Flowing with Reality (Musaiyyara)

Politics and Leadership of the Islamic Movement in Israel

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ABSTRACT: This article delves into the intricate relationship between the Islamic Movement and the authorities in Israel. It specifically examines the strategy of integrating the southern faction into Israeli politics in recent years and during the emergence of the democracy crisis in Israel. I term this strategy ‘the politics of musaiyyara’ (flowing with reality), a distinctive approach within the Israeli context. This approach utilizes the Knesset as a platform for forging new alliances with Zionist actors, sidestepping discussions on issues related to the Israeli occupation. The article relies on primary sources that convey the perspectives of the Islamic Movement, specifically its two leaders, Sheikh ʻ Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh, representing the old generation, and MK Mansour Abbas, representing the newer generation within the movement.

KEYWORDS: ʻ Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh, Islamic Movement, Israel, Knesset, Mansour Abbas, Palestinian society, the politics of musaiyyara

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Arabs residing within its borders have been an excluded national and religious minority. Presently, Arabs constitute approximately 20 percent of Israel’s population. The majority are Muslim, with significant Christian and Druze communities. They are primarily concentrated in Arab communities as well as mixed cities, including Jaffa, Lod, Ramla, and Haifa. From 1948 to the present day, the political stance of the Arabs in Israel has been marked by shifts between supporting Zionist parties and opposing various governments. For the most part, Arab members of the Knesset have found themselves excluded from decision-making centers without influence.
on the composition of different governments. There have been instances, however, when Israeli governments sought their support, particularly during times of political crisis, such as the one experienced by the country between 2019 and 2022. Moreover, the Arab minority suffers from problems of infrastructure, poverty, high unemployment rates, crime, and additional social problems in addition to lacking representation in state institutions. At the same time, significant changes have been taking place in Arab society. These include rising levels of education, especially among women, growing rifts in relations between religious and non-religious factions, and the emergence of a new generation of political and social leadership challenging the old and traditional leadership.

Recent transformations in Israel have brought about challenges and opportunities for different groups in Israeli society. New political players have emerged who, until now, have been on the margins. One of the actors that has recently become a significant political player is the southern faction of the Islamic Movement. The movement intends to pursue what is called al-Nahj al-Jadid, the New Approach. This approach expresses willingness to negotiate with both left-wing and right-wing political actors while aspiring to become a leading player in Israeli politics.

This article discusses the politics that have emerged in the southern faction of the Islamic Movement, which I call ‘the politics of musaiyyara’ (flowing with reality). The term is original. The 16 members of the movement and its leaders, interviewed for this article, did not use it during their interviews. Nor can it be found in the movement’s writings or existing literature on the topic. References to the term in the Arabic language have appeared in two contexts. The first is psychological and means ‘to obey social norms’; the second is in a religious context. My choice of the term for the political context studied here reflects the perspective of the leaders of the Islamic Movement about how they should deal with the state: it is flowing (musaiyyara) in the sense of walking alongside (mugharat), rather than walking behind (ittiba‘a) or against. I argue that this approach has developed gradually, reaching maturity in the past decade. By pursuing this approach to politics, the southern faction of the Islamic Movement tried to reconcile tensions between pragmatism, on the one hand, and religious and ideological commitments, on the other.

I present the characteristics and background of this political movement, focusing on two prominent leaders: Sheikh ‘Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh and Member of Knesset (MK) Mansour Abbas, who represent different generations within the movement: Darwīsh, the founder, belongs to the older generation, while Abbas signifies the younger one. Abbas played a pivotal role in shaping the politics of musaiyyara. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that Darwīsh laid the groundwork for this political
approach through combining conventional means while emphasizing the unique aspects of Muslim life in Israel, thereby offering distinctive religious interpretations that align with their circumstances.

