



POLICY BRIEF

2025 STUDENT UNION ELECTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA

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INTRODUCTION

Recent developments at the University of Haifa's Student Union elections underscore a larger struggle over political and civic spaces for Palestinian citizens in Israel. These elections have become a flashpoint for several issues:

- Efforts by the student union administration to limit and suppress Arab student participation;
- Mounting suspicions of vote-rigging and obstruction during and after election day; and
- The formation of the *Carmel List*, a historic joint Arab electoral list that united previously separate Palestinian student groups.

Significantly, this clash reflects a broader policy landscape in which far-right government actors and various institutions have escalated their push to shrink Palestinian civic and political space - an ongoing trend that has intensified under the current administration and amid the war on Gaza. In this briefing, we present the key facts, implications, and recommendations for international stakeholders concerned about preserving democratic principles and safeguarding the rights of Arab students in Israel.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

1. Attempts to Block Arab Candidacies

- **Quiet Announcement:** In late August, the announcement for the Student Union elections was posted on a less-visited section of the union's website, giving students only a brief 10-day window (ending September 9) to register their candidacy.
- **Restrictive Rules:** New provisions disqualified first-year students and anyone who was not a union member in the previous year. These rules effectively reduced the candidate pool and discouraged new voices.
- **Obstruction Tactics:** On the designated day to submit candidacy, Arab and Arab-affiliated lists (including Hadash, Balad, Standing Together, and independents) had to wait while current union members seeking reelection took up to 50 minutes each to register.
- **Abrupt Closure:** After 3 hours, the registration window was suddenly closed, and security guards were brought in to remove the remaining candidates. The

university administration then called the police to remove the Arab students from the premises. Observers saw this as a deliberate tactic to prevent Palestinian students from running.

- **Rescheduled Elections:** In response to the unjust restrictions, Arab student groups took Haifa University to court, demanding that the elections be rescheduled. The court acceded to the students' demands and ordered the University of Haifa to redo the nomination process and hold the elections in December (later postponed to January due to the war).

2. Context of Discrimination

Palestinian students comprise nearly 50% of the student population and constitute a majority among Student Union members. They cite recurring patterns of exclusion, which they see as part of a broader effort to suppress Arab civic engagement on campus - particularly acute during the current far-right political climate and the ongoing war on Gaza.

Arab students described this election process as a “blatant conspiracy” to bar Arab voices, linking it to a larger environment of intimidation and censorship.

3. Formation of the “Carmel List”

The Carmel List is a historic coalition bringing together all the Arab student groups. This unity of the Hadash and Balad student groups (alongside independent students) is unprecedented and was formed to confront systemic exclusion, racism, and intimidation. The Carmel List fielded a total of 27 candidates for the Student Union's 40 seats.

The alliance's slogan, “*50% and We Are Not a Minority*,” reflects the fact that Palestinian students constitute roughly half the student body at the University of Haifa - and a majority of active Student Union members. The Carmel List's formation is being celebrated by its supporters as a model of national unity that could be replicated at other campuses and possibly beyond university life.

4. Election Day Developments

- On Wednesday, January 8, Arab students came out in large numbers, **comprising half of all voters** in the initial hours, according to observers. This wave of participation challenged the longstanding dominance of the incumbent union administration.

- Based on exit surveys conducted by student organizers, the **Carmel List anticipated winning 15-18 out of 40 seats** on the Student Union Council. Such results would have reflected the Arab student body's size and enthusiasm.
- However, once results were eventually announced, the Carmel List was allocated **only 4 seats** (with 1 other seat being won by an Arab student who is a member of the Student Union and not the Carmel List) - roughly 10% representation on a 40-seat council. This stark discrepancy - when compared to Arab students' nearly 50% share of the university population - points to severe underrepresentation and reinforces suspicions of electoral malpractice.

5. Suspicion of Vote-Rigging and Postponed Ballot Counting

Although standard procedure calls for immediate or next-morning counting, the ballot boxes were left overnight on Wednesday, January 8, in the Student Union's printing room. Carmel List sources observed possible unauthorized entry into that room, heightening concerns of tampering.

