The Split of the Islamic Movement in Israel: Minority Dilemmas in the Jewish State

The Islamic Movement in Israel was established in the 1970s by Palestinian citizens of Israel as a grass-roots movement with the focus of strengthening the faith and observance of Muslim individuals and the community at large. Gradually the Movement built a country-wide network of religious and social institutions catering for the needs of its constituency that are not provided satisfactorily by the state. Through its network of self-reliant institutions, the Movement grew into a local political power centre and has from the mid-1980s participated in local elections.

The Movement split in 1996 due to a disagreement over whether or not to stand for national (Knesset) elections. It has since had two branches referred to as the Movement of Shaykh Ra’ed Salah (the so-called ‘Northern branch’) and the Movement of Shaykh Darwish/Sarsur/Daabes (named after its current leader, the so-called ‘Southern branch’). A question for the Palestinian minority inside Israel is whether to act from inside the Israeli state and society institutions or from outside these institutions in their activities aimed at improving their predicament. This dilemma is well illustrated by examining the reasons for and consequences of the split of the Islamic Movement in Israel.

The Split of a Movement

The leaders of what became the Northern branch of the Islamic Movement argued that they cannot participate in national elections because of the non-Muslim character of the Israeli state. This has two implications: from a religious point of view they argue that the Movement should not participate in a political system that is not based on shari’a; and from a political
point of view they argue that participation in these elections, with resulting representation in the Knesset, would force them to accept the Zionist character of the state. This would force the Movement to swear allegiance to the state, and to its (Jewish) symbols and (Zionist) agenda. Furthermore, they argued that it would make the Movement dependent on government resources and thus provide the state with control over its activities.

Conversely, the leaders of the Southern branch of the Islamic Movement argued that there is room for a political compromise to be made with non-Islamic actors if this constitutes the local context in which politics is conducted; and especially if this is the best way in which to promote and protect the interests of the Palestinians in Israel. By participating in national elections and consequently in the national assembly (the Knesset), they further argue that the Movement can object to laws that contradict shari’a; fight against corruption and oppression; fight for socio-economic equality; utilise the freedom provided by parliamentary immunity of its representatives; strengthen the Islamic Movement vis-à-vis its opponents; make ministers accountable by questioning them; and use its powers afforded by withdrawing votes in parliament.

Consequences of the Split

The Southern branch has since 1996 had representatives in the Knesset on a joint list with other parties representing Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel. In the 2013 elections this list secured 4 (of 120) Members of Knesset, which makes it the largest Arab Palestinian list in the Knesset at present, and meant that it maintained its numbers from the previous elections in 2009 (the list secured 4 seats in 1996; 5 seats in 1999; 2 seats in 2003; and 4 seats in 2006).

The consequences of the split of the Movement in practical terms is that the two branches are providing the same services in what can be described as mirror organisations in Palestinian localities across Israel. For example, before the split there was one organisation called the Al-Aqsa Association that works to document, preserve and secure access to Palestinian religious sites inside Israel and in East Jerusalem. In 2000, the new Al-Aqsa Association of the Northern branch was established with the same agenda as the original association.

With their mirror organisations the two branches are competing over clients and activists, as well as over financial support for the organisations and events from local and international donors. According to student activists interviewed from both branches, the split is considered unnecessary and detrimental to the Movement, as it steals attention and resources that could have been used on furthering their shared ideological causes.

Similarities and Cooperation

There is also cooperation between the branches, notably in the Hajj and Umra Committee. Despite the split and the continued existence of two branches of the Movement since 1996, in our
conversations leaders on both sides
downplayed the differences and
emphasised the cooperation and
ideological similarities between them. In
addition to similar organisations, the
two branches have the same tripartite
goals to protect the Palestinian people,
 holy sites and land.