Examining the implications of Israel’s judicial overhaul and associated trends for the musaiyyara approach is thus a pertinent question. This article draws on primary and secondary sources supplemented by an in-depth interview with Mansour Abbas, the leader of the southern faction of the Islamic Movement, as well as interviews with members of the movement, along with media materials. The article is structured into four parts. The first provides a brief historical background on the Islamic Movement. The second delves into Sheikh ʻAbd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh and his central political activities. The third section explores Mansour Abbas’s political initiatives. The fourth part analyzes the characteristics of the politics of musaiyyara and its alignment with the reality of the lives of the Arabs in Israel.

The Islamic Movement: Background


Factors contributing to the southern faction’s influence include Da’wa outreach (propaganda, the spread of Islam) and religious discourse (al-Atawneh and Hatina 2019; Ali 2005a; Rekhess 2011; Rekhess and Rudnitzky 2011; Rudnitzky 2008), tribalism, particularly in the Negev (Rubin 2017), women’s empowerment within the apparatus of the Islamic Movement (Alinat Abed 2016; Nasasra, 2008), and the establishment of religious organizations providing diverse welfare services (Eseed 2020). Alongside these, the movement cultivated a political arm responsible for the parliamentary arena (Nasasra 2018; Navot et al. 2023).

Both the southern and northern factions aim to strengthen religious identity but differ in their approach to the state. The southern faction seeks recognition from the state and uses parliamentary politics and attempts to improve the status and condition of the Arabs in Israel through negotiation, influence from within, and pressure on the state and the majority. In
contrast, the northern faction has no interest in being recognized by most of the state and emphasizes independence. Sheikh Salah called this project *al-Muˁtama` al-Ezami* (independent community) (Mustafa 2011).

The northern faction faces persecution due to its non-integrative stance. Furthermore, the northern faction’s vision of an independent community focuses on aligning with Arab-Islamic political Islam (al-Atawneh and Ali 2018; Mustafa 2011). In contrast, the southern faction recognizes the unique situation of Muslims in Israel (Sarsour 2005). The factions diverge on participation in Knesset elections, which underscores the deep religious and ideological divides between them, with implications for their stance on the nature of the state and sovereignty over holy sites. The debate around participation in Knesset elections continues to be a bone of contention as it touches on core ideological questions about relation with and recognition of the state as Jewish and democratic. The southern branch chose a pragmatic approach.

**The Founder: ‘Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh**

‘Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh, born in Kfar Qasim in 1948 under the military government, witnessed the 1956 massacre in his hometown, a pivotal moment, shaping both his personal and collective experience. This trauma, shared by the Kfar Qasim community, became an annual commemoration by the village and the Islamic Movement, contributing to a local and Palestinian national narrative. The Arab press regularly covers this event, influencing Darwīsh’s perspective on the Israeli system. The fear of deportation influenced his concept of survival.

The *Sahwa*, an Islamic awakening in the 1970s that swept across the Arab and Muslim world, also influenced Darwīsh’s approach to Islam and political activism in Israel. In 1979, he was accused, along with other movement members, of founding an underground military organization, *Osrat al-Jihad*, which planned sabotage activities. He served a prison sentence until 1984. Later, Darwīsh admitted the mistake of founding such an organization and rejected armed struggle against Israel (Majadlah 2017). However, he acknowledged he could not prevent other Palestinians under the Occupation from fighting for liberation.

As a religious man, Darwīsh was attuned to the unique condition of the Palestinians in Israel. In an author interview in 2017, he first defined himself as a Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian “liv[ing] on his land” (Majadlah 2017). He emphasized the need for wise action to prevent legal reasons for Arab expulsion from the country. Strategically, he opposed armed struggle by the Palestinians in Israel and avoided actions that could lead to the
outlawing of his movement, a point he stressed in one of his interviews. Therefore, when engaging with Israeli politicians, he expressed respect for Israeli citizenship while emphasizing that he was representative of a broader constituency: “I have the public behind me” (Majadlah 2017).

