

“The Joint List: A Unified Front or a National Front”

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Since 1999, many attempts have been made to create a single list unifying all the Arab political forces that participate in parliamentary elections. However, these attempts failed in the 1999, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2103 Knesset elections. The attempts to establish a Joint List finally succeeded before the last elections in March 2015, and the Joint List was composed from parties that already had parliamentary representation: The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, The Islamic Movement, the National Democratic Assembly and the Arab Movement for Renewal.

I was by then, an active partner in the establishment of the List, and I had - to avoid fake modesty - a significant role in that process. Accordingly, my observations on the List are not the observations of a “lazy wanderer in the garden of knowledge”, as Nietzsche says, or of an observing witness of the details of its constitution. But instead, the observations of a person who was part of it, of its engineering, creation and formation of its work, through all the important stages it went through.

We started to consider the establishment of the Joint List after the electoral threshold was raised from 2% to 3.25%, which implied that none of the Arab parties could be certain they will be able to pass the electoral threshold. It was clear that there would not be three lists, as in the case of the last five parliamentary elections, and that there are two possibilities to pass the electoral threshold: one single joint list, or two lists.

My personal position, as well as that of my party (Balad), was definitive: support for one single Joint List and the rejection of binary coalitions, though such coalitions can be tempting. Immediately after the legislation of the law that raised the electoral threshold, I initiated quiet and discrete conversations with Mohammad Barakeh, the head of the Democratic Front at the time, and Sheikh Ibrahim Mansour, the head of the Unified List (that was composed of the Islamic Movement and the Arab Movement for Renewal). And for the sake of truth and history, I testify that neither of them rejected the idea, but instead, their reaction towards it was positive. Despite that, Sheikh Ibrahim Mansour, like the Islamic Movement in general, was doubtful concerning the possibility of its establishment in view of past experiences, and the traditional refusal of the Democratic Front to a joint list. On the other hand, Mohammad Barakeh was reserved in his position, because his party did not have a determined decision, given that substantial powers inside it were not enthusiastic about a joint list. They rather preferred two lists, for reasons related to the identity of the party and, out of fear, that the absence of competition will alternately lower the percentage of the electoral participation.

The announcement of an early election in January 2014 surprised us, and dictated upon us, a pressing time schedule according to which we had to take definitive decisions within a relatively brief time. Accordingly, communications were intensified on all levels, and in parallel, the idea of a Joint List started, day by day, to become more rooted among the Palestinians inside the Green Line, as an optimal option. Also, it had received stronger support from the general public, whose support was overwhelming, and from the leadership and elites that were certain that it was the best alternative from the electoral, political and popular perspectives.

From the viewpoint of the principles, most of the parties had decided for a single joint list many years ago, and the Democratic Front continued to be the central party that did not agree to adopt the principle of the joint list throughout all previous elections. But this time the matter was different. The issue was discussed seriously inside the party until a positive decision was taken by the central committee of the Communist Party, calling for the “exhaustion of the process of the establishment of the broadest joint list”, which was followed by similar decisions taken by the councils of the party and the Front. After the Democratic Front made its decision, unanimity on the principle was established, and talks turned to concentrate on the issue of the order of the seats of the four parties constituting the Joint List (after the Islamic Movement and the Arab Movement for Renewal had decided to negotiate separately). The order of the seats followed the previous elections. The “National Accord Committee” had intervened to resolve the disagreement on the order of the possible additional seats from 12 to 15, given the fact that there had been an agreement between the parties that the first 11 seats should follow the order of the previous elections: 4 for the Front, 3 for the Islamic Movement, 3 for Balad and 1 for the Movement for Renewal.

Despite the vehement discussions, “The Accord Committee” reached a resolution based on a principle of rotation on the 12th seat between the Arab Movement for Renewal and the Islamic Movement, and on the 13th seat between Balad and the Front. It was clear, despite few claims, that the principle agreement on the establishment of the Joint List will lead definitively towards its establishment and the order of the seats will not be an obstacle. In this way, an agreement of the principle idea of the Joint List and the order of its formation was reached. After that, an agreement on its work procedures in the elections was also made, and the electoral teams were constituted. What is called to attention, is that the electoral program of the Joint List was not less detailed than the programs of each one of the parties, and this an indication, that despite the deep ideological differences between the parties, that there is wide agreement on the positions and the visions in the parliamentary context and the context of confronting the Israeli discriminatory racist system.

The Difference between the idea of a Unified Front and the idea of a National Front

There are those who consider the issue of the unification and the Joint List a temporary phase, directed at confronting the rise of the “fascist right”, following the example of the unified fronts (sometimes called popular fronts) initiated and established by anti-fascist parties, especially socialist and communist parties, in Europe and elsewhere. In contrast, there are others, including myself, who believe that self-defense and the protection of our existence and right of freedom and justice in the face of a colonial project, demands the establishment of a “national front” that unifies the people’s forces within a strategic anti-Zionist struggle for liberation. We also believe in the need for a unity that should last as long as the colonial project still exists and as long as the project of liberation continues to be lively.

