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The Arabs in Israel הערבים בישראל

Editor: Arik Rudnitzky

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From the Editor's Desk

The current issue of **Bayan** is published at the beginning of a year in which elections to the 26th Knesset are expected to take place. It focuses on the preparations and readiness of the Arab political system in Israel for the upcoming elections.

The issue includes two articles. One article, written by **Shahin Sarsour**, examines the Joint List and the circumstances that led to its reestablishment. The second, written by **Rani Hassan**, provides an in-depth analysis of the voting considerations of Arab voters in the upcoming elections.

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The opinions expressed in MDC publications are the authors' alone.

We invite our readers to contact us, through the following channels:

- The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation:
Dr. Arik Rudnitzky (Project Manager)
Tel. 03-6406046
- Moshe Dayan Center website: dayan.org

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The Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation (KAP) was established in 2004 by the German Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University as part of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. KAP is an expansion of the Program on Arab Politics in Israel established by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Tel Aviv University in 1995. Its purpose is to deepen knowledge and understanding of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel through conferences, public lectures and workshops, research studies, publications, and documentation.

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Shahin A. Sarsour * / Between instrumental unity and cumulative political learning: The establishment of the Joint List ahead of the elections for the 26th Knesset in comparison to unification attempts during the period 2015–21

The establishment of the Joint List in 2015 was not based on a shared ideological vision but rather on a concern over the loss of political resources needed for the continued parliamentary activity of the Arab parties. Despite this, the unification was presented to the public as a historic move with broad normative significance.

Ra'am's departure from the Joint List in 2021 reflected a deep ideological disagreement over the role of the Arab parties in Israel: participation in the government to achieve civic goals as opposed to promoting a nationalistic agenda.

The unification process ahead of the 26th Knesset elections will not eliminate the disagreements among the Arab parties. It is not being framed as a historic achievement but rather as a pragmatic step toward a defined goal: maximizing political power in the face of the violence and crime plaguing Arab society.

The unity of the parties will likely be tested on a daily basis until the elections. Past experience shows that in the absence of genuine unity the passage of time may act to destabilize rather than stabilize the situation.

The Joint List is one of the most important and exceptional phenomena that has emerged in the Israeli political arena over the past decade. The unification of Arab parties with different—and at times even conflicting—ideological identities into a single parliamentary framework raised expectations of a change in the character of representation of Arab citizens in Israel and of a strengthening of their political power on the national stage. However, from its very inception it became clear that the Joint List was not merely a technical electoral solution, but a complex political arena in which historical, ideological, and organizational tensions converge (Akirav, 2020; Kook, 2019; Hitman, 2018).

The establishment of the Joint List ahead of the elections for the 26th Knesset is taking place in a social and political reality which is fundamentally different from that which prevailed in 2015. The escalation of violence and organized crime in Arab

* **Shahin A. Sarsour**, a native of Kafr Qasim, is a political science researcher focusing on the politics of the Arab minority in Israel. He completed his undergraduate studies in business administration in the United States in 1990. He later served as a strategic consultant at Infoprod Middle East alongside Dr. Gil Feiler. For about 12 years he held the position of parliamentary adviser in the Knesset, working with Members of Knesset Ibrahim Sarsur and Taleb Abu Arar on behalf of the United Arab List (Ra'am). He completed his master's degree in political science at Bar-Ilan University, during which he wrote an academic study on the Joint List. Sarsour has published op-eds in Arabic on issues related to Arab politics in Israel, and he is currently a doctoral research student at Bar-Ilan University. His doctoral dissertation deals with the development and behavior of the United Arab List.

society, alongside the erosion of parliamentary representation and the intensified sense of exclusion, has created a widespread feeling of urgency among Arab citizens. This article considers whether the attempts to achieve unity in 2026 reflect cumulative political learning or whether it is yet another cyclical response to an isolated crisis that does not fundamentally alter the course of political action.

The theoretical contribution of the article

The article contributes to the theoretical discussion of the politics of national minorities on three levels. First, it presents an analytical distinction between ideological-symbolic unity and instrumental unity that is aware of its limitations. In contrast to parts of the classical literature, which identifies political unity with ideological consensus or with a shared collective identity (Kymlicka, 2007), it is argued here that unity can also emerge in the absence of a common ideological base, as a result of accumulated constraints, the experience of failure, and gradual political learning.

