

Ayman Odeh

“The joint Jewish-Arab list – of which I am leader – has formed despite considerable obstacles. Tomorrow we go to the polls to demand justice and democracy.”

Take out the Jewish-Arab list, and that quote belongs to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. In fact, however, it belongs to the year 2015 and was said by Ayman Odeh, the Palestinian who ran in the Israeli Knesset elections.

For the first time in the history of Israeli elections, the various parties that represent Palestinian minorities ran in the elections on a unified list. The results are in and the joint list won 14 seats. Against the backdrop of what seems to be an ultra-right-wing government, this may not appear to be much of an achievement. It is, however, most certainly an achievement for the list’s leader, Ayman Odeh.

Ayman was born and raised in Haifa. He is a forty-year-old lawyer and the father of two. He is well spoken, fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, and is most certainly not what right-wing Israelis would like you to see of Palestinians. A member of the Hadash party, his political career began when he was 23 years old and just out of law school, when he was elected to the Haifa City Council.

He was brought up in a city where Palestinians and Israelis live side by side and struggle together, which, as he explains, “certainly influenced my thinking about the possibility of achieving equality and living together.” (Q & A session with Al-Jazeera



English, March 16, 2015) His activism spans years of defending the rights of Palestinian minorities in Israel. He was deeply involved in fighting against the demolition of the Bedouin villages in the Negev Desert. He has been leading the national committee against drafting Palestinian-Israeli citizens into the Israeli Occupation Forces.

With the new election law stipulating that the threshold for entering elections is to have 3.25 percent of the vote, the ability of Palestinian parties to participate as individual entities was called into question. The only way out was to come together in a joint list in order to concentrate the vote. According to Ayman, they look to become an unavoidable force in the Knesset in order to shift the growing anti-Arab, racist discourse within the Knesset. Ayman isn’t just a hero in his own community, he is well received among Jewish citizens as well. He and his fellow candidates worked hard to promote the joint list among Jewish communities as the only way out of a purist, right-wing government.

Young, vibrant, articulate, very much Palestinian, and dedicated to the cause and plight of Palestinians living in Israel, Ayman represents none of the Palestinian stereotypes promoted by the racist, right-wing Netanyahu and his cohort. More importantly, Ayman has become the hope that Palestinians living in Israel have lost over the years. Tawfiq Zayyad might be breathing a sigh of relief up in the heavens today.