The idea of the “national front” does not stem from the temptations of the parliamentary gains that can be made through the compilation of several components into a political power. Instead, it stems mainly from an analysis of reality and the nature of the struggle in the context of a national struggle for the liberation from the implications of a colonial project, while we take into consideration that we are experiencing a colonial reality. In fact, Zionism is a colonial movement wearing a national mask, and it is not “the representative of capitalism” in a “non-colonial” context, as some defined it. On the basis of the definition of the case as a colonial one, not just as a case of “right extremism”, it should be confronted through the establishment of a “national front,” as in the case of the collision between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek in China and the case of the African National Congress. The difference between the two concepts is that the “unified front” is a front against the derivation from the existing order and an attempt to return the rule to its previous sanity. While on the other hand, the starting point of the “national front” is the illegitimacy of the existing order as a colonial racist one. Part of the forces constituting the collision and the unification may have different readings of the concept of unity. Yet, what is decisive in this case is reality itself, and not its readings. For this reality dictates the idea of the “national front” on the political unification. While a party such as Balad, that considers itself part of the Palestinian liberation movement, tends to use the concept of “national front”, there are forces that consider themselves Israeli left and tend to use the concept of “popular front”. Despite that, the different understandings of the idea of unity should not prevent us from arriving, though from different starting points, to the same place, and this is what happened in fact in the case of the Joint List. For as soon as we arrive at the finishing line, things take to a certain extent their own dynamics that is independent of the starting point: If one is brought to the unification for one reason, he may stick to it for another reason.

The true struggle in our country is not one between left and right, but one between a Zionism colonial project and its opponents. In the case of the citizens of Israel, there are no serious differences between the right and the left. The Israeli left was for many years the engineer and the applier of the politics of discrimination, exclusion, marginalization, land confiscation and siege. The left is as dangerous as the right. The unity is not demanded and necessary alone from the viewpoint of the principles, but also from a practical viewpoint, if under the role of the Zionist right or the role of its twin, the Zionist left.

Why the Joint List?

The establishment of the Joint List represented a unique case of “unity in an époque of no-unity”. Its establishment was not self-understood, and it was not a ride with an existing wave or swimming with the current. In fact, our Arab societies, including the Palestinian society, experienced a situation of fragmentation and division and rivalry. Our political unity was established amid this specific époque. It may be said that one of the most important reasons that pushed towards deciding for a single Joint List, and not two lists, was the desire to protect our people from the disadvantages of division and political and sectarian polarization; a consideration that was strongly present throughout all the stages of discussion and dialogue towards establishing the list.

One of the most important reasons that pushed forcefully towards the establishment of the List, had been the overwhelming popular support of the establishment of a single joint list that soon became a major source of pressure producing significant impact on the decision-making

process of the leadership of the parties that constituted the List. This support was clearly manifested in all the polls initiated by “Mada al-Carmel” and other institutions, where the support of the List had reached a level of 85%, which represented the true percentage of votes that the List later received in the elections from the Arab voters. The pressure was manifested in the people’s permanent approaches towards the leadership of the parties, which can be summarized in the sentence: “If you do not unite, we will not vote for you!”

Raising the electoral threshold had an enormous influence on preparing the path towards the constitution of the Joint List. It was clear that the Arab parties were the target of raising it. Lieberman did not hide his intentions when he declared that the law will weaken the Arab representation in the Knesset. And answer to the claim that the Arabs will unite, was that it would be impossible that the communist and the Islamists reach a collective agreement. In fact, the outcome resulting from raising the electoral threshold was not restricted to the effects of a certain number, but had basically influenced the circumstances—within the parties, the wide public and public opinion—pushing towards unity. Indeed, the claim that was widely repeated was as follows: they attempted at weakening us through raising of the electoral threshold and we must respond through our unification and a stronger return to the parliament so that their act would become a boomerang against them. Indeed, there had been an estimation that the Joint List will add to the representation of the Arab parties in the Knesset.

From a direct political viewpoint, the existence of an extreme right racist government triggered the unification to face the rise of racism and the numerous laws directed against the Arabs and their rights. On the eve of the establishment of the Joint List, we believed that our political weight will rise with our unification and raise our representatives in the Knesset, and this belief was a stimulus to accomplish the unity and to use it in the confrontation with racism and the racists.

It is also important to mention that in the last year, people started to dislike the malicious fights and discussions between the political parties. What is more important than that, is that the tensions between the political powers had a negative influence on our joint work, as well as on the performance of our national institutions. Naturally, the election should have become a stage for fight and an axis for tension and its incensement. The idea that was raised during the talks on establishing the Joint List was that, such establishment will soften the encounters and will improve the relationships between the parties that participate in the parliamentary elections. It will pave the way towards a wider unity that will include the political forces that do not participate in the Knesset elections, such as the Northern Wing of the Islamic Movement, Abnaa el-Balad and the heads of the local municipalities—all included under the umbrella of the Follow-up committee, that constitutes the widest and most comprehensive framework of unity for all the Arab masses in Israel.

