

Spotlight



Mansour Abbas has chosen to stand with the extreme settler right against the interests of our people
Sami Abou Shehadeh
Joint List Knesset member



Mansour Abbas, right, of the United Arab List, will join a coalition jointly led by Yair Lapid, left, of the Yesh Atid party, and Naftali Bennett, center, of Yemina. The irony of an Islamist political party closing ranks with Yemina, a Jewish nationalist alliance, has not been lost on the Arab world. AFP

MIDDLE EAST

Anything for power

Muslim Brotherhood shows its true colors with the United Arab List setting aside principles to join Israeli coalition

Arab News Dubai

To govern is to choose, they say. Mansour Abbas, leader of Israel's United Arab List, is likely to face a few difficult decisions over the coming weeks and months if, as seems likely, he and his party form part of a new governing coalition in Israel.

Late on Wednesday, it was announced that Abbas had agreed to join a coalition jointly led by Yair Lapid of the centrist Yesh Atid party, and Naftali Bennett of the right-wing Yemina. The irony of an Islamist political party eagerly closing ranks with Yemina, an alliance of Jewish nationalist parties, has not been lost on Palestinians or the wider Arab world.

Analysts see the development as yet another example of a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired party putting power and self-interest above principles when it comes to the crunch.

"The news was not surprising. Brotherhood affiliates have always used all means to achieve their political goals," Dr. Hamdan Al-Shehri, a political analyst and international relations scholar, told Arab News.

"This cooperation is just another episode in a long-running drama that will continue to demonstrate the extent and willingness of the Muslim Brotherhood to cooperate with anyone except the governments of their own countries."

Whether this marriage of convenience will last long enough is another matter. If approved in the Knesset, the coalition will bring an end to the 12-year premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu. It will also mark the first time that an Arab party has served in an Israeli government since the formation of the state of Israel in 1948.

If Abbas becomes a minister, he will be the first Arab politician to take a seat at the Israeli Cabinet table. Jewish-Israeli politicians and voters previously have viewed such participation as a step too

far in compromising the Jewish nature of the state.

There has perhaps also been nervousness on the part of the Arab politicians themselves at active participation in the government of a state whose legitimacy and even right to exist are still so heavily disputed across much of the Arab and Muslim world.

These politicians range from Druze members of Netanyahu's Likud party to the secular communists of Hadash, to representatives of the marginalized Bedouin minority in the south of Israel, some of whose members serve as volunteers in the Israel Defense Forces.

Then there is Abbas' United Arab List, which is often known by its Hebrew acronym Raam. The United Arab List is the rump of Israel's Islamic Movement and, as such, is understood to be aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood.

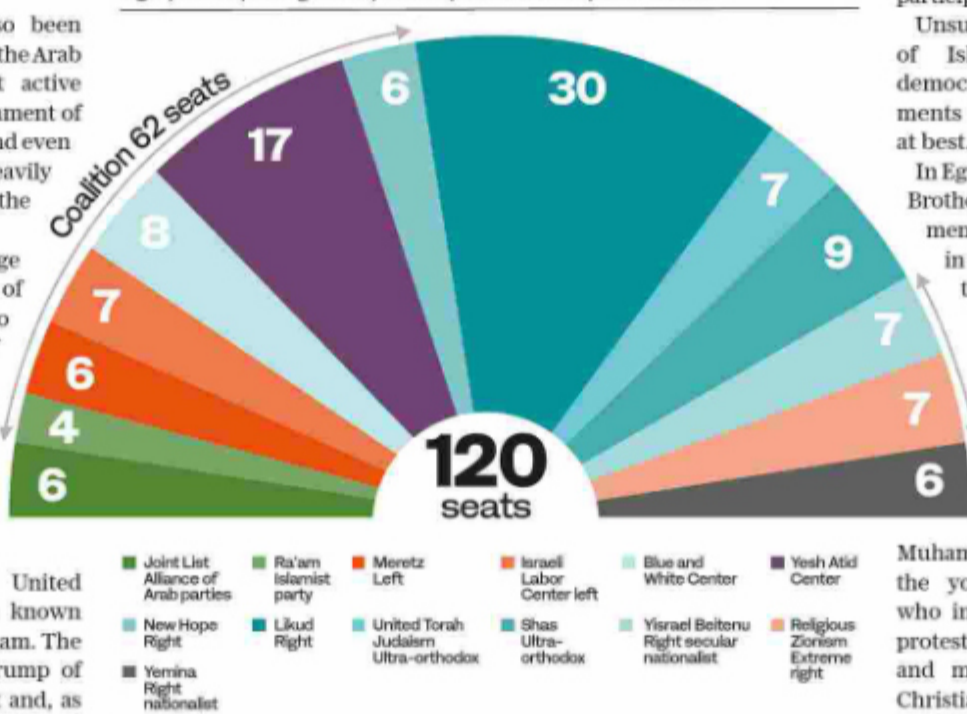
While Hamas, the militant group that runs the Gaza Strip and is highly popular in the West Bank, does little to hide its origins in and friendships with the Muslim Brotherhood, the United Arab List is only affiliated to it. The Muslim Brotherhood is classified as a terrorist group by Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia among others.

