



Mansour Abbas—the kingmaker who redefined Arab politics in Israel

In the run-up to the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the Jewish state's most important political leaders. This week: Mansour Abbas of the Arab party "Ra'am."

By Jan Kapusnak

On June 2, 2021, Mansour Abbas and his party "Ra'am" joined the eight-party coalition led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, thereby ending Benjamin Netanyahu's twelve consecutive years as prime minister. The alliance spanned from the nationalist right to the Zionist left, but its groundbreaking member was the Islamist and socially conservative Ra'am. For the first time since the state's founding, an independent Arab party joined an Israeli government and gained direct influence over policy and the budget.

A Devout Muslim and Strategic Politician

Abbas had not become a Zionist. He remained a devout Muslim who identified with the Palestinian people and advocated for an independent Palestinian state. His break with traditional Arab politics was strategic, not ideological. Arab citizens, he argued, should use their votes and Knesset seats to shape policy from within. In the Knesset elections on October 27, Mansour Abbas could once again become a kingmaker with his pragmatic stance.

"A minority within a minority"

Abbas grew up in Maghar, a town in Galilee where Druze, Christians, and Muslims lived. He describes himself as "a minority within a minority." His father, Ghazi, was a member of the local council and mediated family disputes through *sulha*, which gave Abbas an early model for negotiation.

Born in 1974 as the fifth of eleven children, Abbas memorized the Quran and became an imam at the age of seventeen. He studied dentistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and, in the late 1990s, led the Arab Student Committee, focusing on civic issues such as student housing.

His most influential mentor was Sheikh Abdullah Nimar Darwish, whose transformation foreshadowed his own. Darwish founded the Islamic Movement and later *Usrat al-Jihad*, an underground organization that sought to establish an Islamic



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state. In 1981, he was convicted of membership in a terrorist organization and spent several years in prison. Afterward, he renounced violence, accepted political activities within the framework of Israeli law, and supported the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO.

The movement split over the issue of participating in the 1996 Knesset election. The southern faction supported participation and founded the “Ra’am” party as its political wing. Abbas became secretary-general of “Ra’am” in 2007 and its party chairman in 2018.

Conservative, Islamist, and pragmatic

“Ra’am” is often classified as part of Israel’s political left because it supports a Palestinian state. But this classification is incorrect. Abbas rejected same-sex adoption and a ban on conversion therapy. In 2020, he said the party’s position on homosexuality stemmed from Islamic law, not from “political interpretation, flattery, or favoritism.” With its stance on such issues, “Ra’am” is closer to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties than to the secular Israeli left.

Abbas’s priorities include fighting crime, improving housing, creating jobs in Arab society, and recognizing Bedouin villages. Palestinian statehood remains on Ra’am’s agenda, but Abbas does not make cooperation with Jewish parties contingent on progress in this direction.

This set “Ra’am” apart from the other three Arab parties—“Hadash,” “Ta’al,” and “Balad.” Abbas argues that these parties focus too much on Gaza and the West Bank while neglecting Israel’s Arab citizens. He says that sustained opposition has had little impact. The alliance between “Ra’am” and the three other Arab parties fell apart before the March 2021 election over the question of whether an Arab party could cooperate with Netanyahu and the right wing. “Ra’am” ran independently of the joint list under the slogan “Realistic. Conservative. Influential.” and, contrary to election forecasts, won four seats.

The coalition experiment strengthened “Ra’am”

Just a few weeks after the 2021 Gaza War, which had sparked unprecedented violence between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel’s mixed cities, Mansour Abbas



joined the Bennett-Lapid government with “Ra’am.” He made this participation contingent on measures benefiting Arab communities. The government subsequently approved a five-year development program worth approximately 30 billion NIS (7.5 billion CHF, 8.7 billion EUR) and a separate plan worth 2.5 billion NIS (6.25 billion CHF, 7.2 billion EUR) to combat violence and organized crime.

The Bennett-Lapid coalition government lasted only eighteen months, but Ra’am emerged from it stronger. In 2022, it increased its seats from four to five and won about 32 percent of the Arab vote. Joining a Zionist-led government had not cost Abbas his voter base.