Second, the article emphasizes the role of the public as an active agent in political learning. Previous studies characterized the Arab public as reactive (Jamal, 2022), but findings from a recent study show that the public consciously activates mechanisms of reward and punishment by means of their voting choices and abstention from voting (Sarsour, 2021).

Third, the article elucidates the concept of the “power ceiling” in minority political frameworks and shows that significant electoral achievements do not necessarily guarantee sustained political influence in the absence of institutional anchoring and a clear parliamentary strategy (Akirav, 2020).

Unity as an outcome of institutional constraints: The establishment of the Joint List in 2015

The Joint List was established at the beginning of 2015 after the raising of the electoral threshold to 3.25%, a legislative move that Arab parties viewed as a genuine threat to their parliamentary representation (Sweid, 2017). This institutional constraint forced the four parties—Hadash, Balad, Ta’al, and Ra’am—to unite into a single electoral framework despite their significant ideological and organizational differences.

Findings from a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews of key political figures show that the unification did not stem from ideological convergence or the crystallization of a shared vision, but from a real fear of losing representation, funding, and political resources essential for continued parliamentary activity (Sarsour, 2021). This instrumental perception was also reflected in the structure of the internal agreements between the parties, which focused on the allocation of realistic Knesset slots and rotation arrangements, while avoiding the formulation of a binding ideological document. Nonetheless, the unification was presented in public discourse as a historic move with broad normative significance. The gap between the essence of the unification and the image created by its leaders laid the foundation for the tensions that later developed.

Between rhetoric and reality: The performance of the Joint List in the 20th Knesset

The term of the 20th Knesset (2015–19) served as the first and most significant testing ground for the Joint List, both in the eyes of the Arab public and in the broader Israeli political arena. On the one hand, the Joint List achieved unprecedented electoral success: 13 seats and an especially high turnout rate of 64%, a reflection of broad public mobilization and genuine hopes for a change in patterns of representation and influence. This achievement strengthened the perception of the Joint List as a collective political framework with real potential to achieve parliamentary influence.

On the other hand, a number of structural failures in the Joint List's internal functioning were exposed during its first term, including ongoing organizational tensions, disputes over the distribution of power and allocation of jobs, and the absence of binding institutional mechanisms for managing a diverse political partnership over time. This gap between an impressive electoral achievement and the difficulty in translating it into organizational stability and sustained political influence laid the groundwork for the crises that developed in the years that followed.

Based on the analysis of the interviews in Sarsour's research, the rotation crisis was not merely a technical event but a structural breaking point that exposed the gap between unity rhetoric and the reality on the ground. Interviewees described how narrow party interests prevailed over considerations of the party's collective good, and how ambiguity in the internal agreements led to a loss of trust and public disappointment (Sarsour, 2021; Shapira, 2020).

The split in 2019 and punishment by the public

The dismantling of the Joint List on the eve of the elections for the 21st Knesset in April 2019 marked a breaking point in the relations between the Arab public and its political leadership. The sharp decline in Arab voter turnout (to approximately 49%) cannot be explained by political apathy or technical circumstances, but rather reflects a clear and distinct change in voter behavior.

The Arab public interpreted the dismantling of the Joint List as a breach of trust by the parties' leaderships and as a failure in achieving collective responsibility. In this context, abstention from voting served as a conscious political punishment, through which the public expressed its protest against a leadership perceived as preferring narrow party considerations over the interest of broad representation (Sarsour, 2021). This pattern reinforces the argument that the decline in electoral participation in 2019 was the product of active political disappointment rather than passive alienation.

The reunification ahead of the September 2019 elections was achieved primarily out of fear of long-term electoral damage, and in the elections for the 23rd Knesset in 2020 it led to a record achievement of 15 seats and a renewal of the upward trend in voter turnout. However, this achievement too was not translated into sustained political influence due to, among other reasons, structural limitations, the absence of

an agreed-upon strategy, and ambiguity regarding the boundaries of the Joint List's political activity (Akirav, 2020).

