

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6059>



Israel/Palestine

Israel's Insider Radical

- Features -

Publication date: Monday 6 May 2019

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Haneen Zoabi has survived insults, death threats, and the vagaries of the Israeli justice system. But the first Palestinian woman to represent an Arab party in Israel's Knesset wants something more "to be heard.

In the spring of 2018, the Palestinian politician Haneen Zoabi spoke in a committee hearing of the Knesset, Israel's parliamentary body, and intimated, not for the first time, that IDF soldiers were murderers. "Haven't you heard of Palestinian youths who've been murdered?" she said. "Who murders the Palestinians in the occupied territories?" [1]

Over the course of a decade as an elected official, Zoabi, forty-nine, has regularly faced death threats. On and off, she's had to be assigned a government bodyguard. A few years ago, ex-Knesset member Danny Danon, now Israel's representative to the UN, referred charges of "incitement to violence and terrorism" against her to the Israeli High Court. "I ask the court to help open the eyes of law enforcement," he wrote in his official petition, "and send Zoabi to the place she really belongs: prison." Her "murderer" comments got her a suspension of one week. A pittance compared to her record six-month stint. [2]

A few months after that bit of controversy, on a late morning in late summer, I take a rental car and head to Nazareth, with my father Yoav, to meet Zoabi. Passing through Nazareth Illit, a planned Jewish town, we drive past construction cranes pattering near rising three- and four-floor apartment buildings. The attempt to "Judaize" the land adjacent to the historical Arab city began in the late fifties, my father points out. Clearly it is still ongoing.

We drive down twisting little streets. We hit dead ends, lurch to stops, make awkward tight turns, keep going, hit more dead ends. We watch an old man in a limp white undershirt walk gingerly, happily, out of a corner shop with two dozen eggs placed precariously in cardboard trays. My cell service cuts out and my dad jokes "Shabak" "the Israeli security agency" "is monitoring your phone."

Zoabi greets us in her driveway. Refusing to let him wait in the car, she hustles my father into a side office full of dark wood and framed law degrees, then, to his visible delight, brings in a silver tray covered with baklava and delicate floral-decorated coffee cups. Zoabi and I move into the living room, an airy space with good natural light, a hard tile floor, a big grandfather clock, and a StairMaster.

From afar, I'd been curious about Zoabi for years. She acts as if she is fearless. She's loathed as if she is feared. Is she merely a loud, marginalized voice in the din of Israeli politics, or something more potent? And what role does an elected radical have, anyway? What can they accomplish?

I mention Zoabi's "drama" in the Knesset, and she jumps in at a gallop. For the next fifteen minutes, she practically delivers a monologue "or perhaps a stump speech. As she speaks, her excitement nearly totters her over the edge of her seat.

"It's always a drama, to struggle for very basic rights. You say to us, "You must vanish or you must agree that we are in control.' You say, "OK, Haneen, we came here. You lost everything. And also you must be convinced that there is an ethical justification for what we did to you.' No native in the world can accept this!"

Suddenly, she cuts herself off. "Coffee!" she says, with a raised index finger. She runs off to the office, pours Yoav a cup, and then returns to seamlessly finish her point.

"I am making â€" we, Palestinians, are making â€" a huge historical compromise. To say, stay. You can stay. But you must give up the concept of Jewish privileges, and live with me equally. And yes, you need me to say, â€"I accept you.' This is my ethical superiority. You still need my legitimacy."

She says it again, emphasizing her words with sharp raps on her wooden table. "You *still*" â€" knock â€" *"need"* â€" knock â€" *"my legitimacy."*

“There Is No Man Controlling Her”

"What you want to know?" Zoabi huffs when I ask about her childhood in Nazareth. "I didn't get any special political education. My parents, they did not define themselves as Palestinians. And of course not as Israelis. It was nothing. An empty ambiguity."

