

# The Joint List: A Gender Oriented Approach

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On the eve of every Knesset elections, a Joint List has been always a demand made by the Palestinian masses inside Israel, requesting that the Arab parties participating in the Knesset elections unite into one single list. This demand turned to be urgent on the eve of the 20th Knesset elections in Israel in March 2015, which brought the “National Accord Committee” to take a role towards the realization of this demand.<sup>1</sup> The Joint List was established to confront the danger of raising the electoral threshold (to 3,25%) facing the Arab parties and movements, and whose aim had been excluding them from the political game. Also, its establishment became a “treatment” (a temporary one at least) to the disinterest of a great percentage of the Arab voters, in participating in the elections, and as an answer to the rising right wing discourse aimed at delegitimizing their representatives both inside the Knesset and outside it.

The Joint List had evoked, and it still does, the interest of the public, journalists and researchers through the periods preceding and following the elections. They examined the circumstances surrounding its establishment, the nature of its components, its possible influence on Palestinian politics inside Israel (and in the West Bank and Gaza as an example for the desired unity after a long period of division), on parliamentary work and the way in which the Israeli central power and the Hebrew media reacted to it. They also tried to divine the span of its life after the election: would the list perish or rather continue to exist, constituting a starting point of a new era of parliamentary political work for the Palestinians in Israel and in general. Amid all these discussions, the generally social, and the specifically feminist aspects, were absent; an issue which this short paper attempts at examining. I present, in this paper, a gender oriented reading of the Joint List, and propose an analysis of the absence of the feminist aspect. I conclude by divining the potential power of the Joint List, and paradoxically as it may appear, by pointing out what allows me to demand that the List works towards changing and politicizing the generally Social and the specifically Feminist.

My main claim is that discounting the Feminist, as well as its absence from the discussion about the Joint List, and about the institution of whose program the Feminist has been a part of, are not only an expression of the division and the differentiation between the political and the social generally, and the separation between the national and the feminist, but also a reflection of the accumulation of different layers of discounting and a result of combination and reaction that were in action in the context of the establishment of the List. First, there is an aggravation of the colonial settler policies and practices that constitute the most comprehensive context. Second, the gender problem remains marginal in the agendas of most of the political parties and movements, and it is even totally absent from the agendas of some of them. Third, there are constraints and fatal circumstances related to the first experience of the Joint List. All these elements, were they separated, joined, accumulated or combined, bring to an overlooking of the

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<sup>1</sup> See an article dedicated to the committee in this issue.

Feminist so as to avoid a “mine area” and be able to continue playing in the safe area of the lowest common ground around which the political parties constituting the List agree, and thus guarantees its emergence to existence. Yet in parallel, my claim, that may appear to be paradoxical, is that this same context—with reference to its layers, dynamics, and newest innovations, represented by the existence of the Joint List in the political space—may possess within itself, elements that are strong enough to interact with the Social and the Feminist and, at the least, politicize them both.

My gender-oriented approach of the Joint List has three main axes: the axis of representation, the axis of agenda, and the axis of participation.

### The Representation Axis

From within the 120 candidates of the Joint List, only 24 candidates are women,<sup>2</sup> 18 of them are Arab and 6 are Jewish. That is, their percentage amounts to 20%. Only two women were included within the first 10 seats. In addition, women occupied the last two seats of the next 10 seats. In other words, there had been two female candidates within the first 15 seats, that were actually the seats expected to be won, and that makes a percentage of 13.33%.

Following the election’s results, the Joint List received 13 seats, where two of them were occupied by two Palestinian women: Aida Toma-Suleiman (Democratic Front) occupying the fifth seat and Haneen Zoabi (Balad) occupying the seventh seat, at the time in which each one of the two occupied the second place within the lists of her own party. Accordingly, women constitute 15,4% of the total number of the Joint List’s Knesset Members. And following the fact that Haneen Zoabi was the only female Arab Knesset Member in the previous two Knesset rounds, it can be said that the representation of Palestinian women in the Israeli parliament doubled itself. This fact, should be in fact, a cause of satisfaction for those men and women who support this concern. This is indeed true, but a number of reservations should be made. The first reservation concerns the gap between the percentages of female candidates for the guaranteed seats of a part of the parties — that has been a third in Balad, a quarter in Democratic Front (and totally absent in the lists of the Islamic Movement and the Arab Movement for Renewal) — and their percentage for the guaranteed seats of the Joint List. The second reservation concerns the disappointment from the realization of the expectations, that the results of the negotiations between the parties constituting the Joint List would include additional guaranteed seats for women in the Joint List. According to the recommendations of the Accord Committee (i.e., the committee that supervised the negotiations and thereby preformed an exceptional role), the twelfth seat was supposed to be reserved for a woman. The details of these recommendations found expression in the first version of the committee’s declaration that leaked to the media. The declaration announced the establishment of the Joint List as well as the order of the candidates.<sup>3</sup> The media soon reported that the twelfth seat was reserved for a woman. However, according to the ultimate results of the negotiations, this seat was subject to a rotation between the Movement for Renewal followed by the Islamic Movement (two years for each). Yet, from the beginning,

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<sup>2</sup> This short paper does not allow the presentation of the female candidates in detail. I will return to this issue in a future paper.