In 2015, the Israeli government banned the Islamic Movement. Raed Salah, the leader of the northern wing from the town of Umm Al-Fahm, has repeatedly served prison terms on charges of inciting violence.

Abbas, a dentist from the village of Maghar who was elected to the Knesset in 2019, presents a more emollient face. He is believed to be from the more moderate southern wing of the party. However, he is an experienced politician.

"Mansour Abbas' decision to work with Naftali Bennett is not surprising when you consider that he has cooperated with Netanyahu for several years now," Mairav Zonszein, a senior analyst of Israel/Palestine affairs

COMPOSITION OF ISRAEL'S KNESSET
Eight parties spanning the full political spectrum make up new coalition



ARAB NEWS

at the International Crisis Group (ICG), told Arab News.

Bennett, who will take the prime minister's job for the first two years of a four-year term, served in the Sayeret Matkal and Maglan special forces units of the Israeli military (IDF), taking part in many combat operations before becoming a millionaire software entrepreneur.

"Abbas has a lot more in common with some of the right-wing religious Jewish political parties than with the left-wing Palestinian ones," Zonszein said, referring to the Joint List alliance of Arab parties.

"It has yet to be seen what will come of this coalition. Its very formation is indicative of the political deadlock in Israeli politics caused both by Netanyahu's domination as well as the demise of a Jewish left."

To be fair to the United Arab List, it is hardly the first Islamic-rooted party to jump at the chance of sharing political power. Many Islamists hold that democracy is a Western invention and is incompatible with the primacy of God-given laws. Yet,

often the view of the activist or participationist wing prevails.

Unsurprisingly, the outcomes of Islamist participation in democratic elections and governments have been problematic at best.

In Egypt, the home of the Muslim Brotherhood, some senior members balked at taking part in elections in 2011 following the so-called Arab Spring revolt which ended the rule of Hosni Mubarak as president.

Elected through the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), its tumultuous period in government under Muhammad Mursi alienated the younger educated activists who instigated the anti-Mubarak protests and, over time, women and members of the country's Christian minority.

Critics found the groups' commitment to democracy to be questionable at best and viewed Mursi's decision to run for office as little more than a cynical bid for power.

In Tunisia, Rached Ghannouchi, currently the speaker of the national assembly, has struggled to reconcile an Islamist worldview — strongly anti-Israel, anti-nationalist, pan-Islamic — with the compromises necessary for effective government following the ousting of the Ben Ali regime in 2011.

In Britain, where some Muslim Brotherhood leaders are now based, a review by senior civil servants and diplomats of the international Islamist network found parts of it had an "ambiguous relationship with violent extremism."

The review identified a secretive cell structure, "with an elaborate induction and education program for new members. It relied heavily on group solidarity and peer pressure to maintain discipline. This clandestine, centralized and hierarchical structure persists to this day."

In Turkey, where other elements of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership are based, the government

of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, leader of what is usually described as a neo-Ottoman AKP party, has forged a political relationship with ultra-nationalist hard-liners.

It is not clear what conditions Abbas has been able to gain in return for his participation in government. His calculations are made more sensitive in light of the fighting last month between Israel and Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, territories captured by Israel in 1967.

For 12 days from May 10, fighters loyal to Hamas traded missiles and artillery fire with the IDF. Almost 250 Palestinians, at least half of them women and children, died in the violence. In Israel at least 12 people were killed by Hamas rockets.

In the course of the fighting, largely Arab and mixed towns inside Israel, such as Jaffa, Lod, Haifa, Acre and Nazareth, were gripped by unrest. Israeli border police battalions were moved quickly back into Israel to deal with rioting, car burning and attacks on buildings.

Palestinians living in Israel suffer from higher levels of unemployment and what they see as prejudice and discrimination. Making up 21 percent of the population, they are generally poorer and less educated than Jewish Israelis — although they have a better standard of living than that enjoyed by Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and in the diaspora elsewhere in the Arab world.

So, in practical and symbolic terms, what will Abbas' taking part in government mean for Israelis, Palestinians living in Israel, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza?

"On the one hand, a Palestinian party entering the coalition is significant as it breaks a taboo and sets a precedent for the future," the ICG analyst Zonszein told Arab News.

"On the other, there is as of yet no reason to believe it will lead to the fundamental changes in discriminatory and destructive state policies against Palestinian citizens," she said.



Left, top to bottom: Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia's Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party; Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood spokesperson Talaat Fahmy; and Zaki Bani Rsheld of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. The outcomes of Islamist participation in democratic elections and governments have been problematic at best. AFP