



## **A BLOC OR COALITION WITH THE ARAB PARTIES**

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The political system in Israel is not direct. The citizens do not vote for a candidate for the presidency or a prime minister, but rather they vote for political parties that form the Knesset. The Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, is composed of 120 members elected every four years by a system of proportional representation in closed electoral lists of political parties. The elections system has an electoral threshold, and it usually is necessary to form a coalition in order to govern.

The parties that enter the Knesset recommend another member of the Knesset as their first option for Prime Minister. After hearing these recommendations, the president of the state asks said member of the Knesset (generally the first one on the electoral list and the leader of the largest party) to form the government. This leader must form a coalition of at least 61 members of the 120 members of the Knesset.

On three occasions, the Prime Minister was elected in direct elections instead of being appointed by the Knesset: in 1996, 1999 and 2001. Yet the system was abandoned after it became apparent it was impossible to form a stable government due to the lack of parliamentary majority.

In other words, once the elections are over begins the political game called "Harkavat Hakoalitzia", or forming the coalition. Normally, the parties involved already have an idea of who will form the coalition (government) with the largest party, since the political system is usually divided between left- and right-wing parties. The ultra-orthodox parties usually remain as a wild card and tend to get many benefits when asked to form a part of the coalition. This is a very serious negotiation game in which each one of the parties brings to the table its vision, political agenda and "desires" as negotiation cards.

The "bloc" is another card in the political game. This term is often used to demonstrate that enough members of the Knesset were voted for (at least 61) and will not recommend to the president the member of the largest party or who seems to lead a possible coalition of parties that will attempt to form a government. That is to say that these 61 members who usually form the bloc would be against the potential government, but at the same time, would have difficulties in agreeing on and building an alternative coalition.

Since 1948, the creation of the State of Israel, governments were formed with Zionist parties of the *mainstream* along with ultra-orthodox parties. The Arab parties and the non-Zionist communist party were never considered to form a coalition but were taken into account to form a bloc.

In the past, the Arab parties and the communist party (which had a Jewish member) united under the name of "The Joint List". This helped them achieve a significant number of members (13) at the Knesset.



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To put things into perspective, that is more than 10% of the members of the Knesset who never enter the “game” of coalition building—parliamentarians who represent 20% of the population in Israel who were never taken into consideration to form a coalition or put their political agenda on the negotiation game.

In the 2019 elections, there are four Arab parties which run for Knesset. These parties no longer form a part of the “Joint List”, and instead created two new lists: the electoral list of Balad-Ra’am and the list of Hadash (the communist party)—Ta’al.

Balad is a party which calls for turning the State of Israel to a democracy completely detached from Judaism and Zionism and is against the Jews’ right of self-determination. Ra’am is a party which fights for Arab-Palestinian nationalism in the State of Israel and for the creation of a Palestinian State in Gaza, Judea and Samaria and East Jerusalem.

Ta’al is identified as an anti-Zionist national Arab party. It fights for the national interests of the Arab citizens in Israel with the aim of changing the regime and the character of the State of Israel.

It is important to emphasize that some of these parties were banned from running in the elections by the Central Elections Committee of the Knesset, but the Israeli Supreme Court overturned this decision, claiming the right of freedom of speech.

Hadash defines itself as a Marxist party of the working class and supports cooperation between Arabs and Jews. Hadash promotes the Two-State solution and calls for a secular state. It supports the nationalization of natural resources and fights against climate change. It is important to emphasize that, in the past, the communist party had a different status and approval among the Jewish population.

Taking into account the characteristics of these parties and their ideological visions, it is completely understandable why they were left aside during the negotiations for coalitions and government building. These parties are rarely taken into consideration and very rarely do they recommend to the president a candidate (from the Zionist parties) for the role of prime minister.

In all the projections of possible governments after the April 9 elections, no one is taking into account a government with these parties. The right-wing parties led by the Likud party promote the delegitimization of these parties and accuse them of national treason. It is also common to hear right-wing parties accuse the left of cooperating with the Arab parties.

On the other hand, the left-wing and center parties, led by the alliance “Kahol Lavan” of Gantz and Lapid, constantly try to disengage from any connection to the Arab parties and deny having possible coalition-building conversations with them.

Clearly, the upcoming elections will focus on two “rival” groups: the right-wing parties and the center and left-wing parties.



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Apparently, the groups that tip the scale to one side or the other are the Jewish ultra-orthodox parties, of which some members, paradoxically, are not Zionist either.

The ultra-orthodox will have much to be gained in the game of negotiations and may claim many benefits for their population that tend to not serve in the IDF, not study the Israeli core curriculum and not pay taxes.

It is clear that, in our ideology, we fight for a Jewish and democratic state. From the Darkenu: "Based on the fundamental idea of Israel as the national home of the Jewish people, and considering the values stated in The Declaration of Independence, the state will have two primary and joint foundations: Jewish and democratic. ... These values guide us to fight for equal rights for all of the citizens of the country, without distinction to belief, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic situation or intellectual or physical abilities. ... The process of preserving the democratic values commits the movement to two important objectives. First, with regards to the Israeli society, we aspire for a tolerant society, free from injustices committed against its different groups."

Are we doing the right thing by ignoring more than 10% of the parliamentarians and 20% of the country's population? Why cannot we put aside some of these differences (as we do with the ultra-orthodox) and achieve changes in the Israeli society for the integration of this 20% of the population? Are we not alienating them more by not considering them as part of the democratic game?

Is it not the time to think of what is best for the State of Israel and find a way to work with these parties, at least at certain levels such as education, basic infrastructure and civil security for their voters?

We fight to live in a state in which Judaism is lived as a norm, but it is important not to put aside our duty toward our fellow Arab citizens. Maybe, by starting at home, we can also achieve the peace that we long for with our neighbors.

Let us hope that the political campaign and slogans will be left behind in order to truly work and form a government with an ethical and just coalition, which fights for all its citizens without sectoring and prioritizing its own voters.

Chazak Ve'ematz