<sup>3</sup> As an indication of the rapid collapse of this condition, that lasted less than 24 hours, I can testify that I was informed about it before my participation in an evening program in Hebrew, where I anticipated that the representation of women in the Joint List will be multiplied 3 times. Yet, by the next day, the fact became different.

the Movement accepted the rotation under the condition that the reservation of the twelfth seat for a woman be canceled. The final signed agreement confirmed this demand.<sup>4</sup>

These occurrences have many indications on many levels. Here, we are interested in matters that relate directly to women's representation. The fact that the considerations of the Joint List included the dedication of an additional seat for a woman, is by itself an expression of a tendency to increase the participation of women in the Joint List which could have had reached almost a quarter (23.33%) of its representatives in the Knesset. From a gender-oriented viewpoint however, without getting into the fine details of the relevant events, what is equally important is that the above recommendation reflects an authorization, whether social or subjective, of the Committee to take into consideration such a social issue. This matter points to the importance of producing a change concerning the representation of women in politics, including the Knesset elections, as well as to the fact that such a demand cannot be ignored any more. However, such a recommendation and an endeavor may clash with the positioning, agenda, inner politics, reality of the involvement of women within the inner institutions and/or the gender ranking of the cadres of a certain political party or movement. Such a clash may prevent its realization as it happened in the experience mentioned above. When we take the historical-political context into consideration, we realize that the Accord Committee, as its name indicates, had given priority to the role of conciliation, over the role of renewal (in its comprehensive sense), so that it won't become an obstacle standing against the establishment of the List, and in order to maintain the indigenous element in politics, whose roles were dictated by the colonial state, however again at the expense of the representation of women.

Moreover, even the low percentage of women's representation in the guaranteed seats was not reflected in the advertising signboards and pictures that Joint List located at the entrances and public squares of the Arab towns and villages, but was however, published in all media, on the List's website and during its election festivals and public gatherings. Women were totally discounted from the official advertisement of the Joint List. That picture presented four male candidates, each representing one of the four parties. This means that overlooking women in the picture, which is a symbol, surpassed their percentage in the Joint List and in political reality. The claim that the picture was designed in a way that allows that one representative from each one of the parties constituting the Joint List, while all of them are men, in order to legitimize the picture objectively, does not help avoiding the demand that we read the picture and the legitimization of its "objectivity" as deeply involving masculinity and gender hierarchy.

### The Agendas

The basic principles and the working program of the Joint List included women. The attitude towards women showed a clear tendency towards a principle of equality from rhetorical and discursive perspectives. What surprises us positively at this juncture, is the capacity of the rival partners in the Joint List to reach an apparent agreement on one of the basic themes that were thought to be capable of blowing up the negotiations of the establishment of a Joint List, joining together partners that prioritize women's equality (seculars) and other partners holding conservative opinions on this issue (religious or conservative). Despite that, a fast gender-feminist reading of the principles and the program demand that we consider three aspects: form, quantity and content.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.maannews.net/Content.aspx?id=755934](http://www.maannews.net/Content.aspx?id=755934)

From a formal and a quantitative viewpoint, the fifth principle within the eight basic principles adopted by the Joint List stands “against woman’s persecution and for her rights and participation.” The issue of “woman’s rights” appears in the fifth, and last, part of the working program of the Joint List and was formulated in six articles within a total of sixty articles. The last part may inform us symbolically about the status that the Joint List gives to women (social) issues—at the end—and also about their hierarchy on the scale of its priorities—the lowest class. It may also inform us about the agreement between the participating rivals on this matter, despite the differences between their, ideologies and agendas in this respect as separate parties and movements. It may also be telling, with respect to the fastness and the cruciality of the context of the establishment of the Joint List (which was a matter of “to be” or “not to be”), insofar as the participating partners did not pay big attention to the principles and to the programs, which indicates that they have conceived the Joint List as an election list rather than a political list.

From the viewpoint of the content, the basic principle relates to women’s equality and to their rights, as well as to fighting all kinds of women’s persecution in the political, social, economic and cultural aspects of life and in all circles starting from the family up to society. Thus, this basic principle turns out to be all comprehensive. When we turn to deconstruct it into a working program, we come out with the impression that the formulation is again comprehensive. Moreover, the institutions in question, the references and the working procedures call our attention. We receive the impression that the working program directs itself towards the outside, that is towards the State and its institutions, and not towards the inner Palestinian society and its institutions and groups. This is also true with regards to the working procedures as they relate to the State, especially to legislation. Also, reference to the international level, such as international agreements, and to the State, such as positive discrimination, stand out. I do not intend to underestimate the importance of such references and procedures. However, such an attitude does not exempt us from turning parallel attention to our local society, its culture and groups, in order to point out the locations of women’s persecution and discrimination, as well as to other social problems, so as to take the responsibility of confronting them with social procedures stemming from one’s own history, and with other creative procedures; while exulting at the same time, the “authentic” reference and legitimacy and also trying to produce creative references and legitimacies for women’s equality and rights within the Arab Palestinian culture. The general formulation of the issues of women’s persecution and their equality, the reference to the State and its institutions and the adoption of State and international references and procedures, as indicated above, may be the minimal limit that all the parties constituting the Joint List agree to accept. Let us take into consideration that the historical experience in this respect has shown that the relation between declarations and implementations is weak, though declarations may be written and signed. For, a declaration does not necessarily mean that it will be implemented. How much more so in the case of a Joint List?! We can perceive here how this way can be the easiest and cheapest way out from the typical picture surrounding part of the political parties such as masculinity and chauvinism. Also, we can see how this way allows one to look much more beautiful before the world, the State (!) and the local society.

