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## Coming up: an Arab-Israeli parliament

By [Yoav Stern](#)

Just a few days before the deadline for submitting party slates to compete in the elections for the 17th Knesset, a new movement has formed in the Arab sector with an aim to organize an election boycott. Last week, the Popular Committee for a Boycott of Knesset Elections was formed at a meeting of Arab activists and academics; it is calling on the Arab sector to abstain from going to the polls this March. Instead, the new organization is suggesting to the Arab public that they take part in direct elections for a body that will represent the Arab public before the state, a kind of 'Arab parliament' that will replace the Arab public's Supreme Monitoring Committee - a body that is today comprised of Arab members of Knesset and council chairmen.

Behind the formation of the committee are the two factions of Bnei Hakfar ('sons of the village'), which do not recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, and a group of independent participants that includes prominent Arab academics, such as Dr. Assad Ghanem, of the University of Haifa, and Ameer Makhoul, the general director of Ittijah, the Union of Arab Community Based Associations and the brother of Issam Makhoul, a Hadash MK who was pushed off the party's list for the coming elections. The new public committee promises to compete with rival parties for Arab votes, within the existing financial constraints.

Bnei Hakfar's position is ideological and stems from a negation of the Zionist-Jewish character of the state. Dr. Ghanem says of himself that he is taking part in the initiative for more practical motives. 'Clearly the presence of the Arab MKs in the Knesset cannot help the Arab sector achieve its rights,' he says. 'It's not because they don't want to, but because the Knesset doesn't let them have an impact. This has been the case since the establishment of the state, but it is especially so today. The Jewish public as a whole is squeezing into the center and pushing out of the political game the settlers, the ultra-Orthodox and the Arabs, who as mentioned, were out of the political game even beforehand.'

Dr. Ghanem also attacks the Arab MKs for reasons other than political motives. 'Most are media phenomena,' he says. 'They after all visited foreign countries more than they visited Arab villages and they do not represent the public's interests.'

Raja Aghbariya, the head of one of the Bnei Hakfar factions, stresses that the committee's objective is not just to come out

with a call against the elections, but also to suggest an alternative. According to Aghbariya, 'We feel the Palestinian public within Israel is entitled to an elected leadership. Creating such a leadership body, which will have to be accountable to the constituents who elect it, will change the balance between the Palestinian public and the state, because the public at large will be represented by the monitoring committee and we will no longer have to play according to the Knesset's political rules. The Knesset has a dominant Jewish majority and we will create a new body that the state will be unable to ignore. After all, every minority in the world is entitled to form its own parliament.'

In 1948, Aghbariya's father, together with the other residents of Umm al-Fahm, took part in ambushes not far from the junction at the entrance to the village. They fired at Jews traveling on the Wadi Ara road. After 1948, when Umm al-Fahm became part of the state of Israel, his father halted his violent acts, but taught his son to vehemently oppose the Zionist state. 'If there's one thing which Umm al-Fahm serves as a model for, it is in its voting rates for Zionist parties. It verges on zero. They have to be swept out of here and out of the Arab sector as a whole,' he says.

The idea of forming an Arab parliament is not a new one. The Bnei Hakfar movement suggested doing so already in the early 1990s as part of its effort to improve the status of the Arab population in Israel. In effect, the movement's official ideology calls for the establishment of one state from the river to the sea, but as long as Israelis and Palestinians are interested in separate national states, the movement is working to improve the situation of the Arab public. 'We want the battle in the next ten years to focus on the matter of Arab autonomy,' says Aghbariya. 'This of course does not refer to separating from the state of Israel geographically, because the population is mixed in throughout the state, but it does refer to autonomy that includes responsibility for dealing with health, education, construction and more. Why does the Shin Bet security service have to be involved in what happens in our schools? Do I care what happens in Hadera?'

The Arab parties represented in the Knesset are concerned about voting rates in the Arab sector and therefore the new initiative worries them very much. A review of the voting rates among Arab citizens since the establishment of the state indicates a steady decline. The lowest voter turnout was registered in the last elections - 63 percent. According to various polls conducted until now, voting rates are expected to rise this time by several percentages. This is of critical importance for the Arab parties, which are facing the possibility of not reaching the threshold of minimum votes and disappearing from the parliamentary political map.

Officially, the new public committee is the only organization in the Arab sector calling for an election boycott. However, the Islamic Movement (northern branch) is also voicing similar positions. The movement is not running in the Knesset elections and officially maintains a neutral position: Every citizen should decide according to his conscience whether or not to participate in the elections. But, unofficially, it is calling for a boycott and its leaders have made it clear that they themselves will not go to the polls. In an interview given by the movement's leader, Sheikh Ra'ad Salah, to the weekly paper, Kol al-Arab, which is published in Nazareth, he said: 'We are sure that the people we are appealing to can understand the message.'

In the two months left until the elections, the committee's activities will focus on the boycott campaign as well as call on parties represented in the Knesset to support alternative elections. The committee still has insufficient sources of funding and its anticipated scale of activity, as well as its level of public support, is still unclear. Aghbariya believes the efforts will gain momentum and says that until the elections, the committee hopes to convene a 'national conference' to discuss an alternative to the elections in Israel - a process for choosing an Arab monitoring committee.