'Radical' versus 'Moderate'
Since the split, it has become common to
describe the branch that refuses to
participate in national elections as
'radical' and the branch that has
representatives in the Knesset as
'moderate'. 'Radical Islam/Islamists/sm'
are labels usually used to describe
groups who promote and conduct
violent actions in the name of Islam.
'Moderate Islam/Islamists/ism' are
used to describe non-violent groups that
focus on reform through peaceful
means.

Judging from the activism of the
two branches, the present analysis
challenges this dichotomous description
based on the facts that both branches
are non-violent; their activism in their
mirror institutions does not violate
Israeli law; and both participate in local
elections and thus interact with Israeli
state institutions using the democratic
tools available to them. Thus, both
branches can be described as
'moderate'.

In addition to the disagreement
over participation in national elections,
the main differences between the two
branches of the Movement are in the
rhetoric and style of the leaders; the
media attention afforded the two; and
the actions of the state towards them.

Leader of the Northern branch,
Ra’ed Salah, uses candid descriptions in
his argumentation against the
occupation and Israeli policy towards
Palestinian citizens, and this cements
his position as outspoken among his
supporters and radical among the
Jewish Israeli population. He uses
terminology such as ‘the occupying
establishment’ to describe the state of
Israel and ‘Palestinians of 1948’ when
he talks about Palestinian citizens,
thereby clearly distancing himself from
the state.

Former leader of the Southern
branch, Abdallah Nimr Darwish,
established the pragmatic style used by
the subsequent leaders of this branch.
Darwish as a leader was perceived as
accessible, and also to a degree
acceptable, to the Jewish public through
his participation in Israeli public life in
interviews in Hebrew newspapers and
participation in inter-faith and other
events, such as the President’s iftar
annual meal for Palestinians leaders in
Israel.

The Israeli authorities’ actions
against the Northern branch have added
to its image as radical, for the Israeli
audience, and as a defiant for
Palestinians. The Northern branch
seems to be more closely monitored by
the Israeli authorities and its offices
have been raided and closed down by
the authorities, as has its newspaper,
several times. Salah has been taken in
for questioning by the police, arrested,
tried and imprisoned repeatedly. He has
been detained and arrested several
times for his activism in East-Jerusalem
and has also been prohibited from
entering the city, or parts of it, several
times.
Further fuelling the radical image of Salah and the Northern branch is the imbalanced media attention apportioned to Salah and his deputies, who receive more attention at events, even when they participate alongside leaders of the Southern branch. When describing this branch and Salah, Israeli newspapers often use adjectives such as ‘saboteur’, ‘hard-liner’, ‘anti-Israeli’, ‘anti-Semitic’, ‘extremist’ and ‘militant’.

‘Pragmatic’ and ‘Idealist’

It is here suggested that the term ‘pragmatic’ be used to describe the Southern branch and ‘idealist’ to describe the Northern branch. This term more accurately depicts the difference between the two branches, as it better reflects the actual differences of the two branches vis-à-vis the state, yet does not give the false impression that they are different in their goals, methodology or in any way polar opposites.

Threats to the Islamic Movement in Israel

Currently, both branches are under threat from new legislation. The Northern branch is under pressure from the current right-wing government who wants to ban it, with direct involvement from the current Prime Minister.

The Southern branch’s ability to be represented in the Knesset is threatened by a decision of the Knesset earlier this year to raise its threshold for election to the parliament from 2 percent to 3.25 percent. This will make it difficult for the small parties representing the Palestinian minority to secure representation in the parliament.

It remains to be seen if any of these developments will result in withdrawal from this political scene, or new collaborations across party and ideological lines.

- The recommendation is to be in contact with both branches of the Movement and to include them in arrangements with representatives of Palestinian citizens of Israel.
- This is significant because the Movement represents many Palestinians in Israel. It is difficult to estimate exactly how many, as the Movement does not operate with any type of membership registration (and therefore it is also difficult to assess the number-balance between the two branches).
- It is particularly significant that the Movement has many supporters among the Palestinian Bedouin in the Naqab/Negev – the most marginalised community in Israel.

The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)

A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.