### The Participation

Women’s participation and their relatively active presence were standing out, despite the low representation of women in the Joint List,<sup>5</sup> the comprehensive attitude of the List’s working

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<sup>5</sup> The names of the women may have been added to the Committee’s members later, which should have been a delayed correction. However, this matter was not published in any of the news or the media reports on the Committee.

program towards their discrimination and their total absence from the Accord Committee and as representatives of the parties and political movements they belong in the negotiations, which can be considered forms of participation and representation. The participation of women took different forms, such as the (relatively) remarkable presence in the List's opening festivals in Arab villages and towns, in public gatherings and in "female" and "home" meetings.<sup>6</sup> And from a logistic perspective, every party or political movement ensured the participation of a female representatives in these activities.

The participation of women during the election period acquired a special momentum in view of the fact that it coincided with the activities of March 8, The International Women's Day, where women's activities and meetings of the Joint List were intensified and national and local candidates, parties members, political activists and relevant specialists took part in them.<sup>7</sup> A petition, initiated and signed by "local authorities' female members [...] calling women to support the Joint List" was one more form of political participation.<sup>8</sup>

In the different meetings, special attention was given to the importance of women's participation in the voting process and they were asked to realize their right of influence and participation through voting for the Joint List and supporting it. However, and despite the fact that dangerous circumstances accompanied the process, to which I related above in detail,<sup>9</sup> demanded that voters, women and men alike, take their responsibility, the re-production of women, primarily as auxiliary votes (this time in national elections) and their moral and national commitment to vote for the "right" list was present.

Local media looked after covering women's participation and activity made in support of the Joint List, and allowed them a presence that was relatively high, something that increased their willingness to interact with it and support it. However, active (or passive) forms of women's participation, that includes preparations, intensive work, discussions within party institutions and endeavors to launch the Joint List, naturally remains hidden. This issue requires conducting methodological thorough research to examine women's true political involvement. I expect that such research will provide a clear picture of the big gap between women's participation and representation.

### Conclusion – The Potential of the Joint List

In contrast with the unsatisfying image of the Joint List from the gender-oriented examination, it is possible, though it may appear to be paradoxical, to hope to activate its potential. This is the potential to create a complete, or partial, political-social change that appears to be possible in moments of crisis and moments introducing a new element in the field, without ignoring the possibility that this same situation may legitimize the continuation of the status quo or its revision. The intensification of settler colonial politics, blocking the political horizon of the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict, worsening the relationship between the Arab citizens and the Jewish majority and the State, poverty, unemployment, social violence and the absence of a compass directing the Arab masses, are all expressions of a clear social-political crisis. The

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<sup>6</sup> See for example [Wadina.net/news/news/11283](http://Wadina.net/news/news/11283)

<sup>7</sup> For example. I have in one of my lectures in Nazareth examined politics as a genderized arena as well as the procedures of its genderization and the ways to confront them.

<sup>8</sup> <http://ahlan.co.il/full.php?id=31146>

<sup>9</sup> The clearest manifestation was the declaration of the Prime Minister, Netanyahu, on the day of the last elections where he warned against the high participation of the Arab voters urging that the Jewish voters vote.

context of the crisis and its dimensions resulted in the collision of the main political parties and movements to constitute the Joint List. Beyond this collision, and after it passed the test of the elections and the context of the crisis, it can be implemented on the historical opportunity that it had received from the masses, as it takes on itself its role and responsibility, and through enacting all the individual and collective relevant parties including a cooperation with the other representative institutions—above all, the Follow-Up Committee (together with a reconsideration of its reorganization).

The Social and the Feminist problems constitute at this point the essence of the assumed responsibility. The starting point should be political examinations of the Social in general, and the Feminist in particular. And in case some of the parties' understandings would lack such political examinations, then the politicization of the Social and the Feminist are an avoidable mission. This attitude should be translated into a bigger representation and participation of women in politics, and in the centers of decision-making, as well as to dealing with urgent social issues and initiating dialogue around it, as a part of an internal enlightening process.

All this can allow the Joint List to turn from an election list into a meaningful, compromising political list, however not without preserving the ideological differences and the internal political discussion. This mission requests a departure from heated political illnesses, such as fighting, distinction and personalization. And that implies an incorporation of a general leadership, especially in moments of crisis, that are meant to create a social political change.

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