At a 2015 peace conference, Darwīsh stated in Hebrew:

I am the first soldier in the army of peace. I am strong in my faith that on this land, these two peoples have to live, and we must do away with the determination derived from Satan—“either you or us.” The truth is that we and you will live together, each in its independent state. I am a soldier of peace; I will remain here in the State of Israel and continue my work as a soldier together with my Jewish religious colleagues . . . We have lunatics just like you have lunatics; believe me, these lunatics will not put themselves at risk as the government gives little encouragement to these people. You and we are making peace; maybe we are taking a risk, like Yitzhak Rabin is better than the other prime ministers, especially Bibi Netanyahu. Yitzhak Rabin was not defeated. Jews and Arabs were hugging each other. I asked myself why, and then I remembered that on the day that they returned from the first peace conference in Madrid, I saw the Palestinians bestow olive branches on the tank crew; yes, it is possible to plant love in our hearts instead of hatred if we breathe the smell of true peace. (Haaretz 2015)

Darwīsh thus expressed readiness to collaborate with religious, national, and social elements in Israeli circles. His main goal was to bridge the gap between Arab citizens and the authorities in Israel. In his personal life, he embodied his ideology, exemplified in 2005 when he donated his deceased brother’s organs, emphasizing in an interview the importance of organ donation from a religious standpoint. Notably, he did not condition organ donation on specific identities and chose not to inquire about the recipients, showing his commitment to his principles in his private life (al-Sonara 2005).

Although Darwīsh passed away in 2017, his political and religious career left a lasting impact, giving rise to a generation of young followers dedicated to preserving his legacy. These followers have spearheaded a new political trend in recent years, a testament to Darwīsh’s enduring influence.

Ibrahim Hijazi, a member of the Shura Council in the Islamic Movement and one of the young people Darwīsh influenced, expresses the significance of the relationship between the constraints of real-life conditions and actions, stating:

We learned from the Sheikh to deeply understand the reality in which we live, to analyze the political and other actors. We learned from him to be rational, to see reality as it is, with all its difficulties. You cannot live in the
imagination of the caliphate of the past or aspire to a caliphate of the Mahdi while we are under a right-wing and racist government. It is unrealistic. Our discourse should correspond to what we experience. The tools we use should also correspond to reality. (Interview with Hijazi, 29 May 2023)

An additional lesson learned from Darwīsh, according to Hijazi, was “to respect others in our faith. We are neither better nor more religious than other people. We need to respect people and their opinions. I’m talking about true respect so that we can have more influence.” (Interview with Hijazi, 29 May 2023)

In sum, under Darwīsh, the Islamic Movement underwent significant organizational and ideological shifts. The foundation was in the 1970s, rooted in Da’wa, when Darwish and his members were still gaining experience in leading Islamic activism. The second phase involved Osrat al-Jihād, involving an armed struggle in Israel and ultimately revealing that approaches suitable for Islamist activists in other countries might not be suited to Muslims in Israel. Subsequently, the Islamic Movement developed into a social force, providing community services through relief activities, welfare, and assistance, fostering a sense of community among believers. In 1989, it transformed into a party, becoming a significant factor in Arab politics, competing with other political forces such as Arab nationalists and the communists.

Darwīsh played a critical role in positioning the movement as a major political force in local council elections in Arab communities. The 1996 elections saw the Islamic Movement split into northern and southern factions, a definition still consequential today. In preparation for local and Knesset elections, Darwīsh explored coalitions with influential Arab parties and politicians.

On the Palestinian and more general Islamic level, Darwīsh maintained ties with Palestinian and Islamic leaders in the Arab world while focusing on the issues faced by Palestinian citizens in Israel. Rather than copying approaches from the broader Islamic world, he developed an approach specific to the Israeli Palestinian reality.

The book Islam Is the Solution (Darwīsh 2021) compiles a collection of Sheikh Darwīsh’s sermons from the early 1990s, reflecting his indebtedness to the mother movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. He viewed the Islamic solution as predating capitalism and communism, centered on the preaching of a return to Islam (Da’wa) and the integration of religion and politics. Darwīsh emphasized the openess of his movement, advocating cooperation with all political forces in Arab society. In line with the Wasatiyya (the middle way) Movement, he affirmed the Islamic Movement’s commitment to a democratic regime, nonviolent action, adherence to the law, and the dialogue with the Jewish majority for sustainable peace.
in the country. This attitude of readiness for an open dialogue is evident in discussions with new generation leaders, Hijazi and MK Mansour Abbas, as well as in Darwīsh’s writing.

