

Yedioth Ahronoth – June 25, 2021

## **Between the Shura and the Knesset**

By Michael Milshtein

- It's hard to overstate the importance of the United Arab List's inclusion in the new government coalition. This is a historic reversal both in terms of the standing of the Arab public in Israel as well as in terms of Jewish-Arab relations in the country. Abbas's decision to join the coalition could qualify as a transition away from the old Arab politics, which found it difficult to change and remained in the slogan-filled past, to a new, flexible and practical politics. But the UAL is not easy for Jewish society to stomach, which in the last two years has begun to pay attention to the different hues in Arab politics, which until then had been perceived as monolithic. The UAL mainly represents a social and geographical periphery of the Arab public, which the Jewish public is less familiar with relative to the other Arab parties and the communities that they represent.
- Furthermore, it can be hard to decipher the UAL, particularly because of the fact that this party, which managed to insert itself so deeply in the Israeli political game, is in fact a religious and conservative party, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is culturally closer to the Haredi and Orthodox parties in Israel than it is to the left-wing that is ostensibly considered to be the "natural" camp of the Arab public. Another important point that must be understood about the UAL—and which is utterly different from what goes on in Jewish politics and even in the more familiar Arab parties—is that it is first a movement and only then a political party.
- The UAL is the representative of the southern chapter of the Islamic Movement in Israel, with a widespread infrastructure of charity organizations, mosques, municipal organizations and educational institutions. The UAL exists to serve the needs of the movement and is subject to the decisions of the Shura Council, which rules on strategic and social issues and provides religious justification for political actions. Abbas is indeed a bold and groundbreaking leader, but he is not the supreme authority in the UAL. He has a lot of influence on the party but must always receive approval and

guidance from the religious sources of authority.

- The Shura Council—a body that the majority of the Jewish public (and to a large degree, the Arab public as well) had not heard of up until a few weeks ago and which is shrouded in secrecy—is a fundamental ingredient in every Islamic movement that identifies with the Muslim Brotherhood, and its role is often to resolve contradictions. The southern chapter of the Islamic Movement has adopted the following approach in the last few decades: flexibility when it comes to contradictions that stem from politics and inflexibility on cultural and societal issues. The Shura Council decided in 1996 to join the political game and in 2021, it decided to join the government, but it also decided that any legislation on the issue of gays or anything that ran against the grain of Islamic tenets were a red line. The UAL, in this regard, has followed the religious rules for minorities that were developed in Muslim communities in the West. Those rules enable and even encourage integration if doing so helps the Muslim public, but are strict that no non-Muslim ideas or culture should infiltrate Muslims' hearts and minds.
- The UAL itself embodies tensions and contradictions that have existed for a long time: it is Muslim first and Palestinian second; it has respect for Judaism as a fellow religion but, like all the other Arab parties, it shies away from “Israeli identity.” The Arab public considers the UAL’s integration into the coalition as an historic test. If Abbas succeeds, even partially so, in helping to solve the root problems that plague the Arab public, he could become a dominant force in Arab society and could reshape Jewish-Arab relations. But if he fails, this is liable to alienate the Arab public from the state and from Jewish society to the point of eruptions of violence similar to the one that erupted in May this year, and worse.
- The author is the Director of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University and a Senior researcher at the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Herzlyia Interdisciplinary Center.