Chronology of Events:

- **Wednesday, Jan. 8 (21:00):** Voting ended. The Election Committee chose not to count ballots immediately. Instead, it placed envelopes, ballot papers, and boxes together in the printing room. **Observers were barred from entry; no camera or open-door policy was allowed.**
- **Overnight (Jan. 8–9):** With the room sealed yet unsupervised, suspicions mounted regarding interference.
- **Thursday, Jan. 9 (10:00):** Students found the ballot boxes had been **moved or repositioned**. Following outcry from the Carmel List, Arab students, and independent observers, the Election Committee postponed the counting until Sunday, January 12. Palestinian students camped outside the room to prevent further tampering. Appendix 1 shows evidence presented by election observers that indicates ballot boxes were tampered with.

6. Evidence of Ballot Stuffing Destruction of Ballots

One of the many pieces of evidence brought forth by the Carmel List and observers is signs of ballot stuffing. In certain boxes, dozens of ballots were found containing a vote for the same two people (one Jewish candidate currently in the Student Union, and one Arab student from the Carmel List), with no other votes for any Arab candidate.

Evidence of ballot destruction was also reported. In countless precincts, observers noted that while dozens of votes were cast for Arab candidates, only a handful were actually counted. In one precinct, at least 20 students reported voting for Arab candidates, only for 8 votes to be counted later. In one precinct, several votes were reported to have been cast for an Arab candidate, only for the candidate to receive just 1 vote in the count later.

In response, Carmel List organizers and observers collected signatures from voters, affirming the time, place, ballot box, and vote they cast, in preparation for the looming court proceedings.

7. Court Involvement and Ongoing Legal Battle

Multiple court actions have been initiated: first to challenge the disqualification of Arab candidates, and more recently to address allegations of fraudulent behavior by the union's current leadership.

A court session is scheduled to take place, where the Carmel List and other student groups are demanding the **nullification** of the election results and for new elections to be held. The Carmel List maintains that these irregularities are unprecedented, and evidence of possible electoral manipulation.

THE CARMEL LIST

A particularly significant development this election cycle was the creation of the **Carmel List**, marking the first time multiple Arab student groups and independents have united under a single electoral umbrella at the University of Haifa. This alliance symbolizes a deliberate pushback against attempts to divide and weaken Palestinian representation on campus. By combining the resources and popular support of groups such as Hadash and Balad, the Carmel list has emerged as an unprecedented coalition whose primary objectives include:

- Securing greater representation for Arab students in formal decision-making.
- Resisting racism, incitement, and exclusionary policies.
- Establishing a platform for cultural, social, and religious activities that reflect the needs and identity of Palestinian students.

WIDER CONTEXT: SHRINKING PALESTINIAN SPACES IN ISRAEL

The obstacles faced by Arab students at the University of Haifa reflect a broader, systematic effort to shrink Palestinian civil and political spaces in Israel. The recent establishment of a far-right government - coupled with the war on Gaza - has exacerbated the following trends:

1. Restrictive Legislation and Policies

Heightened surveillance, curbs on academic freedom, and legislation targeting Palestinian political expression are becoming more prevalent.

Palestinian students and faculty face increased scrutiny, with campus authorities often invoking “security concerns” to justify clampdowns on gatherings or the removal of Palestinian symbols.

2. Growing Influence of Right-Wing Student Bodies

Many local university unions maintain close ties with the National Union of Israeli Students, known for pushing right-wing agendas and endorsing limitations on political dissent. In 2024, the Union advocated for legislation that would require academic institutions to “immediately” dismiss, without compensation, lecturers who express criticism towards Israeli policies, particularly in relation to the war on Gaza.

3. Socio-Economic Exclusion

Beyond campus life, Palestinian citizens frequently encounter systemic barriers in employment, housing, and funding for community development. The sidelining of Arab voices in university governance is thus one facet of a more extensive pattern of discrimination.

