

# Israel: Election Commission excludes Arab candidates from Knesset race

David Cohen  
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The Israeli Central Elections Commission (CEC) has disqualified Knesset member (MK) Azmi Bishara and his National Democratic Assembly (NDA—Balad in Hebrew or A-Tajamu Al-Watani A-dimocrati in Arabic) from running in the Knesset elections on January 28.

Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein made the ruling in December, charging the NDA with rejecting Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state and supporting armed struggle against it. By law, either charge is sufficient to disqualify a party and/or an individual from participating in the elections. The NDA has only one seat in Israel's parliament.

Bishara rejected the decision as false and politically motivated. In a statement he said, "I believe that a people living under occupation has the right to fight against it, but I never called on the Palestinians to embark on an armed struggle against Israel. I never supported violent activity."

Prior to the CEC ruling, Bishara had stressed that he was opposed to all attacks on innocent civilians, Palestinians and Jews alike, but had refused to denounce the recent wave of Palestinian suicide bombings on Israeli civilians. Bishara had said he would not be compelled to make such a denunciation but expressed his personal horror at the murder of children and innocent civilians.

Bishara has called on Rubinstein to reveal the material collected against him and presented to the CEC by the General Security Service of Israel. Bishara insisted that the material contained "blatant lies," such as the claim that he had urged NDA supporters to throw stones at demonstrations or that he favours expelling all Jews who immigrated after 1948.

Whilst barring Bishara, the CEC plenum cleared the racist, right wing Herut Party leader, Baruch Marzel, to

run for the Knesset. Marzel was formerly a leader of the terrorist Kach group, outlawed in 1994 after its supporter, Baruch Goldstein, massacred 29 Muslim worshippers at a West Bank mosque.

Marzel was accepted as the second candidate of Herut (the Liberty Movement) after he won endorsement from representatives of Ariel Sharon's ruling Likud party on the CEC. Labour faction leader Effi Oshaya said the plenum's decision was a stain on the Likud "for giving legitimacy to the most extreme party in the State of Israel." CEC chairman Mishael Heshin told *Israeli Radio*, "I am still in a state of shock. I must point out that the decision has left me greatly upset. I assumed all along that Marzel would not be allowed to run. Of course, I come from a very different world and, in that respect, I may be slightly naive."

The CEC rejected a request to disqualify the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE) and the Movement for Arab Refoundation (MAR) from the Knesset race. The DFPE, led by the Stalinist Communist Party of Israel, is standing a common list in the elections with the MAR. Nonetheless, the CEC disqualified MK Dr Ahmed Tibi from running as the party's third candidate.

Likud MK Michael Eitan said that Tibi had been disqualified because he supports terrorism. "Tibi calls the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] a liberation movement but the PLO consists of organisations whose aim is to destroy Israel," Eitan claimed.

Tibi rejected the charge. He had told the CEC that he had never supported an armed struggle against Israel, but rather a non-violent popular uprising. "I have spoken out on numerous occasions against the militarisation of the Intifada. I prefer an ambulance facing a tank rather than a Kalashnikov facing a tank,"

he had said. But he had refused to condemn military operations made by the PLO, its components (the Fatah movement alongside the Democratic and Popular Fronts) or the Islamic militant factions, and had declared himself “a new kind of Arab, a proud leader with a homeland.”

Uri Avnery, leader of Gush Shalom (Peace Block) movement, explained that the CEC comprises representatives of the parties in the outgoing Knesset, on a proportional basis. “Therefore, the representatives of the right-wing parties, including the Shinui (Change) party, have a majority. They are united in their hatred of Arabs, and they also have a common interest in their expulsion from the Knesset. They will follow the orders of the ‘security establishment,’ as the Knesset majority has always done. In the past, this was done discreetly, but lately it is happening quite openly.”



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