

# Palestine: The Arabs Who Can Beat Bibi

Saturday 23 November 2019, by [KAMINER Matan](#) (Date first published: 22 September 2019).

**Israel's second general election of the year has demonstrated more clearly than ever that the most important oppositional force in the country is its Palestinian minority.**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made it a habit, at times of political exigency, to incite vocally and explicitly against “the Arabs,” the 20 percent of Israel’s population composed of indigenous Palestinians.

On election day in 2015, he famously whipped up support among his base by announcing on social media that “the Arabs are flocking to the polls in buses,” as if their participation were a danger to democracy rather than its consummation. In the run-up to the inconclusive election held this spring, Netanyahu accused his rival Benny Gantz of plotting to include “the Arab parties” in a coalition. This accusation was quickly denied by Gantz, who has made sure to leave no political daylight between himself and Netanyahu’s Likud party, focusing his campaign solely on the latter’s personal corruption.

True to form, a few days before election day this past Thursday, Likud managed to get a court injunction against an effort to get out the vote among the severely disadvantaged Bedouin Palestinians in Israel’s south, and Bibi again spent election day warning darkly (and illegally) of the danger of high Arab turnout.

This time, however, the gambit seems to have backfired. Netanyahu’s base, perhaps tired of his desperate clinging to power despite a growing number of corruption investigations, stayed home in large numbers, handing a plurality to Gantz’s party, Blue and White, which has won thirty-three seats to Likud’s thirty-one (out of 120). This plurality does not guarantee Gantz the premiership. Since neither his “center-left” block (including Labor and Meretz) nor Netanyahu’s “right-religious” block (including the far-right Yemina and the ultra-orthodox Shas and Torah Judaism) has a majority, the country is in for a long round of horse-trading which might only be resolved with yet another election.

But Netanyahu’s racist incitement has also backfired in a way which may have more profound long-term implications for Israeli politics. The four Palestinian-majority parties which united in 2015 to form the Joint List — a national front of leftists, Islamists, liberals, and local leaders — fell apart before the previous election after two years of embarrassingly nonideological bickering and were duly punished by the voters, losing three seats. The rematch gave the parties an opportunity to get their act together, and upon its reunification the Joint List was able to match its earlier achievement and reach thirteen seats, making it the third-largest force in the Knesset.

Ayman Odeh, the head of the Joint List, may or may not officially be the next leader of the opposition, depending on how coalition talks work out. In practice, however, he has already taken on the role. In part, this is a victory by default, the result of the utter collapse of the parties of the Zionist left, Labor and Meretz, which have plummeted from a combined thirty-six seats twenty years ago to a mere twelve in the last two elections. Beginning with the Second Intifada, the Palestinian

uprising of 2000–4, the mostly Ashkenazi (European-origin) and secular middle class abandoned these parties in droves for a succession of militaristic, neoliberal, and antireligious center parties of which Blue and White is only the latest.

However, the Joint List under Odeh has also slowly become the face of a newly united and active political force: the Palestinian citizens of Israel. The “Arabs of ’48” are a trapped minority facing discrimination, marginalization, and poverty, but are also sometimes stigmatized in the Palestinian and Arab world as a collective of collaborators or spoiled “cream Arabs.”

Some political forces within the minority, among them both leftists and Islamists, see Israel as an illegitimate state and traditionally boycott the elections. Others, including the mayor of Israel’s largest Palestinian city, Nazareth, see the mainstream leadership as too concerned with the occupation and would like the community’s leaders to concentrate on internal issues.

Between these two poles, Odeh has managed to chart a course which maintains the Joint List’s commitment to the Palestinian people in general and to ending the occupation in particular, while also demanding the minority’s share of the cake of political and economic power within Israel — including a willingness, in principle, to enter negotiations on joining a coalition government.

For the time being, such an eventuality remains entirely hypothetical, as Blue and White is unwilling to entertain the demands of the Joint List, which include the repeal of the recent “nation-state law” which codifies the discrimination Palestinian citizens suffer, and immediate negotiations for an end to the occupation based on the relevant UN resolutions. But the shrunken parties of the Zionist left, who have long ignored the “Arab parties,” have finally begun to treat Odeh as befits the leader of a far larger faction.

Significantly, early indications also show that around eighteen thousand Jews voted for the Joint List this past week — a tiny minority worth less than half a Knesset seat, but an order of magnitude larger than in any past election — and a signal that future growth is entirely possible. More important in immediate electoral terms is the huge reserve of Palestinians who do not vote out of apathy rather than ideology, and who could easily earn an invigorated Joint List another four or five seats.

In the long run, any hope for a peaceful and democratic decolonization of Palestine will require convincing a majority of the Israeli polity of the necessity of peace. In recent years, this possibility has grown dimmer and dimmer, but the collapse of the Zionist left and the rise of the Joint List could represent a new opportunity for realignment.

A Left grouped around the Palestinian minority, centering its demands as a part of the Palestinian people, as a decidedly working-class demographic, and as an assertive part of the Israeli polity, could be the beginning of something transformative. The Joint List is that beginning, and as such, it deserves both attention and solidarity.

Matan Kaminer is an anthropologist researching labor migration from Thailand to Israel’s agricultural sector, an activist on Israel’s radical left, and a founding member of Academia for Equality.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

---

**P.S.**

Jacobin Magazine

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/09/israel-palestine-benjamin-netanyahu-blue-white-joint-list-elections>