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Israel

The witch-hunting of Tali Fahima

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On March 18, 2004, Ha'yir Weekly, a major Tel-Aviv weekend paper (Ha'aretz Group), published an interview with a certain Tali Fahima - a young woman age 28 working as a secretary in a respectable law firm in Tel-Aviv - in which she stated strongly her positions against the Israeli assassination policy.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/TaliHighCourt.jpg>]

Tali Fahima (centre, glasses) on trial in Israel's Hight Court

The article recounts Fahima's meeting with Zachariah Zbeidi, chief of Jenin's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and her willingness to protect him from the Israeli military's attempts on his life. In the third paragraph, Rona Segal writes: "The difficulty in labeling Tali Fahima, a single woman living by her own, transcends the demarcation lines of political affiliation. Besides being curious, stubborn and extremely individualistic, Fahima defines herself also as a 'News Freak'."

Having no former political experience, the lack of any political affiliation on Fahima's part was a puzzling fact for both journalists and the General Security Services (GSS). It seemed nobody knew what to make of this woman, originating from a very modest Mizrachi (Jewish-Arab) family from the impoverished southern Israeli town of Kiryat-Gat, voting for the Likud party in the last general elections, and acting on her own.

Fahima has paid since a heavy personal price for the public's difficulty to grasp her actions and motives - in mid September she was put in a four-month administrative detention, after being interrogated intensively by the GSS for 28 days. Seemingly, the interrogation did not yield enough evidence to justify persecution. However, the public, with the aid of massive press coverage, had its say - Fahima, people say, is either a traitor or a lunatic, or even better, both.

Segal was the first to acknowledge the journalistic value of the story. She included no theories or assumptions as to what drove this woman to travel to Jenin, and the portrait she fashioned could have been read in multiple ways. However, the framing of the story had its share in generating the impression that Fahima is Zbeidi's lover, a juicy item the GSS promoted in its future news releases ('leaks'), after Fahima's first and second arrests.

Fahima's frontal picture, holding the teddy bear Zbeidi sent her bearing the inscription I Love You, while wearing a lawyer type blouse and glasses, added a touch of kinkiness to the editor's secondary headline: "Two years ago Tali Fahima still voted Likud and advocated for a military solution to the conflict. Now, she considers acting as a human shield to Al-Aqsa Brigades' chief in the Jenin area, the wanted Zachariah Zbeidi, who had escaped three "elimination" attempts. What's her story?"

Although Fahima's refutation of the romantic hypotheses is mentioned, the article itself contains numerous implicit question marks. "The difficulty in labeling Tali Fahima", is immediately followed by "a single woman living by her own", and is in great proximity to the term "News Freak".

The image of a deranged lonely woman echoes that of a female witch, still a highly relevant gender paradigm in a traditional society such as the Israeli one. This is soon corroborated by a quotation of Zbeidi, cited by Fahima, at the occasion of their first meeting: "I've already seen crazy [abnormal] people, but you're a really crazy one. I did not believe you would come."

The witch-hunting of Tali Fahima

Further down, when Fahima recounts her first meeting with Zachariah's wife and child, Segal asks: "And didn't you fear she would show signs of jealousy?" The two archetypical images, that of the lover and that of the deranged outcast are intertwined, at times simply following one another, and at other times combined into one figure - that of the female traitor.

In an article dating from Fahima's first arrest period (1 June 2004, Walla portal, Ha'aretz Group), Offer Aderet reminds the male Israeli reader that "research in the news archives, reveals that Fahima is not "our" first girl to be cuddled up in the laps of Tanzim's dandies out in the open country of Judea and Samaria."

According to Aderet, this curious phenomenon has a short history, which includes both the cases of Angelica Yossefov (serving time for assisting terrorist acts) and Neta Golan, founder of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). When referring to Yossefov, a new immigrant from one of the Muslim states of the former USSR, he writes: "The bottom line is, being an immigrant, she didn't know that what was customary in her native country - relationships between a Jewish girl and a Muslim - is an utter taboo in Israel."

During their weekly demonstrations, Women in Black testify to often having sexist remarks thrown at them, such as 'Arabs' Whores' or 'Arafat's bitches'. 'Arabs lover' is a habitual pejorative idiom in Hebrew for someone holding leftist positions. The clear-cut equation between 'leftist woman', 'Arab lover', 'whore' and 'deranged' is not limited to a certain discourse, but well shared by many.

As Aderet puts it: "Some questions are remained unsolved - what makes a young handsome girl risk her life, break the law, and socialize with wanted armed man with "Jewish blood on their hands"? Is it an adventurous impulse? Sexual attraction? Romanticism? Political positions? Or maybe mere madness?" The assumption that stepping out of the community's harsh norms might have to do with political positions, is way down the list and is followed by the much more 'reasonable' hypothesis, according to Aderet, that the woman in question simply manifests a mental illness.

Four out of the five optional explanations for Fahima's acts are clearly suggesting irrational behavior patterns. In the first sentence quoted, Aderet marks a reservation when putting the possessive pronoun within inverted commas ("our" first girl); as if to imply that the possession is not expressing his own paradigm, but the doxa, the common opinion, according to which Jewish women are Jewish man's property.