The split prior to the elections for the 24th Knesset in 2021, when Ra'am left the Joint List, reflected a deep ideological disagreement regarding the role of Arab political representation in Israel. Research findings show that there were politicians who viewed political partnership with Israeli governments as a legitimate tool for achieving civic gains (Sarsour, 2021), while others saw such partnership as a deviation from the oppositional-nationalistic line (Zur & Bakker, 2025). This gap made clear the limits of unity that does not define agreed-upon rules of action.

Instrumental unity that is aware of its limitations: The 2026 experience

The unity taking shape ahead of the elections for the 26th Knesset is viewed from the outset as a temporary and merely pragmatic electoral alliance. It does not seek to create a shared ideological vision or to blur fundamental disagreements, but rather reflects a conscious recognition of the existence of these disagreements and their postponement in order to realize a narrowly defined goal: to maximize political power in the face of a severe social crisis, particularly in the face of violence and organized crime in Arab society. In this sense, it is instrumental unity that reflects cumulative political learning at the level of public and political awareness; nonetheless, it has not yet been translated into institutional anchoring and binding mechanisms that would ensure its long-term stability.

A clear example of the nature of this unity can be found in the public pressure exerted on Arab party leaderships at the beginning of 2026, following a wave of large-scale demonstrations against violence and crime in Arab society. According to news reports, party leaders signed a document to re-establish the Joint List following persistent public demands for unified political representation, one that has a binding and obligatory character (Majadle, 2026). Thus the unity achieved is not the product of ideological consensus, but rather is a pragmatic response to the existing social distress and to civic pressure that has become an important factor in shaping leadership decisions.

Discussion: Unity, time, and political learning in the Arab arena in Israel

The establishment of the Joint List ahead of the elections for the 26th Knesset calls for an analysis that goes beyond simply a theoretical comparison between previous unification attempts. It in fact requires a fundamental examination of processes of political learning, of the interaction between the leadership and the public, and of the structural limitations shaping the actions of minority political frameworks within a dominant majority system. In contrast to cyclical narratives that view unity as the product of a specific external constraint, the analysis points to a cumulative, multi-year process of internalizing failure, punishment by the public, and a renewed understanding of the limits of the possible in the parliamentary arena.

The unity emerging in 2026 is first and foremost a response to an ongoing social and political crisis rather than the fulfillment of a comprehensive ideological vision.

Violence and organized crime, perceived by the Arab public as a day-to-day threat, have altered political priorities and framed the question of unity not as a value-based choice but rather as a civic necessity. In this context, unity is no longer presented as a “historic moment” or as a symbolic achievement, but rather as a pragmatic move intended to maximize political power, with the goal of dealing with tangible problems (Maariv Online, 2026).

Nevertheless, there is a gap between the public’s learning process and that of the parties. The Arab public gradually internalized that political fragmentation leads to erosion of representation, loss of legitimacy, and a reduced ability to influence the government’s agenda. In contrast, the parties’ leaderships tended to interpret those same events through a prism of organizational survival, resource allocation, and preservation of political assets. This gap explains why—even after repeated crises—binding institutional mechanisms for managing disputes and internal power distribution did not gain a foothold (Sarsour, 2021).

Time plays a central role in the analysis of the 2026 attempt to unify. Unlike previous unifications that were subject to a time constraint due to the early scheduling of Knesset elections, the fact that the date of the elections for the 26th Knesset has not been moved (so far) has resulted in a prolonged period during which unity is put to the test on a daily basis. This period of time may allow for more systematic preparation, the formulation of clear rules of the game, and institutional regulation; however, at the same time it also increases the risk that tensions related to leadership, jockeying for position on party lists, and the distribution of political credit will become exacerbated. Past experience teaches that in the absence of institutional regulation, time sometimes leads to destabilization rather than stabilization.

This discussion reinforces the “power ceiling” argument regarding minority political frameworks. Even when impressive electoral achievements are attained, as occurred in the 2020 elections, the ability to translate numerical power into sustained political influence remains limited. The constraints of the political system, the lack of willingness among majority players to enter into a genuine partnership, and the absence of an internally agreed-upon parliamentary strategy create a persistent gap between electoral strength and actual influence (Akirav, 2020). The attempt to achieve unity in 2026 may replicate this gap if it is not accompanied by a qualitative change in internal practices and behavior.