A traitor to some, a Trojan horse to others

Abbas’s moderate stance continues to make him a target of attacks from both the Palestinian side and the Israeli right. In April 2023, he warned Hamas and other Palestinian factions that inciting Arab Israeli citizens to take up arms would lead to “a new catastrophe.” He called on Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza not to interfere in internal Israeli affairs, rejected violence, and supported a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

This move drew fierce criticism. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) called him a traitor, while Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas accused him of crossing red lines. Arab nationalists, for their part, accuse Abbas of trading Palestinian rights for municipal budgets. Within Israel, right-wing critics portray “Ra’am” as a Muslim Brotherhood organization that uses coalition politics to mask Islamist goals.

Harsh criticism of the Hamas massacre on October 7

Following the massacre on October 7, 2023, Abbas stated that this was “contrary to everything we believe in—our religion, our Islam, our nationality, our humanity.” He later called on the armed Palestinian factions to disarm and to work toward statehood through the Palestinian Authority. When “Ra’am” Knesset member Iman Khatib-Yassin questioned reports of atrocities committed during the massacre,



Abbas demanded her resignation. She apologized and remained in the Knesset.

In July 2026, when asked whether Hamas was a terrorist organization that needed to be destroyed, Abbas himself replied: “I have a clear answer. But I don’t want to say it.” This refusal deepened doubts among Jewish Israelis about “Ra’am’s” role in national security decisions.

A Shift Away from Religious Influence—for Electoral Tactical Reasons?

To refute claims that “Ra’am” remained under religious control, Abbas launched his most ambitious reform since 2021 in 2025. The party separated its political decisions from the Islamic Movement and its Shura Council and held its first independent internal election on August 22, 2026. Abbas presents this as a transformation toward a more secular movement. The change grants Abbas more autonomy, but it could also be a tactical rebranding to make Ra’am acceptable in a future coalition.

Jewish candidate in second place on the party list

Abbas sent the clearest signal that he is interested in rejoining the government when, on August 31, he included Yoav Segalovitz—a Jewish candidate—on the “Ra’am” electoral list for the first time, placing him in second place, immediately behind himself. Segalovitz is a former Knesset member of the “Yesh Atid” party and a police commander.

As Deputy Minister of Public Security under Bennett and Lapid, Segalovitz coordinated the fight against organized crime in the Arab community and gained a high level of credibility among Arab voters through his efforts. Commenting on Segalovitz’s selection as a “Ra’am” candidate, Abbas said: “I’m not looking for someone who is like me. I’m looking for someone who knows how to do the job.” Segalovitz is running for “Ra’am” without becoming a party member. His participation in the election broadens Ra’am’s voter base. However, it does not require the party to abandon its Islamist identity.

The partnership between Abbas and Segalovitz also leaves fundamental questions unanswered. According to media reports, Segalovitz originally wanted “Ra’am” to recognize Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and to support national civilian



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service for Arab citizens. However, Mansour Abbas has yet to make such a statement. In 2021, he did say that Israel was born as a Jewish state and would remain so. But a few weeks ago, he qualified this by saying that this identity was “a fact imposed on us” and reaffirmed his support for an independent Palestinian state.

Abbas’s Unfinished Experiment

A poll conducted on September 17, following the announcement of Segalovitz’s candidacy, predicted “Ra’Am” to win six seats in the Knesset in the October 27 elections, while a coalition led by Netanyahu’s fiercest challenger, Gadi Eisenkot, would secure 55 seats. This means that Mansour Abbas, with “Ra’Am,” could help Eisenkot secure the 61 seats in the Knesset needed to form a government.

However, Eisenkot’s “Yashar” party has stated that it will only consider forming coalitions with parties that recognize “ Hamas” as a terrorist organization and support its destruction. Abbas has not yet made such a statement. For Segalovitz, on the other hand, this is clear. It therefore remains to be seen whether Segalovitz’s partnership with Abbas is reason enough for Eisenkot to nevertheless hold coalition talks with “Ra’am” if doing so would allow him to secure a majority in the Knesset. Or whether Mansour Abbas, with “Ra’am,” will win enough seats on October 27 to topple Netanyahu but still not be accepted as a coalition partner.

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