By doing so, he only confirms that his presumed audience is a Jewish man, and that he shares his conceptions about gender, being well settled within the boundaries of the common rhetorical position concerning the subject, known in rhetoric as topos. For the orator, topos is a highly valuable notion - it allows him to recognize the community's moral 'conglomerates' and in so doing, to be able to use them effectively on his audience.

In the case of the Female Traitor figure, we can clearly see how mentioning only two or three of the female topical characteristics will necessarily deploy the rest of them, as if a logical induction was made: unmarried woman + holding leftist opinions and/or having a friendly relationship with a male leader of the Palestinian resistance = sexual traitor.

From a rhetorical point of view, the beauty of the topo~ (plural topos) resides in their half common half logical nature, which enables them to be an extremely useful, transparent and economical tool of persuasion. To rely on the racist topos of national/religious purity of sexual and emotional relationships, apparently a different one - that of the deranged outcast woman - is automatically evoked. The figure of the Female Traitor is ready for use. No wonder then, that the ethos of a woman who may choose to defy her own national community's codes after deliberation is not widely spread, or even easily recognized, to say the least. Mainly not if she is acting alone.

The witch-hunting of Tali Fahima

The first encounter between Fahima and the GSS took place before she approached the media, and apparently, even before she intended to visit Jenin. In several interviews, Fahima mentions that being interested in the conflict, and realizing she cannot rely on Israeli media to objectively deliver the different aspects of the story, she started contacting surfers from Arab states through the internet.

Some of these contacts developed into friendly telephone conversations. After exceptionally sizeable telephone bills were received, she was summoned to the local police station for a preliminary GSS interrogation. At the time, Fahima believed that the fact that she was not taking part in any institutionalized political activity saved her from being further harassed by the GSS.

Quoted in Segal's article, she said: "He [the GSS agent] interrogated me briefly, asked me why I converse with so many Arabs and if I belonged to any group. I told him I wasn't, and he left me alone." She was soon to get a shock, as the GSS decided in May to bring her in for a long interrogation, after she spent two weeks in Jenin.

In a Y-NET (Yediot Ahronot's internet website) article (R. Ben-Tzur, 29 May 2004) the police representative at court, officer Fadlon, is quoted as saying that "Fahima was already warned few months ago, after being caught while staying in A area [Palestinian controlled area, according to the Oslo agreement partition]. She was bailed on the condition that she committed herself to avoid going to Jenin again."

The entry of either Jewish or Palestinian citizens of Israel into area A has been forbidden by the Military regime in the OPT since early in the current Intifada. However, two magistrate's court verdicts have upheld that being a felony under the military law, it cannot be tried in a State's civil courts. That may explain why the police are not keen on performing arrests on these grounds.

Israeli citizens usually enter area A for various reasons - shopping or business (less so these days), visiting Palestinian acquaintances and family members, or showing support for the Palestinian cause. Members of NGO's and political or humanitarian associations, as well as activists in peace movements, go there on a daily basis, often in small groups. They may find it difficult to pass a military checkpoint, and, in the worse cases, have even been detained and arrested for 24 hours. When brought to court they may be fined, and denied entry to specific locations by a judge's decision.

Other political activists have been interrogated by the GSS following a period of intense political activity. However, Fahima's case is a rarity, considering the vivid interest the GSS manifested in her since the very beginning of her political quest. Although Fahima raised money for a humanitarian project in Jenin, and was arrested the first time after she completed some preparations necessary for the enactment of a pedagogical centre there, acting alone accredited Fahima with no lesser dubious reactions on behalf of affiliated leftist activists.

Leftist Knesset members were not eager to back her up, and even radical peace activists were suspicious of her motives. In personal conversations I held with several experienced activists after her arrests, they raised questions that would have been considered extremely improper in similar cases if an unfamiliar affiliated person were in trouble. The lack of a political group's designation to be added to her name seemed to draw a shadow over all her actions, that otherwise would have been considered bold and even noble in accordance with activists' norms. That she was either a GSS undercover agent or simply a deranged woman with a sexual complex was suggested more than once.

Politics is to be done in groups. Highly dominant and individualistic activists are awaited to form their own groups, but not to simply act by themselves. Nevertheless, the ethical-political model of western societies as set in Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" stresses the value of individual responsibility within the political realm. In the age of Aufklärung, each and every one of us is requested to step out of her/his "state of self-imposed tutelage" and "to use one's own

intelligence without the help of a leader."

The essence of the political aspect of human condition is then displaced from the sociological realm to that of the highly intimate (though universal) response to an ideal and categorical concept of maturity. Political activity, the management of the polis affairs, was always considered to be the most noble one, but modernity alters its essence - now it stems from a different origin - that of the subject's advent.

This commencement is an event as fabulous as the birth of Athena from Zeus's head, since it is the subject itself who generates his own delivery. If the commitment to act as a political agent finds its essential foundation in the notion of subjectivity, then the ethical maturity first translates itself to an individual act. Surprisingly and somewhat inconsistent with the widely accepted Kantian-Modern model, individuals are expected to fulfill their political subjectivity only in the frame of a recognized institution and under the supervision of their respective group's opinions and norms.