It was, however, the relationship between her father, a locally prominent lawyer, and her mother, a math teacher and homemaker, that first made young Haneen aware of a still-inchoate concept of injustice. Her father's domination wasn't all-encompassing. "OK, so he was the king," Zoabi laughs, "but she was strong as well. She doesn't know the word feminism but she's feminist. So I was educated with a strong sense of self-dignity. And from self-dignity to a national dignity, there is a short distance." She adds a caveat: "Nationality is a not a value in itself. But because I am oppressed, nationality is so important to me. In a free society, I wouldn't care that I'm a Palestinian."

In her teenage years, Zoabi aspired to a career in journalism; after a Master's in communications at Hebrew University, she worked as a schoolteacher, then co-founded an Arab media NGO. When she joined the political office of the Arab party Balad in 1998, she discovered a calling charting policy. Eventually, without necessarily intending to, she became a candidate herself.

In its first fifty years, only two Arab women had ever been elected to the Knesset. Both represented Jewish parties. In 2008, Balad put Zoabi on its candidate roster. When she won, she became the first Arab woman to actually represent an Arab party.

During her first year, she was a little-known Knesset member with a focus on gender equality. Then came the 2010 Gaza flotilla. [3] Organized by Turkish activists, the flotilla was a humanitarian effort to break Israel's blockade on the Gaza Strip. Six ships, packed with school supplies and generators, were boarded in international waters of the Mediterranean Sea and headed to Gaza. A few days in, Israeli commandos landed on the largest ship in the flotilla, the Mavi Marmara, via ropes hanging off helicopters. In the ensuing confrontation, ten activists were killed.

Zoabi was on board the Mavi Marmara. "It was the first time I confronted the aggression of the Israeli army," Zoabi says. "I heard about it, I knew about it. I was never a part of it. It was the first time I saw bodies. It was the first time I saw from zero distance. I saw what happened â€" you came. You started to shoot. I saw you!"

A UN human rights report stated that Israel "betrayed an unacceptable level of brutality" in the flotilla raid. Israel's own inquiry acknowledged "the regrettable consequences of the loss of human life and physical injuries" but claimed Israel had acted according to the norms of international law.

"I saw how easy they convince themselves that they are victims," she says. "But they are the only ones who are convinced by their propaganda. The propaganda is efficient just to have the Israelis live in the lies."

The incident further radicalized Zoabi. It also made her famous or infamous. In the aftermath of the flotilla affair, Zoabi became a fixture on nightly news and radio call-in shows. She proved adept at parrying hostile or bemused Israeli journalists. And she was uninterested in temperance in the name of "civil discourse." She was also an elected Knesset member, and therefore difficult to dismiss completely as a fringe voice. She became the insider Arab radical.

In the Knesset, the debate that ensued in the immediate aftermath of the flotilla devolved into chaos. As Zoabi spoke from the lectern, the body erupted in protest. One member shouted, "We have to vomit her out of the Knesset!" Others confronted her physically, getting in her face to shout invectives. Through the din, Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin begged to no effect "Let her speak! The power of democracy is in our ability to listen!" Over the years, Zoabi and her right-wing opponents have continued to stage similarly remarkable scenes. Every few years, it seems, she manages to unleash utter mania in the Knesset.

There is something about her that gets under the skin of her opponents like nobody else. Writing in Haaretz, the famously liberal daily, Shany Littman once offered a theory: "It doesn't matter how many flotillas Zoabi sails on, how many cops she tangles with and how many controversial statements she makes what really pisses off those who watch her from the outside is the fact that on top of all the other troubles, there is no man controlling her." [4] In her early years in the Knesset, a fellow member once shouted at her, "One week in Gaza and we'll see what happens to you. An unmarried thirty-eight-year-old woman ..."

"When I speak in the Knesset," Zoabi says, "this is my duty. To speak. You don't agree with me, but this is my five minutes. And I want to communicate to you. I want to send you a message regardless of the result. You must defend my right to talk."

Anwar Mhajne, a political scientist from the Arab village of Umm al Fahem, looks at Zoabi's career with a qualified esteem. "The challenges she faced as a woman and an Arab MK were tremendous," Mhajne says. "I respect Haneen for even considering running for elections."

