



# WHY ARE PALESTINIANS VOTING WITH THEIR FEET IN THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS?

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## **Why are Palestinians voting with their feet in the Israeli elections**

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### **Reviewing the Middle East peace process: two decades of empty negotiations**

Although the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel have the right to vote in the Israeli elections, many have chosen not to, due to the fact that Israeli politics have been overrun by anti-democratic parties that are preventing the voices of the Arab minority from being heard. Since 1949, when the first Israeli elections were held, the most prominent political parties within Israel have neither promoted peace with the Palestinians, nor have they promoted equal rights for the Palestinians living in Israel. Instead, they support a “Jewish democratic state” that gives rights and privileges to Jewish citizens, ignoring those of the Arab minority. Moreover, Palestinian Arab members of the Knesset (MKs) are being harassed and discredited, as well as being faced with attempts to outlaw them from running in elections. Therefore, more and more Palestinians are not voting due to the fact that their rights are being ignored and they feel that they have nobody worth voting for.

### **What is the Israeli election process?**

Israel has a parliamentary democracy with a single legislative chamber. Members of the 120-seat Knesset are elected to four-year terms on a directly proportional system. However, a prime minister may call for early elections. This may be done, for example, if there are internal political disputes amongst coalition members. Israel nearly always ends up with a coalition government due to the proportional representation voting system.

The election system is designed so that citizens vote for a political party, rather than an individual candidate. In order to acquire one of the 120 seats in the Knesset, a party must receive 2 per cent of the popular vote. The parties themselves nominate their representatives to take the seats that the parties win, and they are put in order according to preference, to be referred to in case they haven't acquired enough seats for all of their nominees.

The leader of the party with the most seats in the Knesset is given the opportunity to form a “majority coalition” composed of other political parties. A majority coalition must include 50 per cent of the 120 seats. If the leader of the party is successful, then they are declared to the Prime Minister. However, failure to form a majority coalition leads to giving the chance to the party with the second highest number of seats in the Knesset, as was the case in the 18<sup>th</sup> Knesset election.

The president is a symbolic position as head of state in Israel, elected by the Knesset to serve a 5 year term.

### **Discrimination and injustice promoted by the main Israeli political parties**

The four most powerful political parties in Israel's present Knesset are Kadima (centre), Likud (right-wing), Yisrael Beitenu (right-wing), and Labour (left-wing). Although they fall on different ends of the political spectrum, when it comes to their views on the Palestinians, they all share the same intolerance. What is



disconcerting is the fact that the two most extreme parties, Likud and Yisrael Beitenu, are the most aggressive and intolerant towards the Palestinians and have joined forces for the election. They are likely to win the majority of seats in the Knesset.

### Kadima

- Kadima supports the two-state solution that includes swapping “land for peace” in order to allow the maximum number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank to live in a Jewish state. This solution would legitimise the illegal settlements.
- It stresses that Jerusalem will be the “undivided capital” of Israel.
- It is committed to completing the separation (“apartheid”) wall, the route of which seizes large amounts of Palestinian land illegally and leads to the cutting down of olive trees and destruction of farmland, and separates Palestinians from their schools, workplaces, hospitals and resources.
- Kadima continues to show its disregard for Palestinian rights and has sponsored and supported many discriminatory laws against Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as those in the occupied territories.

### Likud

- Likud is topping the polls for the upcoming election.
- It is the most intolerant of Palestinians.
- Likud supports the construction of the separation wall, the expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the continued occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights, an undivided Jerusalem as the capital of a “Jewish state” and disregards the issue of the 5 million Palestinian refugees living outside of historic Palestine (Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories).
- Although the Palestinian Arab minority makes up over 20 per cent of the Israeli population, its members are allocated just 6 per cent of the state budget under Netanyahu’s Likud-led coalition government.
- Likud has supported a number of discriminatory laws against the Palestinians, as well as Operation Cast Lead and Operation Pillar of Defence against civilians in the besieged Gaza Strip.
- Likud has recently aligned with Yisrael Beitenu for the upcoming election, to create one of the most anti-Arab groupings in the Knesset.

### Yisrael Beitenu

- The extreme right-wing party has teamed up with Likud to form one of the most anti-Arab groupings in the Knesset.
- Its future vision includes the swapping of Arab majority areas in Israel with Jewish settlements in the West Bank.
- Yisrael Beitenu is opposed to any territorial concessions for security reasons as well as the Jews’ religious “birth right” over the land.



- Uses the party line “No Citizenship without Loyalty” which promotes the proposal of a bill requiring Palestinian Arab citizens to express loyalty to the “Jewish State” and carry out national service in order to receive equal rights and benefits as Israeli citizens.
- Yisrael Beitenu has supported a number of discriminatory laws against Palestinians inside Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories.

### Labour

- Labour’s policies are similar to those of Kadima.
- It a two-state solution with the Palestinian Authority and refuses to negotiate with Hamas directly.
- Labour advocates the completion of the separation wall and the retention of the main (illegal) settlement blocs in the West Bank.
- Labour’s Defence Minister, Ehud Barak, was a driving force behind Israel’s Operation Cast Lead and Operation Pillar of Defence against the civilians of the Gaza Strip.

