Mohamed Diwan

Arab Knesset parties are part of an “internal resistance”, says Hamas editor-in-chief Wisam Afifa. This confirms what many Israeli security experts have feared for years: The line between legitimate opposition and institutionalized subversion is blurring.

“As for the Joint List (of Arab parties, ed.), I hear talk that they could get 15 seats. I think it’s very important to make sure that the Zionist parties get worried, that they feel a strong resistance in their own home.” This quote comes from a 2015 interview with Wisam Afifa, editor-in-chief of the Hamas organ Al-Risala. It illustrates a strategic reality that is often underestimated by the Israeli public: Hamas and other Palestinian actors explicitly view Arab Knesset parties as an operational component of a “resistance from within” against Israel.

This is precisely where the democratic dilemma begins – and it is neither abstract nor theoretical: a state that finances, protects and provides immunity to legal political forces that fundamentally dispute its right to exist finds itself in a structural trap. In Israel, Arab parties are elected to parliament (Knesset), receive millions in public funding, enjoy full parliamentary immunity – and use these resources to work against the basic Zionist construction of the Jewish state.

What has long been interpreted as an expression of democratic strength and tolerance appears on closer inspection to be a dangerous paradox: a democracy that enables its institutional opponents to destabilize it from within – legally, systematically and sometimes in coordination with external actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

The various Arab parties in Israel represent different positions, but there is one point on which they are similar: they pursue a dual-message strategy. In their Hebrew-language appearances, they focus on civil rights, social inequality and discrimination. In Arabic-language speeches and media interviews, the reference to the Palestinian national movement and the “resistance” becomes clear. This ambiguity allows them to address two target groups simultaneously without having to commit themselves.

Hadash: Ambiguity as a trademark

The left-wing Hadash party presents itself as a socialist, Jewish-Arab “peace movement”. In its programs, it combines demands for social justice and the

protection of minorities with a fundamental rejection of Israel's self-image as a "Jewish state". Its MPs use democratic institutions – mandates, freedom of speech, public funding – to argue for a different, non-Jewish defined state model.

The statement made by their Knesset member Ayman Odeh at a rally in May 2025 exemplifies the double message: "Gaza has won and Gaza will win." Hebrew-speaking Israelis should read it as a criticism of the war, while the Arabic-speaking and Palestinian population can understand it as support for Hamas.

The Nazi comparison made by his party and parliamentary colleague Ofer Cassif in February 2025 follows the same logic: a photo of Jews in front of a Vienna emigration office in 1938, compared to Gaza evacuation plans – this is a systematic moral equivalence that equates Israel's security measures with the Holocaust. Former Hadash MP Yousef Jabareen has also repeatedly used the term "apartheid" in international forums, instrumentalizing an analytical concept – not to criticize Israeli policy, but to condemn the state as a fundamental historical injustice, comparable to South Africa under apartheid.

Balad: Institutionalized subversion

While Hadash wraps its opposition in socialist rhetoric, the Balad party represents a more open anti-Zionism. The National Democratic Assembly embodies the most consistent form of institutionalized rejection of the Jewish state model and advocates an Israel that is no longer defined as a Jewish nation state.

The biography of party founder Azmi Bishara is symptomatic of this. Bishara left Israel in 2007 after security authorities expressed suspicion that he had provided Hezbollah with information about possible targets during the 2006 Lebanon war. He was never brought to trial, denies the allegations and has since lived abroad, including in Doha.

From exile, he runs a systematic campaign to delegitimize Israel: he regularly publishes columns in Al Jazeera Arabic, in which Israel is characterized as an "apartheid state" and "colonial settler colony", and heads the Arab Center for Research in Doha, an institution that systematically argues against Zionism. After October 7, 2023, he justified the Hamas attacks as "legitimate resistance" and described the Israeli response as "genocide". Bishara is thus continuing from exile what he began as a member of parliament – with far greater reach.