But, she continues, "Zoabi's methods of provocations did not advance the status of Palestinians inside of Israel. It is important to note most Palestinians in Israel are busy trying to provide for their families, educate their kids, avoid chronic gun violence in the community." And in that context, a firebrand Arab politician can easily come off as an "ideologue who lacks much-needed pragmatism in an already racist and restrictive political system."

Mhajne has other critiques. She doubts whether Zoabi's attempt to speak to an international audience through the college lecture circuit ever reached beyond an existing pro-Palestinian echo chamber. And she's skeptical of the wisdom of Zoabi's tacit approval of Hamas tactics over the years. But she recognizes Zoabi's effectiveness. "I think the various attempts to discredit Haneen is proof that having outspoken Arabs in the Knesset is a threat to the Right." She believes Zoabi did wield power; that there is a kind of power in her words.

When I meet with Zoabi, the March of Return is roiling the region. Every Friday for months, protestors in Gaza had massed at the Israeli border, demanding to be granted return to the lands from which their families had been expelled. [5] [6] Some burned tires and threw rocks; some waved flags. Israel dismissed the protests as calculated provocation by Hamas. Israeli snipers stationed on the border fired live ammunition. By the summer, there were more than 150 deaths and over 15,000 injuries. [7]

They want "to clean the discourse," Zoabi says, of her fellow Knesset members. "They want me to say *harag*" Hebrew for killed "not *razach*," murdered. "As if by accident they shoot Palestinians. By accident! You shoot at his back! By accident! You targeted them. Snipers mean to kill. You want me to say *killed*. No, I don't say *killed*. I say murdered. *Razach!*"

“The Knesset Is a Tool”

Of the 120 members of the Knesset, Zoabi says, maybe forty or so might deign to exchange niceties. The rest ignore her altogether. Outside of fellow Arab MKs she counts one friend: Mossi Raz of the small leftist Meretz party. “I like to have small talks with him,” she says. “He is different. He can really question: what is the ethical value of Zionism? I *think* he can question it. I’m not sure.”

When out in Jerusalem, she almost never enters restaurants or coffee shops without friends. And there are certain parts of the city that she avoids altogether. When shopping at supermarkets, she sometimes hears fellow customers screaming at the cashier. Things like, “Don’t serve her! She dares to come, the terrorist!” When the current Speaker of the Knesset got married a few years back, nearly every member other than Zoabi got an invitation.

In the summer of 2016, the Knesset passed an impeachment law. Previously, Knesset members could only be removed if they had been convicted of criminal acts that involved “moral turpitude.” [8] The new law created an avenue to eject Knesset members for “incitement of racism” or “support for terror.” Colloquially, it was referred to as the Zoabi Law. But in the end her political opponents never managed to use it to boot her.

“Does it make you believe, in a way, in Israeli democracy?” I ask her. “The fact that they haven’t been able to eject you yet?”

She waves away the possibility. “The law oppresses even without using it,” she says. “It makes people self-censor themselves in order not to reach this” — that is, the point of being in the cross-hairs. “They’ll say, “no, we don’t want to be like Haneen.”” And at the same time, she also sounds like she’d welcome impeachment. “OK, use it. Expel me. And then we as Palestinians must rethink the laws of the game.”

The Knesset has made her notorious. It’s given her a platform to confront policymakers with the very real consequences of their policies. But, “the Knesset is not an aim — it’s a tool.”

“It sounds like you’re ready to leave it yourself? Without being expelled?”

“*Of course*,” she exclaims, sounding, suddenly, quite happy. “I cannot see myself much more in this place.”

“How much longer then?”

“I don’t know. Not a lot.”

I make the mistake of asking Zoabi if she sees any reasons to have “hope.” I didn’t mean to use so soft a word. She looks at me sideways.

“Hope, no hope — we want to live.”

Over the last decade, she says, “the right wing redefined political norms. You” — as in, Israel — “moved from racist to semi-fascist, not because of the occupation but because you *don’t pay the price*. Whatever you do. Whatever you do to the Palestinians, you do not violate international law. Whatever you do, you are ethical. There are no connections between reasons and results. No rationality.