A New Generation in the Islamic Movement and the Politics of Musaiyyara

I coin the term ‘the politics of musaiyyara’ (flowing with, and integrating to, reality) to describe the new political approach led by the younger generation of leaders of the southern faction of the Islamic Movement in Israel. The term musaiyyara encapsulates a new type of politics with a psychological aspect aimed at containing and reducing tensions. Since 2019, the southern faction of the Islamic Movement has sought negotiations and openness with Israeli actors on the political right and center, traditionally considered ‘enemies of the Arabs.’

Previous research of the politics of the southern faction of the Islamic Movement characterizes their politics in terms of pragmatism (Ali 2022) or realism (Navot et al. 2023). These two terms capture some of the behavior of the movement in Israeli politics, but their emphasis is on political practice and less on religious ideology. Conversely, the term musaiyyara encompasses doctrine and practice. The Islamic advocacy activity is not only an instrument to leverage political policy but also to spread new ideas—an interpretation within a religious framework that ultimately comes to maintain the identity of the movement as Islamic. The lens of the politics of musaiyyara provides greater insight into the tension between a religious worldview and political practice. This is not a simple dilemma for the leaders of the Islamic Movement in Israel. How to simultaneously achieve two goods, seemingly in tension—political and religious—is a challenge. Dealing with multiple challenges in Israeli politics as well as maintaining an Islamic religious identity within a charged and dynamic Israeli and Middle Eastern space—the politics of musaiyyara has provided a path that reconciles the two.

This section of the article delves into the political and ideological path of the initiator of this form of politics, MK Mansour Abbas, who played a pivotal role in shaping this form of politics. In an interview with Abbas, a ‘civil partnership’ was discussed. Guided by this new principle, the Islamic Movement entered the Israeli government in 2021. The media, both regionally and in Israel, depicted Abbas and his party as separate from the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, even labeling him a supporter of Zionism (mutazahyin) (Abdu al-Karim 2021).

The shift in how the Islamic Movement is perceived in Israel, moving beyond the lenses of security and conflict to opportunity of integration
into the government, was short and lasted about a year. Still, the Israeli media discourse, influenced by the politicians, offered a more nuanced perspective on the movement through interviews with figures like Abbas. Although important for the politics of musaiyyara, this issue extends beyond the scope of the current article.

The interview with Mansour Abbas, conducted on 18 May 2023, at his home in Maghar, delves into his political experience as a leader of the younger generation that followed the legacy of Sheikh ‘Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh (1948–2017). Born in 1974, Abbas has been active in the Islamic Movement since childhood, and the interview explores his journey from 1993 to 2017. Despite the Sheikh’s death in 2017, he played a significant role in shaping Abbas’s political outlook, with a defining moment being their last meeting in March 2017.

Commenting on his mentor, Abbas observed: “What makes Darwīsh unique is that he does not ask you to become a copy of him but to learn from him and then add to the process yourself. That is not obvious when we are talking about a religious leader.” About their last meeting before the death of the founding Sheikh in March 2017, Abbas related: “Then the Sheikh remarked to me that my brothers in the movement wanted me to present my candidacy for the leadership of the Ra'am Party (al-Muwahda), after which he congratulated this move. With this blessing to the Shura Council 2018, I became the head of the al-Muwahda party.”

Abbas recalled a time when Sheikh Darwīsh gave him two pieces of advice. The first was not to abandon the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because it was the only realistic option, whereas a one-state solution was bound to exacerbate the conflict. In relation to internal Israel politics, Abbas noted, “the Sheikh opened possibilities for me in parliamentary activity. I guess he did not expect me to join a coalition.”

