Arab List and the Joint List in the elections with two separate groups of candidates. This contributed towards the fragmentation of Arab votes and their loss of 5 seats in the Knesset after they broke up into two sides: The United Arab List led by Mansour Abbas which won 4 seats, and the Joint List, a coalition of three Arab parties, led by Ayman Odeh, which won 6 seats.

3- Integration of Arabs: This came at a time when Prime Minister Benett pledged to unite the nation. In his speech during the confidence vote in the Knesset, noted that Mansour Abbas plays a crucial role and that he relies on the Arab politician to open a new page in the relations between the State of Israel and the country's Arab citizens.

For the first time ever, an Israeli ministerial portfolio was won by an Arab politician. Issawi Frej,

a member of the Knesset for left-wing Meretz party, serves as Minister of Regional Cooperation in the new cabinet. The development is hoped to lead to furthering political and social integration of the Arab community and its recognition as a legitimate component, which, on the long term, would lead to improved relations between Israel's Jews and Arabs.

Challenges Facing the Arab List

Although the United Arab List succeeded in becoming part of the coalition government in Israel, it is unclear whether it will succeed in defending the rights of Israel's Arab citizens, due to the following factors:

1- Rise of Israel's Extremist Right-Wing: the extremist right-wing continues to rise in Israel, even after the departure of Benjamin Netanyahu from the government. He is still the leader of right-wing Likud party, which controls 59 seats in the Knesset and will continue to play an influential role in making Israel's policies and have the ability to mobilize its supporters, who are a majority.

Furthermore, current Prime Minister Bennett, who broke away from Likud, belong to the extremist right-wing, and has a record of anti-Arab positions, even though assessments indicate that Benette would possibly mitigate his positions, on the short-run at least, lest the ruling coalition would break up causing a collapse of his new government.



2- Attempts to pass the Family Reunification Law:

The first test for the relations between Israel and the Arab community in the Knesset comes days after the new coalition was formed. The government plans to vote on extending the family reunification law for another year. Enacted in 2003, the Israeli law blocks the reunion of Palestinian families and prevents Palestinians and their Israeli spouses from living together inside the Green Line and Jerusalem.

While right-wing and centrist parties back participation in the new government, left-wing and Arab parties do not. And Likud, led by Netanyahu, is expected to use this law to outbid Bennett and push the coalition parties participating in the government to put it to vote. The move would cause a rift within the coalition government with the left-wing and Arab bloc led by Mansour Abbas. This is especially so as Likud insists on approving it as a permanent law and put pressure to vote in favor of the move.

3- The extent of achieving the demands of the Arab Community:

Mansour Abbas stated that he did not mind cooperating with whichever party rules Israel, whether it belongs to the right-wing or the left-wing, as long as it will meet the Arab community's demands of more support and services in Israel's Arab-populated cities. This was honored in the agreement he reached with Bennett, who pledged to allocate more than \$16 billion over five years to boost development, resolve the housing crisis and curb violent crime in Arab towns. But it is yet to be known whether Bennett's government would meet these demands.

Future Scenarios

After the Islamist Arab movement succeeded in becoming part of the Israeli coalition government,

two scenarios for this development can be conceived as follows:

1- Furthering the integration of the Arab Citizens of Israel:

Some believe that having an Arab party in the government coalition will have a positive impact on the stability and legitimacy as well as homogeneity of the state of Israel on the long-run. This would be achieved through giving better access to the Arab citizens to the Israeli government and empowering them to defend their rights, or through improving their living conditions within Israel.

2- Temporary harmony:

Others believe that the current government coalition will only be temporary, because of the rise of the extremist Israeli right-wing to which Bennett, the head of the government, belongs. Additionally, the coalition is being outbidded by Likud. Overall, this would restrict the Israeli government and its response to demands made by the Arab community. Within this context, others note that the main mission of the government coalition is to get rid of Netanyahu. Once this is done - for example by trying him on charges of corruption- Israel might be set for early elections to form a new government that is more homogeneous from an ideological perspective.

It is up to the stakeholders to pursue a pragmatic approach, overcome any bones of contention, responding to some of the legitimate demands of the Arab community, which, altogether, would determine the standing of the Arabs within Israel's political system, as well as the relevance and effectiveness of their participation in, or withdrawal from, the Israeli government. There remains the question about the prospects of their participation in the Israeli government if the threat posed by former prime minister Netanyahu ceased to exist.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.