I realized that this is the problem, the price â€” how *cheap* was this occupation.”

We go back to the side office and sit with my father for a bit. He grew up here, served in the IDF here, had his kids here. But he moved us out of the country in the early nineties. Now, the two chat amiably about the changes the country has seen. The particulars of their experiences are radically different, but they're both angry and discouraged and engaged. So they have lots to kick around. They sit, talking shop.

I thank Zoabi for her hospitality. For the baklava.

“Of course, of course,” she says. “Maybe, if he starts to talk to me about soldiers, I will not be so nice. But, of course. You must prove to me you are violent. It is not that I take you from the beginning to be a violent person and then I must discover your humanity. No, you are innocent until you” â€” she smiles â€” “prove something else.”

In early 2019, Zoabi indeed announced she would not run for reelection in the April 9 elections. [9] As much as anything, it was a pragmatic decision. When her term is up, Zoabi will rejoin the political office of Balad. It's a calculated retreat with a few notable wins.

Following her announcement, the former defense minister Avigdor Lieberman tweeted, “Good that the senior representative of the fifth column is leaving the Knesset. I wish her luck in Gaza or Beirut.” Lieberman was one of Zoabi's most virulent critics. All of that virulence, though, never curtailed Zoabi's presence. She left on her own time.

Then, in the run-up to the election, Balad was one of a handful of parties disqualified by a decision of the Central Elections Committee. In response, Balad put out a statement in the punchy style of classic Zoabi, saying that its disqualification had been pushed “by a gang of racist toughs in a political atmosphere in which racism is threatened by democracy instead of the other way around.” Then Balad fought, successfully, to have the disqualification overruled by the Israeli High Court.

When I asked Mossi Raz about his former colleague, he told me, “Haneen is a clever woman. I felt, in our [private] conversations, that she could bring new [points of view] to the Knesset. She could have helped a lot. But the Marmara incident pushed her to the corner. The right wing would not even listen. They needed somebody to hate â€” she became this person, who was so easy to hate. I think she lost, I think the Knesset lost, and I think the society in Israel lost.”

Of Zoabi's time in office, Raz says, “I believe, for her, it was a nightmare in the Knesset.”

After she announced her retirement, I spoke with Zoabi on the phone. Just like our conversation at her home in Nazareth, she began with speechifying and I couldn't do much other than sit back and listen. “Equality is never radical,” she said. “Equality is the minimum for human dignity. But they make this vision sound so radical. So that it comes from a different galaxy. But equality is not radical. Equality is the minimum!”

Eventually the conversation, again, shifted down into a lower gear. Of her future after the Knesset, she promised me not much will change. Out of office she'll work just as hard, just as long, towards the same ends.

“Is there anything you regret, from your time in office?”

“I [can't] say that I did it 100 percent perfect. But to regret â€” I don't understand this word, to regret. If I did it another

way, would I have had more effect? You would never know. You just behave and act and perform, basically, according to your conventions, attitudes, passions, beliefs. Yeah. What you really believe in.”

“And for you, will it be easier, out of the spotlight?”

“Yeah,” she said softly. “The demonization, the incitement that was there as a Knesset member” — that, she thinks, will naturally abate. “I think, yes.” She laughed at this very limited — perhaps unexpected — optimism. “I think, yes.”

[Jacobin](#)

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[1] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/12/operation-cast-lead-ten-year-anniversary-israel-occupation>.

[2] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/firebrand-arab-mk-handed-week-long-knesset-ban-for-calling-soldiers-murderers/>.

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/31/israeli-attacks-gaza-flotilla-activists>.

[4] <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-zoabi-apologize-or-at-least-get-married-1.5310770>.

[5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/05/great-return-march-nakba-palestine-resistance>.

[6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/opinion/gaza-protests-organizer-great-return-march.html>

[7] <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-snapshot-casualties-context-demonstrations-and-hostilities-gaza-30-march-2>.

[8] <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/High-Court-MK-impeachment-law-is-constitutional-558514>.

[9] <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/03/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-elections-blue-white>