

An Arab minister is not enough

By [Yoav Stern](#)

The minor storm the Arab MKs aroused about two weeks ago - when they met in Jerusalem with Hamas officials and expressed support for their struggle against the plan to strip the Hamas men of their residency rights - reflects the relationship between the Arab MKs and the Hebrew media. Almost the only chance Arab MKs have of receiving "air time" is by engaging in something controversial pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of the Jewish public regards them as extremists without distinguishing between different streams within the Arab public. Within the Arab public they are seen as relatively moderate.

The truth lies somewhere in the middle. The Jewish Israelis are not aware of the fact that during the election campaign the Arab MKs had to confront calls for boycotting the elections and establishing an "Arab parliament" whose representatives are directly elected by the Arab public and that would operate in parallel to the Knesset. On the other hand, they conducted a strident campaign in which they delegitimized the option of voting for Jewish parties.

There will be 12 Arab MKs in the 17th Knesset: two in Labor, two in Kadima and the rest in the three Arab parties. This represents a slight increase compared to the previous Knesset, which had 11 Arab MKs. A Jew, Dov Khenin of Hadash, was elected to this Knesset by a solid majority of Arab voters, also. On paper this looks like success, but a close look at the election results reveals disturbing data on the political conduct of Israeli Arabs.

The data indicates a tendency to vote along geographic or ethnic lines. That is, one of the main factors in the Arab voter's choice of party is the candidate's place of residence. In the southern Triangle communities, for example, where MK Ibrahim Sarsur and MK Ahmad Tibi live, the United Arab List and Arab List for Renewal (Ra'am-Ta'al) received a large number of votes. Thanks to these votes, MK Tibi restored the party's fourth Knesset seat at the expense of the Labor Party's Druze candidate, Shakib Shinan, whose campaign slogan was "a member of the community is more worthy of your vote."

Umm al-Fahm is another clear example. Hadash won a decisive majority in the city because it placed a local resident, Dr. Afu Aghbariya, fourth on its list.

A more disturbing trend pertains to the Arab voting rate - a low 56 percent. This is the lowest voting rate ever and 21 percent less than it was a decade ago. There is concern that the voting rate in the next elections will dip below the 50 percent mark.

This does not indicate a lack of political awareness: Local elections in the Arab communities have some of the highest voting rates in the country. Rather, there is a conscious decision not to vote in the Knesset elections. Undoubtedly, what enabled the Arab parties to maintain their strength and even to gain a bit was the relatively low voter turnout among Jews.

Despite the disturbing data, the Arab parties welcomed the election results. Hadash and Balad maintained their strength, while UAL emerged as the big success in the elections. The risky move Ta'al MK Tibi made several weeks prior to the elections in uniting Ra'am with Ta'al proved itself, and the combined list won four Knesset seats.

Kadima did not invite the Arab parties to participate in coalition negotiations, but the parties were invited to rare meetings with the incoming prime minister. Nonetheless, several MKs, including MK Tibi, now enjoy a direct connection with the prime minister - something that did not exist during the Sharon period.

Olmert's government will bear a heavy responsibility. If the situation of the Arab population here is not thoroughly addressed, despite this group's political weakness, the schism between Jews and Arabs in Israel is liable to widen. It is not enough to appoint an Arab minister. Priorities must be changed in ministries where the officials are stronger than any minister - like the Interior Ministry, for example.