Challenges

The establishment of the List is by itself an important achievement and antecedence in the history of the Arab masses in the country. Yet it is quite natural that the demand for unity develops into the demand that unity ought to fulfill its expected role to increase our weight, performance and achievements and to preserve, maintain and develop the unity. The establishment of the Joint List presented the start of a new phase that opens new horizons for work and presents us various challenges, such as:

First: contrary to what many people may believe, political and intellectual discussion should enrich the unity and not weaken it. In the framework of unity, there can be indeed a serious discussion far from maliciousness and fight. There has been here and there some discussion, but that was not enough and does not fulfill the demand. There are still differences in declarations and positions, as well as in the political performance between the members of the Joint List. Accordingly, we should open the door for a serious discussion and dialog on urgent and strategic issues. This is the mission of the Joint List, and at the same level, the mission of each one of the parties, of our intellectuals and our civil and national institutions. It is enough to mention some of the issues that deserve discussion: our role within the Palestinian national project, our position towards the Jewish state, the instruments and strategies of our struggle, the development of the Joint List, social issues, local municipalities, cultural autonomy, the Joint List and its role, organizing the Arab masses on various levels.

Second: treating the national unity as a political unity relying on political programs, projects and goals, and not just as an occasion to accumulate weight and power. The starting point of this attitude appreciates the interests of the parties and their nature, and understood the need to increase their power, under the condition that such an endeavor is not one existing on the cost of national interest and national unity. Accordingly, there is a need to develop a common political compass and to develop the Joint List as a political personality occupying its one sphere, apart from the parties that constitute it.

Third: using the power of the Joint List, as a representative of the Arab public in the parliamentary context—being the third biggest list in the Knesset—in order to realize achievements in the various aspects of daily life that interest the citizen. And in fact, there are signs that it is possible to achieve some issues; a matter that strengthens the Joint List and increases the trust of the people in it. People have many expectations that can sometimes be exaggerated, and thus, it is important to stay in contact with the people in order to keep them informed and allow them to participate in the work of the Joint List. We have started to feel that the different ministries and institutions relate to us more seriously in view of our unity. It is true that the responsiveness to our demands is not as high as we want, but it is certain is that it is better than earlier times when we were more than one parliamentary list each working independently.

Forth: it is important to capitalize on the unity and on its impact in order to present our issues at an international level. Indeed, we have witnessed that the attitude towards us has undergone a positive change through our meetings with ambassadors and councils of different states, in view of the unification of our forces and in view of presenting the Joint List as a representative of a national group in the parliamentary context and not just as an average list in the parliament. When foreign parties meet the parliamentary representatives of the Arab public speaking in one voice, they do give them a weight that is much bigger than the weight given upon meeting each party separately. In addition, some representatives of different states expressed their admiration of the success of the Joint List, to overcome the obstacles that should have stood before the composition of the unity of different political trends.

Fifth: it has been proven that the local municipalities, our civil, national and public institutions can be in relations with the Joint List and work with it much more easily than with the parties taken separately. This is in fact a treasure for the Joint List through which it can develop and improve its work. This matter was obvious in the case in which the Follow-up Committee, the National Committee of Arab Local Authorities, and the Joint List had to lead

a joint struggle cooperatively. It is legitimate to criticize the joint performance of these three bodies in view of their size and the multitude of the centers of power within them. However, it gave us hope for being the first experience of a joint struggle of these three bodies. The greatest challenge standing before us now is to transform the joint work of our institutions into a comprehensive systemization so that it won't be a passing matter or one governed by moodiness.

Sixth: Is the Joint List just a parliamentary collision? Or does it have a role outside the parliamentary context? There has been serious discussion that concerns the possibility that the parties constituting the Joint List, participate in the elections for the local authorities jointly. And there is also a question about its role in building the civil and national institutions, as well as in civil work outside the Knesset to confront violence, crime, religious sectarianism, family fanaticism, oppression of women and so on.

Seventh: The Joint List should organize its inner relationships, create a work division and organize the institutions within it. This issue is crucial for the future of the List. The Joint List had made important steps when it divided the membership in the committee, created work teams and established the procedures of parliamentary work.

Conclusions

The Joint List is a right and necessary option. We should preserve, protect, develop and invest in it politically and nationally with the purpose of serving the interest of our people and all the goals for which it was established. The survival of the Joint List is not guaranteed, and we must keep looking after it so that we won't unintentionally lose it one day.

We are sure that all parties are interested in preserving the Joint List. However, intentions are not enough. Preserving and developing the Joint List it is not alone the mission of its members and political parties. Rather, it is also the mission of our intellectuals, institutions and masses in general. We should translate that through the establishment of institutions that support the Joint List, in which specialists and activists can participate. The Joint List has decided to establish consultation committees and we should implement this decision immediately. In addition, following the work of the Joint List as well as criticizing it, strengthens its status and work. It is also important to create a political public atmosphere that delegitimizes any attempt to divide the Joint List into two lists or more.

The Joint List is an historical achievement for our people and the message of unity that it carries has influenced the soul of every Palestinian. It is demanded that this message be reconfirmed for it is a contribution, though simple, to a project against division, fragmentation and for unity and mutual assistance.

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