In this context, the instrumental unity of 2026 demonstrates that the lessons of the past have only been partially learned. It does reflect the internalization of the price of fragmentation, but at the same time there has not been in-depth institutional learning to achieve sustainable political partnership. As long as unity is perceived as a way to survive rather than a framework for action that requires binding regulation, it remains fragile and vulnerable.

Conclusions

This article has argued that the attempt to establish the Joint List ahead of the elections for the 26th Knesset is not merely a return to past political behavior, but rather reflects a more advanced stage of political strategy in the Arab arena in Israel. The unity achieved in 2026 was born out of a rare combination of severe social crisis,

consistent public pressure, and heightened awareness of the constraints on political action within Israel's political system. Unlike the 2015 unification, which was presented as a normative and symbolic achievement, this is a pragmatic move perceived as a political necessity in light of the erosion of representation and the deepening sense of exclusion.

However, an analysis of the Joint List's previous incarnations during the past decade indicates that unity itself, even when it is the product of cumulative political learning, does not guarantee stability or sustained influence. In the absence of clear institutional anchoring, binding mechanisms for managing disputes, and a shared strategic definition of the boundaries of political action, unity remains dependent on transient goodwill and fragile balances of power between individuals.

The main contribution of the article is not only to highlight the difference between the unity achieved in 2026 and previous unification attempts, but to emphasize the conditions required to transform instrumental unity into a sustainable political framework. These conditions include institutional regulation of decision-making, transparent internal power distribution, and explicit recognition of the limits of ideological partnership. Without these steps, there is a concern that this attempt too will be no more than a temporary response to crisis rather than becoming a stable framework for action in the Israeli parliamentary arena.

Finally, the case of the Joint List contributes to the international discussion concerning the politics of national minorities. It demonstrates that political unity can arise not from ideological consensus, but from a cumulative process of failure, punishment by the public, and the internalization of structural limitations. In this way, the Israeli case offers broad insights into the relationship between unity, pragmatism, and the ability to exert influence within political systems dominated by a majority.

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Rani Hassan * / Considerations of Arab voters in the upcoming 26th Knesset elections

The problem of violence and crime has become an existential issue in the eyes of Arab voters, and they will support any party that promises a timely solution to the problem. The urgency of the situation will likely motivate Arab citizens to take greater responsibility for their fate and therefore should increase their participation in the elections.

The Arab voter would like to see the Arab parties run as a joint list. Such a list could increase voter turnout in Arab society with the potential of forming the third largest bloc in the next Knesset. The Joint List did indeed increase Arab representation in the Knesset in the past, but it did not achieve any tangible results.

There is a strong desire in Arab society for the Arab parties to join a government coalition given that this is the only way to influence decision-making. Nationalistic clichés no longer have an effect on the Arab public which is focused on day-to-day problems: poverty, personal security, housing, and employment.

The decision whether to vote among Arab citizens is not influenced by the Israeli discourse over the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the events of October 7th or the sharing of societal burdens, since these are issues that do not directly affect them.

The elections for the 26th Knesset, expected to be held this year, may emerge as one of the defining events in Israeli politics, particularly in the case of the Arab sector. The results of the elections will largely determine its fate and will serve as a roadmap for what lies ahead. There is no doubt that the Arab voter's considerations in these elections will range from day-to-day economic issues to future strategic considerations on the national level, as well as considerations relating to personal safety and security, as is the case for every citizen of the country. In this article, I will outline the options facing the Arab voters and attempt to explain the importance of their active participation in influencing Israeli politics at both the local and regional levels. First, we must answer the simple, almost trivial question: What is important to the contemporary Arab voter?

It is widely recognized that the Arab public feels genuinely threatened by the unrelenting violence and crime occurring daily, and in some cases hourly, in Arab cities and towns. The year opened with a relatively high number of murders in Arab society (more than 20 in January 2026)¹ and shooting incidents that claimed a heavy toll in human lives. This ongoing situation constitutes a real threat to the life of the average Arab citizen. The sense of insecurity permeates every alley and street, every

* **Rani Hassan** is an independent academic researcher and political commentator on issues concerning Arab society and Israeli society in general. He holds a master's degree in Democracy Studies from the University of Haifa and serves as a lecturer in the Hebrew language and a civics teacher in several educational institutions around the country.