Abbas identified the following phases in the movement’s development: “The beginning and formation stage, the prohibition of al-Jihad and its consequences, and the second stage, activity in a municipal framework; the third stage, the civil stage, according to which we are part of the state, operating within its laws and promoting our agenda within the laws of the game at our disposal.”

Against this backdrop, Abbas developed the idea of ‘civilian political involvement’ operating on three levels: local councils, the Knesset, and the coalition government. For this purpose, Abbas confirmed the involvement of women in the movement “as partners and not as followers only . . . They are part of the Shura Council (consultation) that shapes the image of the movement. They are responsible not only for the fate of women but also for the fate of men. They manage institutions in the movement. They are members of the Knesset.”
In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Islamic Movement drafted a new constitution, reorganized its institutions, and promoted the issue of women’s representation at all levels of the movement. Democratic elections were held. An additional new rule to improve representativeness limited a candidate to the Knesset to three election cycles only.

Abbas was the first leader to take the unusual step of negotiating participation in governance with all sides of the political spectrum immediately after being elected to the Knesset in April 2019. He explains his reasoning: “I knew in advance that I was going to make an unusual move. As a new member of the Knesset, I did not want to repeat the same political moves made by traditional Arab politicians.”

He further explains the repeated need to maneuver between intra-Arab negotiations and his musaiyyara approach, which other Arab parties were not on board with:

In the second term, I went with the Joint List. It was short, during which we recommended Benny Gantz (HaMahane haMamlachti, The National Unity Party). But it was a short term of two and a half months. In the third term, I joined the Joint List, recommending Gantz, expecting to be a part of the coalition and the government. This was unclear to other Arab Knesset members; they only thought of themselves as part of the opposition. It is also important to note that even Gantz needed to prepare for the kind of move that would be ready to accommodate us.

Notably, during the period from 2019 to 2021, Abbas kept his options open for partnerships with both right-wing and left-wing blocs. He believed that Likud members led by Benyamin Netanyahu and the ultra-Orthodox were willing to consider his party but religious Zionists were the main obstacle. Abbas’s efforts led to a significant change among Likud members, marking the first time there was public openness to including an Arab party in a coalition discussion. Abbas emphasized the movement’s independence, stating, “In the fourth round, I pointed out that I was neither in the right’s nor the left’s pocket.”

Negotiations with Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid, There Is a Future) and Naftali Bennett (HaBayet HaTzioni, The Jewish Home) were conducted amid tense Jewish-Arab relations, following the violent events of May 2021, resembling a kind of civil war in the country. Abbas recalls his role during this challenging period:

I was determined to bridge the two peoples. I went to Lod when there were tensions between Jews and Arabs in the city. I visited the city’s mosque and synagogue to calm the tension. Over time, I realized that we should be part of the government. Ultimately, I reached an agreement with Lapid and
Bennett in 2021. For the first time in the history of relations between Arabs and Jews in the country, we reached this achievement.

In 2023, a new government was formed by Netanyahu without Abbas’s party. Since February of that year, intense protests have erupted against the government’s attempts to alter the balance between the judiciary, the Knesset, and the government. Critics of the government view the proposed reforms as a potential coup to establish a dictatorship in Israel. Abbas acknowledges the protests and the involvement of individuals from Arab society in these demonstrations. However, he believes that for the protests to be successful, Arabs should refrain from actively participating in them. According to his perspective:

We do not actively participate to avoid harming the protest. It is important to us that it succeeds. To not hurt the protests’ chances of success, the Arabs will not participate, and thus the government will not be able to take advantage of the presence of Arabs. The protest leaders understand our position. I attended one of their meetings to state our position. We stand with the strengthening of democracy. Our partnership in the election process is a strengthening of democracy. We are at peace with the values of democracy. The mechanisms of the movement have democratic values, which are reflected in our relations with the state.

Abbas believes that there is no single Islamic political model representing Muslims throughout history. According to him, various models of Islamic political activity have emerged in different historical periods, each suited to its context. He sees no “contradiction between the civil-political partnership and the broader Islamic historical imagination of Islamic political activism.”