### Habayit Hayehudi/National Union

Although a fairly new political party, the Habayit Hayehudi/National Union (right-wing) party is likely to play a prominent role in this Israeli election. The party, led by Naftali Bennett, represents religious-Zionists and territorial nationalists, including settlers. He served as Netanyahu’s Chief of Staff before becoming head of the settler representative body the ‘Yesha Council’. Bennett’s vigorous style has appealed to the religious-Zionist movement, drawing votes from Likud. He is likely to be invited by Netanyahu to become a coalition partner should Likud win the election and be asked to form a government.

### Discriminatory Bills

Discrimination against Palestinians amongst Israelis has reached a new high. It is not only seen in behaviour, but has now become a part of Israeli legislation. In the past 4 years, during Netanyahu’s current government, the Knesset has proposed and passed about 35 discriminatory laws, the most in Israel’s history. Most of these laws aim to marginalise the Palestinian minority in Israel by excluding them from Israeli society and granting preferential treatment to Jewish citizens. The main bills supported by the top parties in this year’s elections are:

- **Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law**

This was passed by the Knesset in 2003, and although it was intended to be temporary, it has been renewed annually. This law denies Israeli citizenship and residence permits to people from the occupied territories and “enemy states” (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran) who marry Israeli citizens. Although this law applies to all Israelis, it mainly affects Palestinian citizens of Israel, as they are more likely to have spouses from those areas/countries.



- **Nakba Law**

Palestinians mourn on Israeli Independence Day, as it is linked to the events of the war in 1948, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forced to leave their homes. They commemorate the “Nakba” (the catastrophe) by having lectures, seminars and other ceremonies and gatherings. This law prohibits all such commemoration of the Nakba. The proposed bill included a jail term of up to 3 years for violators. After many ministerial objections to the bill, as it criminalised the commemoration of the Nakba, it was amended to allow instead the Ministry of Finance to cut off funding to institutions supporting activities undermining the “Jewish and democratic character” of the State of Israel. It was passed into law on March 22, 2011.

- **Admissions Committees Law**

This law was also enacted on March 22, 2011. It legalises “admissions committees”, which are selection committees allowed to reject applications for residency based on an applicant’s “social unsuitability” in 457 small communities in Israel. The law is so unclear about what qualifies as “socially unsuitable” that many interpreted it as those who do not have Zionist views or support the “Zionist vision”. It is obvious that this was passed to exclude Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel from living amongst their Jewish co-citizens.

- **Plesner Committee**

This law was proposed as an alternative to the Tal Law, which allowed orthodox Jews studying the Torah to be exempt from national service. The Knesset has attempted to draft a law that addresses national service for all. Due to the controversy created by this law, the Plesner Committee was dismantled; however its recommendations were accepted by Netanyahu. These recommendations include one that says that 80 per cent of orthodox Jews should be drafted for national service, and that all draft-age Palestinian citizens of Israel should perform national service, even though serving in an army that occupies Palestinian land and fights against both Palestinians and Arab countries makes Palestinians understandably very uneasy. This law will be voted on in March 2013.

- **National Homeland Bill**

This bill aims to highlight the Jewish nature of the state, rather than its democratic nature, as it removes the Arabic language from being an official language of the state.



### Why the number of Palestinian voters is decreasing steadily

Based on a number of surveys, it is predicted that only 28 per cent of Palestinian voters will definitely participate in this year's election. This would be a new low, as the number of voters has never before gone below 50 per cent. Many people consider this decrease in voters to be a protest against the injustice and discrimination they are suffering at the hands of successive Israeli governments.

Although this drop in numbers reflects general dissatisfaction with the government, Israel's Palestinian citizens are also disappointed by their choices for the Arab leadership, who seem more caught up and focused on the Israel-Palestine conflict than on the Israeli-Arabs' everyday problems, such as healthcare and education.

Moreover, a number of Palestinians feel that it is useless to vote, as their voices are not heard in the Knesset. Arab parties have been de-legitimised and discriminated against in the election. Many Jewish Knesset members have tried to ban Arabs from standing as candidates in the election. Furthermore, some Palestinian Arab MKs have been taken in for interrogation by the police, whereas no Jewish MKs have been questioned about incitement against the Palestinian population. Arab MKs have suffered both verbal and physical attacks, as well as legal indictments. This has further discouraged Palestinians from voting, as they feel that the election is not being fought out on a level playing field.

Palestinian election boycotters can be categorised in two groups; those calling for an ideological boycott, and those who abstain simply out of frustration and dissatisfaction. Those boycotting due to ideology feel that because the Israeli government is based on the establishment of a "Jewish state", the government cannot be democratic, nor can it represent the Palestinians in any way. They believe that Israel is a state that believes in ethnic cleansing, occupation and apartheid. As such, this group feels that in order for the Israeli government to represent the Palestinians fairly, the entire system of government needs to change.

However, the group that abstains from voting simply out of frustration does so due to their feelings of hopelessness and the fact that this discrimination has been going on for the past 64 years. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, in the light of the anti-democratic bills, discriminatory policies and overall negative attitude towards the Palestinians put forth by most Israelis.

