

Palestinian candidate in East Jerusalem defies voting boycott

Ramadan Dabash sought to be the first East Jerusalem resident to serve on the city council since 1967.

by [Dina Kraft](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue



Ramadan Dabash stands in front of city hall during his run for Jerusalem's city council in 2018. Dina Kraft / The Christian Science Monitor.

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Ramadan Dabash, a Palestinian civil engineer, builder, and community activist from traditionally Arab East Jerusalem, broke a decades-long taboo when he registered to run for a seat on the Jerusalem City Council.

Since Israel captured East Jerusalem in 1967 and subsequently declared the whole city its unified capital, local Muslim leaders have encouraged East Jerusalemites to boycott municipal elections. In that view, to vote would be to recognize Israeli

sovereignty. Dabash argued that the boycott has kept Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem politically powerless.

“We can change this situation—51 years of neglect of East Jerusalem,” he said. “We need to stop complaining and start doing. City Hall is a place we need to be.”

Dabash, who heads a new party called Jerusalem for Jerusalemites, quoted Hillel, the Jewish sage from the first century BC: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

But Dabash’s party did not receive enough votes on October 30 to win a city council seat. No East Jerusalem residents have served on the city council since Israel annexed their half of the city.

East Jerusalem is one of the poorest parts of the West Bank and Israel. According to some estimates, as many as 70 percent of its Palestinian residents live below the poverty line. There is great bitterness over demolitions of homes—or extensions of homes—built without permits that East Jerusalemites claim are nearly impossible to procure from a city that views them as a demographic threat.

Although there have been millions of government dollars invested in building and expanding Jewish neighborhoods in the city, including some in East Jerusalem, no plans for expanding or building Arab neighborhoods have been made since 1967. Overcrowding, high rents, crumbling and insufficient infrastructure, and a chronic shortage of classrooms are longtime concerns of East Jerusalem residents.

But as a growing number of East Jerusalemites hold Israeli citizenship and send their children to high schools where they can graduate with an Israeli diploma—indications that they are beginning to see themselves as part of the city’s fabric—there appear to be cracks, albeit small ones, in what was once a solid wall of support for the boycott.

The boycott has been heavily pushed both by Muslim leaders in the city and by the Palestinian Authority itself. But a survey jointly conducted by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Israel/

Palestine Center for Research and Information suggested that almost 60 percent of East Jerusalem residents believed Palestinians should vote in the city elections, while only 13 percent held firm to the boycott position.

An estimated 2 to 5 percent of Palestinians voted in the October 30 election, according to local news reports.

Palestinian residents make up an estimated 37 percent of Jerusalem's population, a large enough voting bloc to shift the balance of power in the city council, where a coalition of right-wing Jewish and ultra-Orthodox parties has ruled.

On the practical side, with relatively few polling stations in East Jerusalem, accessibility is a challenge, especially for those living beyond the Israeli-built security barrier who can enter the city proper only through checkpoints.

Aziz Abu Sarah, a Palestinian political and social activist, recently quit his effort to run for mayor of Jerusalem on a decidedly anti-occupation platform after being squeezed on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. But Abu Sarah said he hoped the symbolism of his attempted run would help change the mind-set among his fellow East Jerusalemites.

"When you tell certain Palestinians you are running in the city elections they think you are accepting the occupation," he said. "I was trying to say that you can be a good Palestinian and run in the municipal elections and keep your identity."

Some Palestinian groups fiercely opposed his candidacy, opposition he saw as a reaction to "people buying into our message," he said. "I think people are getting tired and frustrated from all the slogans of nationalism that lead to nothing and the reality that their life is getting worse."

The Interior Ministry originally planned to open only six polling stations in Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. Just 2 percent of eligible East Jerusalem Palestinians voted in the last municipal elections in 2013. The handful of stations stood in stark contrast to the 187 polling stations in Jewish neighborhoods of the city, and Dabash decided to protest by appealing directly to the Central Election Commission.

He won his appeal to have 20 East Jerusalem polling stations on election day. Jewish Jerusalemites of various political backgrounds came out in support of adding the extra polling stations in East Jerusalem.

"We feel like we are on the precipice of something," said Yair Assaf-Shapira, a researcher at the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research.

He had heard of Jewish residents of Jerusalem who planned to vote for Dabash because they believed it was time that a representative from East Jerusalem had a seat on the city council.

Inas Jweihan, a 22-year-old university student, shared her thoughts while walking up a steep hill in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Abu Tor.

“I want to feel like I am a human being who also lives here, a citizen who has a right to vote,” she said. “The neglect of our areas, it bothers me a lot.”

Her neighbor, Muntasir Qaisi, 38, who runs a corner grocery, said he had never voted.

“Look at us here, Jews and Arabs living just meters apart and see how different our neighborhoods are—just look at the trash in the streets,” he said, gesturing outside the doorway. “All elections are just lies. Politicians say they want our votes, but they do nothing for us.”

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