He further draws a distinction between right and left in Israel. Connecting with the rightist parties is easier for him from a social perspective, given his conservative views. However, finding common ground becomes challenging due to different political perspectives. Thus, on the other hand, the political left is more accessible to him, but he identifies difficulties on social issues, such as those related to homosexuality. What these tensions reveal is the way the movement under Abbas negotiates between the Palestinian national identity and the Israeli civilian identity as the movement pursues the musaiyyara approach. Expressed in Abbas’s words:

The Islamic Movement presented itself as an alternative political force for the first time. We underwent a fundamental change from the stage of protest to the scene of responsibility and decision-making. Today things are more apparent to me. I am committed to the two-state solution. But the priority is Arab society in Israel. I am a bridge between the Israeli civil
identity component and the Palestinian national identity component . . . As a member of the movement, my contribution was building an Arab-Jewish political model of partnership. This is the innovation I began compared to the other Arab parties still protesting Israel’s policy toward Arab society and the Palestinians.

Examining the discourse of Abbas in the Hebrew media, there is much evidence of the politics of musa’iyara. In media interviews given in recent months, he expresses a rational, non-populist, non-confrontational discourse to explain his positions.

One example is Abbas’s treatment of rampant violence and crime in Arab society in Israel. In the first half of 2023, the number of murders in Arab society was over 130. Hebrew media coverage ranged between attributing responsibility to the state and to the culture of Arab society. In response to a question about whether Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir cares about criminal violence among the Arab, Abbas replied:

I will not get into the intentions of Itamar Ben-Gvir. I describe things as they are and the results speak for themselves. Government policy failed, so I turned to the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Justice Yariv Levin, and asked that the government deal with this problem. A minister who functions well needs to be involved in his office. Let them hire a professional deputy minister or a special project manager to deal with the situation. We pay with the lives of citizens and, in some instances, beyond that. They can endanger relations within a locality, between two or different ethnicities. The dysfunctional government needs to be more functional in the realm of security, the economic field, and the management of legal changes. There is a feeling that there is no one leading the country.

Abbas’s discourse reflects a notable absence of emotional rhetoric and personal accusations directed at right-wing figures, such as National Security Minister Ben-Gvir. Instead, his speech focuses on promoting an agenda that seeks to bolster the rule of law and enforcement agencies in the country. Abbas positions himself as a citizen who advocates equal citizenship and fair government policies. This novel discourse in Arab politics in Israel, advanced by Abbas, moves beyond portraying the Arab community as victims of the regime. Instead, it takes on a more active approach, emphasizing a sense of responsibility and commitment to proactive political engagement.

Similarly, in reference to accusations that Arab culture is at fault for high violence rates, Abbas responded: “There is no doubt that there is a cultural dimension to this crime, such as blood revenge or murder within the family, the so-called honor of the family. It’s something in the cultural perception, not of the whole Arab society but of a certain handful, and
we are dealing with it” (Shumpelbi and Cohen 2023). At the same time, he stresses that the majority of crime is based on socioeconomic grounds.

The background of violence and crime in Arab society is diverse and comprehensive and it cannot be reduced only to the domain of blood revenge. Almost 65 percent of the cases are related to criminal organizations and 35 percent are other aspects, blood feuds, violence within the family, road rage . . . I would prefer someone who deals with it from a cultural dimension from Arab society itself and who would promote a solution—also through the education system. Everything else should be handled by law enforcement and the courts.

Thus, Abbas’s approach is not to eschew responsibility or internal self-criticism where relevant. And at the same time, to work with state authorities to address social problems. Thus, when asked about a case of road rage murder, initially attributed to nationalist motives, he demanded “to let the law enforcement institutions and the justice system follow the law with the criminals. That is very important to restore trust in these systems so that the family [of the victim] receives a response” (Shumpelbi and Cohen 2023).

