

Palestine: The biggest loser in this election: Liberal Zionism

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Israelis consistently vote against the idea of a Jewish and democratic Israel alongside a Palestinian state. It is now impossible to see how that could ever be realized.

On Sunday Ayman Odeh, the chairman of the Joint List, met with President Reuven Rivlin to announce his party's [noteworthy](#) decision to endorse Benny Gantz, chairman of the Blue and White party, as prime minister. In an effort to thwart another Netanyahu term, Ayman Odeh did what no other Israeli politician is doing — he articulated a vision for the country's future: "We want to live in a peaceful place based on ending the occupation, the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel, true equality, on the civil and national level, social justice and certainly democracy for all."

This is not a new or radical position. If anything, it represents the spirit of the Israeli peace camp in the 1990s. It is a bedrock liberal Zionist approach, but the only Israeli politician articulating it is a Palestinian Muslim politician from Haifa. Odeh chairs the socialist Arab-Jewish Hadash Party, which together with the three Arab-dominated parties forms the Joint List; having won 13 seats following last week's election, the Joint List is now the third largest party in the Knesset.

Odeh's op-ed in [The New York Times](#) Sunday translated for an American audience what many Palestinian citizens and a paucity of Jewish citizens believe: "[T]he only future for this country is a shared future, and there is no shared future without the full and equal participation of Arab Palestinian citizens."

If you are a champion of liberal democracy, or even just a realist, it is hard to argue with this statement, especially given that Palestinian citizens make up 20 percent of Israel's population. Yet it remains not only a minority position in Israel, but a [persecuted and delegitimized one](#). With or without Netanyahu, there is no realistic prospect of the Joint List being invited to join a governing coalition (since the founding of the state, no Palestinian-Israeli party has been in the government) or even of heading the opposition. Palestinian citizens of Israel have shown they have enough power to be on the political map, but not enough to change it.

After election results came in last week, Netanyahu spoke of the need for a "strong Zionist government" (code for Jewish-only) and labeled the Joint List "anti-Zionists." Similarly, the Blue and White Party, like the majority of Israelis, maintains that Israel is the national home of the Jewish people where Jews have a unique right to self-determination. Blue and White ran on an anti-Netanyahu platform; during its campaign, the party championed pluralism and insisted it would [push back](#) on Israel's discriminatory [Jewish Nation-State Law](#).

Ultimately, however, the Jewish Nation-State [formalizes precisely what they believe in](#). They are emotionally and ideologically attached to the notion that Israel must be a state that prioritizes Jewish rights over those of non-Jewish citizens. No matter how liberal they are or claim to be, this

fact always trumps the other, leaving hundreds of thousands of Palestinian citizens inherently deprived of equal rights and denied a path to achieving them.

A recent [poll](#) by the Israel Democracy Institute shows 76 percent of Palestinian citizens favor the Joint List joining a ruling coalition and having their representatives serve as ministers in the government. Nearly half of Jewish citizens (49 percent) oppose the idea. This renders meaningless the claim that Palestinian citizens are anti-Zionists or rejectionists, since they are demonstrably taking an active part in the political process.

After two elections in one year, both of which failed to produce a clear majority, the country is in a political deadlock; the situation reflects the predicament of both the liberal Zionist model and the obstinacy of Israeli consensus. A Jewish ethnostate cannot, by definition, also be a liberal, democratic one — particularly when its population includes a large indigenous minority with a separate national and cultural identity.

Since the founding of the state, Israeli political leaders from both the right and the left have [prioritized land appropriation and Jewish settlement](#) over providing the same civil rights to all citizens, regardless of nationality or religion. This policy has come at the expense of finding a political — not to mention a sustainable — solution that recognizes the rights and aspirations of both peoples.

Blue and White, Likud, Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, the Orthodox parties and even the center-left Democratic Union and Labor-Gesher parties all face this same crisis. They claim to be liberal and insist they are democratic, but they still haven't figured out how to deal with Palestinian citizens of Israel, as currently represented to them by Ayman Odeh, or the Palestinian people in general. It is interesting, for example, to note that the Israeli center-left party was called the Zionist Union in the 2015 election, while this year we saw the formation of the Democratic Union (a merger of Meretz, Ehud Barak and Labor's Stav Shaffir), exposing the tension between Zionism and democracy and, seemingly, conceding that to be a leftist in Israel, you have to ultimately champion one over the other. This says a great deal about the current state of Israeli politics.

The biggest loser of the second Israeli election of 2019 is liberal Zionism. The idea that Israel can be a Jewish and democratic state with internationally recognized borders, which both acknowledges its national Palestinian minority and reaches an agreement to establish a Palestinian state, has absorbed a fatal blow. Israelis have consistently voted against this idea; it is now impossible to see how it could ever be realized.

Ayman Odeh is a practical, effective leader with integrity. By insisting in his *New York Times* op-ed that "there is room enough for all of us in our shared homeland, room enough for the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and the stories of our grandparents, room enough for all of us to raise our families in equality and peace," he is challenging liberal Israelis to look in the mirror and find a way to reconcile their particularistic political views (their Zionism) with their values. They can only do this by accepting that Palestinians — whether citizens, residents or stateless people under occupation — are not going away. The precise nature of the political solution, whether it's one state or two, is of secondary importance to finding a formula by which Jews and Arabs have equal rights and live in peace and dignity.

Mairav Zonszein is a journalist and editor who writes about Israel-Palestine and its role in U.S. politics. Her publications include The Guardian, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New York Review of Books, The Intercept, VICE News, Foreign Policy and many more.

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