4. Deteriorating Civil Liberties Since the War on Gaza

The ongoing war on Gaza has intensified xenophobic sentiment, leading to increased hostility toward Palestinian symbols and activism.

Media rhetoric and nationalist mobilization have emboldened extremist forces that openly advocate for Palestinian exclusion in both academic and public spheres.

POLICY CONCERNS

Election Integrity

- Suspending ballot counting and relocating ballot boxes raises serious questions of fairness, transparency, and potential malpractice.
- The union's exploitation of loopholes before and following the election casts doubt on the legitimacy of any results not subject to independent scrutiny.

Undermining Minority Rights in a Critical Arena

- Restrictive eligibility rules and last-minute date changes effectively disenfranchise half the campus population. This not only harms individual students but also signals broader hostility toward Palestinian political expression in Israel.
- The war on Gaza has exacerbated a hostile climate, increasing the risk of direct or indirect institutional discrimination.

Legal and Administrative Accountability

- The University of Haifa cites the union's independence to justify non-intervention, yet the administration has a responsibility to safeguard student rights under its aegis.
- The timely and fair resolution of legal appeals is crucial to restoring confidence and preventing further deterioration of inter-communal relations on campus.

Future of Palestinian Mobilization

- The Carmel List's show of unity underscores the potential for widespread Arab student mobilization - not just at the University of Haifa, but across other Israeli campuses.
- If disenfranchisement persists, there is a real possibility that Arab students will withdraw from established structures and establish alternative bodies, amplifying campus polarization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Immediate Nullification of Results and Declaring New Elections

A new election must be held, with an impartial, monitored count of all ballots held without delay at its conclusion. Independent observers must oversee the process to ensure credibility and fairness.

2. Transparent and Fair Election Framework

Reopen the candidate registration process, abolish arbitrary eligibility restrictions, and allow all interested parties - including first-year students - to participate.

The university must require the Student Union to publish all deadlines, rules, and voting procedures prominently and in multiple languages.

Loopholes allowing post-election interference must be closed, and any changes to voting procedures should require broad consultation and advance notice.

3. Guaranteed Freedom of Association

Enforce anti-discrimination policies that protect the right of Arab student groups to organize, campaign, and express their political and cultural identities without intimidation or administrative barriers.

4. Continuous Legal Oversight

The courts should remain vigilant, ensuring that allegations of electoral fraud and exclusionary tactics are investigated and adjudicated swiftly, with meaningful remedies for victims of disenfranchisement.

5. Support for Palestinian Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organizations, international stakeholders, and diplomatic missions must monitor university elections and support initiatives - like the Carmel List - that foster inclusive representation. They must also advocate within Israeli and international forums against the intensifying clampdown on Palestinian rights, particularly under the far-right government and amid the war on Gaza.

CONCLUSION

The University of Haifa's Student Union elections as a microcosm of the larger struggle over Palestinian civil and political spaces in Israel. The creation of the Carmel List demonstrates a concerted effort by Arab students to unify against racism and marginalization, yet their uphill battle highlights serious systemic issues requiring immediate attention. With the rise of a far-right government and the ongoing war on Gaza, discriminatory policies risk becoming further entrenched. Ensuring that Arab students and their allies can engage meaningfully in campus governance is a vital step toward safeguarding broader democratic and civil rights in Israel.

The Mossawa Center urges the University of Haifa to annul the current election results and facilitate a fair, transparent, and independently supervised new vote. It further calls on local and international stakeholders - including human rights organizations, diplomatic missions, and academic bodies - to press Israel's educational authorities to uphold the principles of equality and freedom on campus. Crucially, it is incumbent upon civil society, lawmakers, and the global academic community to challenge systemic discrimination at universities, support the broader Palestinian struggle for civil and political rights, and hold institutions accountable for their treatment of Arab students. Failure to do so not only compromises the integrity of academic governance but also sets a dangerous precedent for minority rights in Israel.

APPENDIX

1. Photos of the ballot boxes in the Student Union's printing room taken by election observers. The photos show that boxes were moved overnight, with their positions on the evening after voting ended (right) being different the following morning (left).