¹ "The violence in Arab cities is reaching new levels and residents are leaving. Where are they going?", *Globes*, January 25, 2026. [Hebrew]

public discussion and even every family conversation. Accordingly, the Arab voter will support any party that promises a timely solution to this problem. At present, the Ra'am party appears to be promising such a solution, and it intends to join any future government under the right conditions. According to Ra'am's leaders, this will make it possible to influence decision-making in the fight against crime.

The data show that during the "government of change" (Bennett–Lapid) there was a decline in crime levels and in the number of murder victims—from 126 in 2021 to 116 in 2022 (according to data from the Abraham Initiatives organization).² This can be explained by pressure on the government from coalition members to increase efforts to fight organized crime. This demonstrates that addressing crime requires political will and decision-making, including efforts across a variety of domains—the economy, education, etc. For example, channeling budgets into education raises the academic achievements of youth; however, budgets must also be allocated to informal education activities, as well as for business development and encouraging employment in the Arab sector. All of these efforts can reduce unemployment and lift families out of poverty, and all are dependent on the government's decisions. Accordingly, during the upcoming Knesset election campaign Ra'am can be expected to focus on the budgets directed toward Arab society—budgets which, according to Ra'am's representatives, reached about 30 billion shekels during the "government of change."³ It is worth noting that a significant proportion of that amount was cut for various reasons immediately after the formation of the current right-wing government.

Moreover, the Arab voter is currently in favor of unification of all the Arab parties, whether as a joint list, a technical list, or a full union. Recently, under public pressure following the mass demonstration in Sakhnin held on January 22, it was announced that unification would occur, even though party leaders hinted that the unification was not achieved easily and that difficulties might arise in the future. The parties agree that only the establishment of a joint list will increase voter turnout among the Arab public; however, party interests and other considerations may pose a significant obstacle to a joint list over time. Currently, it is proposed that such a list be defined as technical and that it be allowed to split immediately after the elections. Such a list has the potential to increase voter turnout and thus enable the Arab bloc to become the third largest in the Knesset, as it was after the 2020 elections. Party leaders in that Knesset understood the distress of Arab society and acted responsibly and in accordance with the public's will. Nevertheless, some argue that it is still not possible to determine with certainty that the new Joint List will indeed endure. The vague statements of party leaders, with the exception of Mansour Abbas, still do not signal that the Joint List in its new format will indeed be established, since not all disputed issues have been resolved. The challenges facing it have not yet been addressed, foremost among them the distribution of seats among the Joint List's members, and above all it has not yet been decided who will head the Joint List.

The Arab public views the past experience of the Joint List as only a limited success, mainly in terms of representation in the Knesset and also as a symbol of national

² The data are taken from the Abraham Initiatives organization: <https://abrahaminitiatives.org.il>

³ Danny Zaken, "The budget for Arab society: about 30 billion shekels; Abbas: 'We received everything that we promised'", *Globes*, August 2, 2021. [Hebrew]

unity; at the same time, it views that experience as a decisive failure in terms of achievements. The prevailing claim made today is that although the Joint List included 15 members and was the third largest list following the 2020 elections, it did not achieve the desired results: it did not eradicate violence, did not stop home demolitions in the Negev, and did not improve the economic situation of Arab citizens. In addition, after Mansour Abbas decided to embark on his new path (*al-Nahj al-Jadid* in Arabic) further internal fragmentation occurred and unprecedented insults were exchanged between members of the parties. In the 2021 elections, the Joint List included three parties— Hadash, Balad, and Ta'al—but it still could not maintain unity, even though its members claimed that agreement on a political platform had been reached. The truth is that what united—and later fragmented—the list was narrow party interests and sometimes even personal interests. This led to its dissolution shortly before the 2022 elections, which led to Balad running independently in those elections, and resulted in the loss of Balad's votes. Some argue that Balad's decision to run independently stemmed from considerations of ego and a dispute over the sixth seat on the three-party Joint List, while others are convinced that Balad is still led by Azmi Bishara who resides in Qatar, and that he contributed to the breakup of the three-party list. Either way, the fact is that this split contributed to the rise of the right-wing parties: Balad did not pass the electoral threshold, lacking only a few thousand votes to do so, and thus 138,000 Arab votes went to waste.