Former Knesset member Haneen Zoabi embodies the same attitude. In 2010, she was on board the “Mavi Marmara”, part of the Gaza flotilla at the time, when there was a violent confrontation in which several people were killed. Zoabi refused to condemn the activists’ violence and stated that further missions would follow. In interviews, particularly in 2018, she not only questioned the Zionist state model – she explicitly stated that Israel should be “dissolved”.

The case of Basel Ghattas marked another turning point. The Balad MP was sentenced to prison in 2017 for smuggling cell phones to detained security prisoners – taking advantage of his parliamentary immunity. The fact that Balad put Ghattas back on their list of candidates after his release in 2020 shows that The party does not see such actions as a moral problem, but as part of the “legitimate struggle”.

This is also illustrated by an incident in 2016, when Balad Knesset members Zoabi, Ghattas and Jamal Zahalka met with families of killed Palestinian terrorists and commemorated the dead in a minute’s silence – in front of the parliament of a democratic state, for people who had killed Israeli civilians. The Knesset only responded with temporary disciplinary measures.

Ta’al and Ahmad Tibi: Respectable delegitimization?

The Ta’al party and its leader Ahmad Tibi occupy a special position. While Balad is openly confrontational, Tibi operates more subtly. The former advisor to Yasser Arafat is considered one of Israel’s strongest Arab politicians in terms of rhetoric and presents himself as a moderate fighter for minority rights. This is precisely what makes his position so effective: he uses the rhetoric of civil rights in order to pursue fundamental criticism of the principle of the state itself – under the cloak of democratic respectability.

Tibi’s strategy follows the double message pattern described above with particular consistency: in Hebrew, he argues “I am fighting for civil rights, against discrimination”, while in Arabic he fundamentally denies the legitimacy of the Jewish state. His 2009 statement that throwing stones is a “democratic expression of freedom of expression” normalizes violence against the state by framing it as legitimate political protest.

The boycott of the funeral of former Israeli President Shimon Peres in 2016 by the coalition of various Arab parties, of which Ta’al was a member, was also revealing.

Peres was the symbol of a Zionist politician who sought peace. Boycotting his funeral meant: there are no Zionist peace partners, only Zionist occupiers with whom reconciliation is impossible.

Ra’am: A special case?

Ra’am under Mansour Abbas appears to be providing a counterpoint to these parties. In 2021, Ra’am supported the Bennett-Lapid government and negotiated extensive investments in Arab communities – a historic step that set the party apart from the others. Abbas condemned the attacks on October 7, not least because Arab Israelis themselves were victims.

But on closer inspection, Ra’am also follows the pattern of the double message. The party’s internal platform, which speaks of a “fundamental injustice”, remains unchanged. The question remains open: does the pragmatic coalition participation represent a genuine change of course – or is it pragmatism in the service of longer-term goals?

Structural self-endangerment

The examples of Hadash, Balad, Ta’al and Ra’am show that Israel is confronted with a form of institutionalized opposition that rejects not only government policy, but also central elements of the understanding of the state. Members of parliament who reject the Zionist project sit in the Israeli parliament. And the sentences from the Hamas interview quoted at the beginning make it clear that external actors are using this openness of the Israeli political system strategically: as an opportunity to exert pressure on the Jewish state “internally” through Arab parties.

In principle, the democratic dilemma posed by the admission of Arab parties in Israel revolves around three questions: How much fundamental criticism of the state can a democratic system withstand? What minimum loyalty can it expect from its representatives? And how can minority rights be protected without the majority feeling that their collective identity is being put at risk?

Addressing these issues is urgent. On January 22, the leaders of the four Arab parties Hadash, Ra’am, Ta’al and Balad signed an agreement for a joint list for the Knesset elections in October of this year. According to polls conducted by the Moshe Dayan Center, such an alliance could win 15 to 17 of the 120 seats in the Knesset.

This would mean that the four Arab parties in the highly fragmented Israeli parliament would in all likelihood become the kingmakers for the current opposition – provided the latter agrees to the four-party alliance participating in the government. So far, it has ruled this out. But in realpolitik, such announcements can change quickly.

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