This approach sets Abbas and the *musaiyyara* politics apart from conventional approaches embraced by other Arab leaders, who often attribute acts of violence to nationalist motives. Abbas diverges from the traditional narrative, commonly accepted in Arab society, that interprets instances of Jewish-Arab violence as conflict between the two peoples. Instead, he offers a new and complex way of interpreting reality.

Abbas rejects the a priori assumption about the national strife dimension in relations between Jews and Arab citizens of the state. He emphasizes the civil dimension, highlighting citizenship as the common denominator between the two peoples within the Green Line. This perspective aligns with the principles of the politics of *musaiyyara*, where citizenship serves as a foundational element.

An example of this can be seen in Abbas’s discourse on the administrative reform that sparked violent protests in Israel’s streets. He expressed his opposition to the proposed changes to the judicial system, emphasizing the importance of strong democratic values in protecting minorities and preserving the status of Arab society as a minority. Moreover, he views the principles of democracy as an everyday basis for citizenship in Israel (Shumpelbi and Cohen 2023). His holistic view of citizenship is further expressed when he discusses the inadequacies of National Security Minister Ben-Gvir not just for Arabs but also for Jews, and thus for the citizenry at large. His discourse makes him relevant for the broader Israeli audience. “The state must provide security for its citizens, but the ruling
party is not in control of the situation. Even ministers in the government understand that they are in an embarrassing situation. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has failed; he is not good for the Arabs or the Jews” (Shumpelbi and Cohen 2023). Thus, the politics of musaiyyara, as expressed by Abbas, is marked by efforts to engage a Jewish audience while simultaneously facing criticism from certain segments of the Arab population. Abbas strategically distances himself from emotive discourse, opting for a focus on strengthening the rule of law and law enforcement agencies in the country. This departure from traditional narratives challenges the conventional interpretation of Jewish-Arab relations.

Abbas goes beyond the victimization narrative and criticizes opponents within the traditional circles in Arab society, such as MKs Ayman ‘Odeh and Ahmed Tibi, heads of two rival parties: Hadash and Ta’al, respectively. His critique centers on their perceived failure to address the issues facing the Arab community and contribute meaningfully to solutions, rendering them irrelevant:

They continue to defy and conduct a discourse that leads to a place of nothing, with the approach of ‘dissolving every Knesset, dissolving every government.’ For them, it is important to make a good presentation on the podium of the Knesset. There is no attempt to find a common denominator. It’s unbelievable that people like Ahmed Tibi and Ayman ‘Odeh have been doing this for years and years. (Azoulai and Shumpelbi 2023)

Along the same lines, in a televised interview, Abbas accused the social, political, and religious leadership of the Arab community of a ‘value and moral failure’ in the last decade that did nothing to eradicate violence and crime in Arab society (Amsterdamski 2023).

The discourse of musaiyyara underscores a commitment to democracy and equal citizenship, emphasizing the importance of strong democratic values in protecting minorities, including recognition of the government of the state. While it accepts responsibility for problems related to Arab society, at the same time, it places responsibility on the state to protect its citizens and exercise its sovereignty. This point is central to the politics of musaiyyara. Against this background, Abbas rejects the proposed changes to the judicial system that could undermine democratic principles and harm the status of Arab society as a minority in Israel. This approach reflects a nuanced understanding of the Israeli reality, focusing on the here and now rather than dwelling on past conflicts or envisioning a religiously driven future.

The concept of al-Nahj al-Jadid (the New Approach) encapsulates the principles underlying the politics of musaiyyara. This approach prioritizes social and moral principles, placing Palestinian Arab society in Israel at
its center. It acknowledges the complexities of the Arab community’s situation, presenting two options: insisting on full justice and rights without the ability to realize them fully or using limited capacity to achieve partial justice. The emphasis on morality justifies engaging with the Israeli political system, negotiating, and forming coalitions to address ongoing injustices (Ryan 2022). According to Sobhai Ryan (2022), *al-Nahj al-Jadid* is based on social and moral principles. Palestinian Arab society in Israel is at its center, and politics is a tool the community can use to be active and choose its values. Ryan posits that the people of the Islamic Movement are independent in making their decisions and do not depend on local and regional forces. The question of morality is at the heart of the Islamic Movement’s political activities, even when it makes unconventional decisions (Interview with Sobhi Ryan, 1 June 2023).