According to the prevailing discourse today in Arab society, there is a strong desire among the Arab public to participate in future governments, which is considered the only way to influence political decisions. This discourse is also reflected in polls: a survey by the Konrad Adenauer Program in November 2025 showed that 77% of the Arab public are in favor of an Arab party joining the coalition after the next elections.⁴

It appears that clichés related to the situation on the national level no longer influence the Arab public; rather it is the issues that they confront on a daily basis that concerns them: poverty, the sense of insecurity, home demolitions, the lack of housing and employment solutions for future generations. These are what keep Arab citizens up at night and deprive them of peace of mind. It is these issues that will determine their choice at the ballot box. It is also worth taking into account the liberal Jewish political parties that advocate equality and which may garner a significant portion of the Arab vote. They view the Arab sector as an important target audience that might identify with their political platform. It is no coincidence that Arab-Jewish movements have arisen (such as the "All Its Citizens" party and the "Standing Together" movement) which have participated in the demonstrations in Arab cities such as Sakhnin, Tamra, and Majd al-Krum, and which maintain ongoing dialogue with the Arab public. They realize that Arab citizens can increase their parties' success in the elections if they are offered an attractive platform. However, in my opinion, they will also constitute an obstacle to replacing the current government, given that most polls predict that they have no chance of passing the electoral threshold, and therefore the votes of Arab voters who support them may

⁴ See the results of the survey on the surveys page of the Konrad Adenauer Program on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, Tel Aviv University: <https://dayan.org/journal/konrad-adenauer-program-surveys>.

go to waste. Thus, they remain an option of last resort within the narrow range of alternatives facing the Arab voter.

It is expected that the Arab public will participate in the next elections at an unprecedented level, given the threats to personal security, the demolition of homes, the low employment rate, and the economic situation which is particularly problematic in the Arab sector. Despair over the current government's inability to provide immediate solutions to its problems will motivate many Arab citizens to vote and to take responsibility for their fate. The needs and hardships of the Arab sector will motivate its voters to choose alternatives that can serve its goal of living a normal life; however, giving up the right to participate politically will likely worsen its fragile situation. The Arab public is aware of its power at the ballot box, which is the only way to influence its political, social, and economic situation, and therefore it will not give that power up easily. It is worth noting that the Arab public's trust in the Israeli democratic system has always been low, especially since most Jewish parties—including the center-left ones—now refuse to consider any possibility of Arab-Jewish partnership, claiming that they cannot rely on the support of Arab parties in a future coalition. Nevertheless, there is no alternative to exercising the Arab sector's ability to influence decision-making, even if that influence is limited.

In a broader context, it must be said that Arab voters are not influenced by the general Israeli discourse surrounding the perceived reasons for the elections. For example, they are not interested in various issues discussed in the Israeli media, such as the establishment of a state commission of inquiry into the events of October 7. Such a commission will not improve their situation as a national minority. In the current circumstances, this issue only concerns them if the commission's conclusions lead to the desired result from their point of view—the replacement of the right-wing government. Similarly, the issue of judicial reform or the question of the ultra-Orthodox share of the burden are not paramount concerns for the Arab public. These issues do not directly affect Arab society, unless the issue of drafting Arab citizens again appears on the political agenda. They are considered secondary and insignificant in light of the grim situation in which Arab society finds itself. Perhaps in the future interest in such issues will develop, but for now there are other matters that trouble the Arab citizen.

In conclusion, all the internal reasons presented above, in addition to the geopolitical instability in the region, may motivate more Arab citizens to vote in the next elections. The prevailing feeling among the Arab public is that the upcoming elections may determine the fate of the Arab population in Israel. Thus, Arab voters realize the importance of their vote and are confident in their ability to influence the policies of future governments. Is there any political figure capable of guiding this voice safely and rationally toward the realization of Arab voters' aspirations? The politicians claim they can, but only time will tell.