For intellectuals, it is still extremely difficult to be heard if they are not holding a University chair, or working as journalists. The party political model may have been broadened to include movements, associations and the more capitalistic NGO's model (where individuals are being paid for their political work), but sociologically speaking, the proper political expression and activism outline keeps some significant tribal features; in order to gain the right to express oneself publicly, a personal name of an agent in the political sphere must be followed by the academic institution or the NGO she works for, or the political group he's affiliated with.

The reception codes vary from one political group to another, but these are obviously not limited to the publicized regulations or even to the recognized norms, as explicitly conceptualized by the subjects that consider themselves 'group members'. Payrolled institutions, such as associations, Universities, political parties and NGO's, state clearly their 'membership conditions', whilst movements and civil society's voluntary associations tend to have much more loose formal regulations as to who may or not gain membership.

Ta'ayush (Arab-Jewish partnership), inspired by the post-modern model proposed by the alter-globalization movements, insists on not having a membership apparatus. Whoever takes part in the movement's activities, is a Ta'ayush movement activist. Membership cannot be either gained or lost, because it's the sheer result of initiating, planning and participating in action. This existentialist type model, cannot however escape the essential problem of "who is active within the group". Can just anybody take part in whatever group based on this model? Principles and reality seem to manifest certain discrepancies, as multi-cultural and discursive sensitivities become more and more relevant to the conceptualization of social actual reality.

All political formats as we know it manifest implicit acceptance codes, whose role is to ensure that 'strangers' do not dilute the ideological, discursive and 'tribal' elements that bind the original group members. In a humorous passage recounting her adventures in the Israeli leftist movements and events such as Ta'ayush and The Activism Festival (Israeli Social Forum), Dorit Pankar writes (Mi'Tzad Sheni, vol. 2, January 2003, AIC): "Apparently, in order to be a member in these organizations I need to change my whole world and to well prepare my homework before coming to class. In every such group there are 'Entry Exams', so I decided to withdraw from all these associations, because I was not capable of fulfilling their demands."

Tali Fahima, growing up in the peripheral impoverished town of Kiryat Gat, being of a Jewish-Arab descent, and having no political experience beforehand (i.e. not having on her record a more or less loose membership in a political group) had absolutely no symbolic or actual access to the Tel-Aviv based pronouncedly Ashkenazi and middle classed leftist groups. In personal conversations I had with her before her arrest, she told me that she attended, on several occasions, panels organized by leftist oriented associations, because she was eager to learn more about the conflict. However, she added, she did not feel that what had been said in these events was appealing to her, or could have possibly answer her more essential troubling questions.

The witch-hunting of Tali Fahima

Journalists, media consumers and activists felt that the unaffiliated Fahima, coming from nowhere, is not "expressing herself politically enough." Fahima was exposed to extensive press coverage, and some of her utterances were not only extremely political, but conveyed some very popular leftist positions. In an interview she gave to the local southern paper Kol Ha'Darom (4.6.04), she answered Amir Shoan who asked her whether she understands at all the Israeli side of the conflict:

"Surely. I put my Israeli identity in the front, but I'm the proof that the State is not democratic. When I was released I told them [the GSS] that they are a terrorist organization. An occupying State is not democratic. I know they had suspicions against me, but it is illegitimate to keep me incarcerated for the sake of an interrogation. Someone up there got nervous because I could, as a civilian, reach Zbeidi.

There's clearly a policy on behalf of the Defense Ministry to cut off the contact to the civil population, not wanting us to know what they do there." The article closes with Fahima saying: "I came to help a friend. Leave the [affair of the] State of Israel and the Palestinians aside. In my opinion a friend of mine was in immanent danger, and I came to help him."

On another occasion (Oren Huberman, Nana portal, 2.6.04), when talking about the fear she sensed on her first meeting with Zbeidi, the journalist asks her: "Isn't that an expensive price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity?" Fahima's answer, somehow, does not utterly coincide with the proper political discourse: "There is no too high a price for knowing the truth." Privileging values as friendship and the passion to reach the truth, is far from being bon ton, and might be considered by political activists to be "apolitical". It may remind us that a very famous philosopher had paid with his life because he preferred his love for the truth to his love for the polis. Fahima may not be as well instructed as Socrates was, and may not be as wise or eloquent. But she sure shares with "the Divine" the willingness to pay a price for her love for the truth.

These kind of figures inspire other people to follow them. Not many perhaps, not the masses. Yet, it is clear that besides all the scorn, suspicion and confusion Fahima evokes, there are people who already recognized in her the potential for being a future leader. To judge from her ethos, as it was portrayed through her media appearances, it does not seem Fahima is ready to play the role of guiding other people in the quest for truth, friendship and mutual respect. They say prisons do a good job in shaping leaders.

We can only hope that Fahima will be consistent with her disgust of ready-made concepts, and will join others in their search for a more sharing and truth loving model of leadership, less tribal and above all, more feminist than the ones we've known so far.

This article first appeared in News from Within, journal of the Alternative Information Centre, Jerusalem.