It is in this context that Ryan presents the two options available to the Arabs in Israel, specifically “insistence on full justice and full rights . . . but without the ability to realize this justice,” or “using a limited capacity to achieve limited justice and a little right.” “The problem with this option is that it shows that there is a waiver of all rights even though there is no waiver of anything but to achieve what is possible and to postpone what is impossible” (Ryan 2022: 123–124).

On this basis, *al-Muwahada’s* activity in politics is legitimized. *Musaiyyara* politics exhibits several key characteristics: a pragmatic and dynamic leadership willing to engage with both left and right, a focus on the civil dimension in Palestinian Arab identity, and a recognition of the unique reality faced by Muslim Arabs in Israel. This approach emphasizes rational discourse, political analysis, and coalition-building, appealing directly to both Israeli and Arab audiences. The religious qualification for the approach underpinning the activities of the Islamic Movement derives from a unique religious interpretation for Muslims in Israel so that a unique religious and political outlook can be adapted.

The historical context of deep-rooted conflicts between Jews and Arabs in Israel, characterized by exclusion and discrimination against Palestinian Arabs in all areas of life, including access to resources, education, employment, housing, culture, and language, informs the backdrop of *musaiyyara* politics. Previous periods in Arab politics in Israel, from cooperation with the oppressor to opposition against discriminatory policies have shaped the evolution of Arab political engagement. The establishment of the Joint List in 2015, which contained three different political and ideological directions: the communist-secular currently represented by Hadash, the conservative trend represented by the Islamic Movement, and the national current represented by Balad, marked a significant development. The unification of forces resulted in a tremendous achievement in
the 2019 elections. The list was the third largest faction in the Knesset after the Likud and the Zionist Union (HaMahane HaTzioni). However internal divisions hindered its effectiveness. According to Mansour Abbas, there was no agreement on how parliamentary power should be translated into power. After all, until 2019, Arab politics focused on opposing the various Israeli governments; Abbas’s approach provided novelty.

Conclusion

In summary, the politics of musaiyyara, as articulated by Mansour Abbas, represents a departure from conventional approaches, focusing on pragmatism, morality, and engagement with the Israeli political system to address challenges faced by the Arab community in Israel. This approach recognizes the complexities of the circumstances, offers a nuanced understanding of identity, and strives for meaningful and substantive change within the existing political framework.

This political shift could only have emerged with the influence and religious interpretation of the movement’s founder, Sheikh ‘Abd Allāh Nimr Darwīsh. His activism among Arab and Jewish circles in Israel and abroad provided public legitimacy to the younger generation that later led the movement. The politics of musaiyyara adapts itself to both Arab and Jewish-Israeli society, even in difficult times. In 2023, amid societal upheavals and protests in Israel, the leaders of the southern faction of the movement maintained a rational and non-emotional discourse regarding the authorities’ policy on the Arab minority.

Facing a right-wing government with a clear agenda of continued oppression and discrimination, the leaders of the Islamic Movement emphasize the power of influence from within the decision-making rooms. They advocate for a dialogue with Israeli political forces based on common interests, guided by the principle of success (maslaha, benefit). This approach reflects a deep understanding of how two peoples can coexist, preparing for more challenging scenarios and shaping Arab and, more broadly, Israeli politics.

Examining the paths of both Darwīsh and Abbas reveals a connecting line between the older and younger generations in the movement. The younger generation is continuing the legacy of the older generation in realizing political goals where rationality is the key to achieving the desired change. Thus, while they opposed the proposed changes to the judicial system, the leaders of the southern faction of the Islamic Movement have sought to maintain their approach through the storm.
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INTERVIEWS

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