

Israel Moves to Outlaw Palestinian Political Parties in the Knesset

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The Israeli parliament voted overwhelmingly last week to suspend Haneen Zoabi, a legislator representing the state's large Palestinian minority, for six months as a campaign to silence political dissent intensified.

The Israeli parliament, or Knesset, [voted by 68 to 16](#) to endorse a decision in late July by its ethics committee to bar Zoabi from the chamber for what it termed "incitement."

It is the longest suspension in the Knesset's history and the maximum punishment allowed under Israeli law.

At a press conference, Zoabi denounced her treatment as "political persecution."

"By distancing me from the Knesset, basically they're saying they don't want Arabs, and only want 'good Arabs.' We won't be 'good Arabs,'" [she said](#).

The Knesset's confirmation of Zoabi's suspension comes as she faces a criminal trial for incitement in a separate case and as the Knesset considers stripping her of citizenship.

But Zoabi is not the only Palestinian representative in the firing line. Earlier this year the Knesset raised the threshold for election to the parliament, in what has been widely interpreted as an attempt to exclude all three small parties representing the Palestinian minority. One in five citizens of Israel belong to the minority.

In addition, it emerged last week that a bill is being prepared to outlaw the northern branch of the Islamic Movement, the only extra-parliamentary party widely supported by Palestinian citizens.

Along with Zoabi, the Islamic Movement's leader, Sheikh Raed Salah, has been among the most vocal critics of Israeli policies, especially over the al-Aqsa mosque compound in occupied Jerusalem.

Death threats

Zoabi was originally suspended after legislators from all the main parties expressed outrage at a series of comments from her criticizing both the build-up to Israel's summer assault on Gaza, dubbed "Operation Protective Edge," and the 51-day attack itself, which left more than 2,100 Palestinians dead, most of them civilians.

In particular, fellow members of Knesset were [incensed by a radio interview](#) in which she

expressed her disapproval of the kidnapping of three Israeli youths in the occupied West Bank, but refused to denounce those behind it as “terrorists.” The youths were later found murdered.

Zoabi faced a wave of death threats and needed to be assigned a bodyguard for public appearances.

During the Knesset debate on her appeal against the suspension, Zoabi [said](#): “Yes, I crossed the lines of consensus — a warlike, aggressive, racist, populist, chauvinist, arrogant consensus. I must cross those lines. I am no Zionist, and that is within my legal right.”

Zoabi, who has come to personify an unofficial political opposition in the Knesset against all the main parties, is under attack on several fronts.

Last week [she was informed](#) that the state prosecution service had approved a police recommendation to put her on trial for criminal incitement for “humiliating” two policemen.

She is alleged to have referred to the policemen, who are members of the Palestinian minority, as “collaborators” as she addressed parents of children swept up in mass arrests following protests against the Israeli assault on Gaza over the summer.

Faina Kirschenbaum, the deputy interior minister in the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, has also [drafted two bills](#) directly targeting Zoabi.

The first would strip someone of the right to stand for the Knesset if they are found to have supported “an act of terrorism,” while the second would strip them of their citizenship.

Because ministers are not allowed to initiate private bills, the task of bringing the measures to the floor of the parliament has been taken up by the Knesset’s Law, Constitution and Justice Committee.

Intentional subversions

Zoabi further infuriated fellow members of Knesset this month when she compared the Israeli army to the Islamic State, the jihadist group that has violently taken over large parts of Syria and Iraq and has become notorious for kidnapping westerners and beheading them.

In an apparently intentional subversion of Netanyahu’s recent comparison of the Islamic State and Hamas, the Palestinian resistance movement, Zoabi [described an Israeli Air Force pilot](#) as “no less a terrorist than a person who takes a knife and commits a beheading.” She added that “both are armies of murderers, they have no boundaries and no red lines.”

Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister, was among those who responded by calling Zoabi a “terrorist.”

“The law must be used to put the terrorist — there is no other word for it — the terrorist Haneen Zoabi in jail for many years,” he told Israel Radio.

A poll this month [found](#) that 85 percent of the Israeli Jewish public wanted Zoabi removed from the Knesset.

“There is a great deal of frustration among Israeli politicians and the public at

their army's failure to defeat the Palestinian resistance in Gaza," said Awad Abdel Fattah, the secretary general of Balad, a political party representing Palestinians in Israel. "At times like this, the atmosphere of repression intensifies domestically."

Silencing all political dissent

The initiatives against Zoabi are the most visible aspects of a wider campaign to silence all political dissent from the Palestinian minority.

Last week, Lieberman instructed one of his members of Knesset, Alex Miller, to initiate a bill that would outlaw Salah's Islamic Movement.

The legislation appears to be designed to hold Netanyahu to his word from late May. Then, the Israeli media [revealed](#) that the prime minister had created a ministerial team to consider ways to ban the movement.

At the same time, the Israeli security services claimed that Salah's faction was cooperating closely with Hamas in Jerusalem.

After Israel barred the Palestinian Authority from having any presence in Jerusalem more than a decade ago and expelled Hamas legislators from the city, Salah has become the face of Palestinian political activism in Jerusalem.

Under the campaign slogan "al-Aqsa is in danger," he has taken a leading role in warning that Israel is incrementally taking control of the most sensitive holy site in the conflict.

Last month it [emerged](#) that the Knesset is to vote on legislation to give Jewish religious extremists greater access to the mosque compound. Already large numbers of Jews, many of them settlers, regularly venture on to esplanade backed by armed Israeli police.

They include Jewish extremists that expressly want to [blow up the al-Aqsa mosque](#) so that a replica of a Jewish temple from 2,000 years ago can be built in its place.

Last week, Yehuda Glick, a leader of one of these extremist groups, [was shot and wounded](#) in Jerusalem. In response, Israel [shut down](#) al-Aqsa for the first time since the outbreak of the second intifada fourteen years ago. Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority, called it a "declaration of war."

According to [the text of Lieberman's bill](#), the northern wing of the Islamic Movement "subverts the State of Israel's sovereignty while making cynical use of the institutions and fundamental values of the Jewish and democratic state."

It also blames the movement for "an eruption of violence and unrest among the Arab minority in Israel, while maintaining close relations with the terrorist organization Hamas."

Raising the threshold

The attacks on Zoabi and the Islamic Movement come in the wake of legislation in March to [raise the electoral threshold](#) — from 2 percent to 3.25 percent — for a party to win representation in the Knesset.

The new threshold is widely seen as having been set to exclude the three Palestinian parties currently in the Knesset from representation. The minority's vote is split almost evenly between three political streams.

Zoabi's Balad party emphasizes the need for the Palestinian minority to build its own national institutions, especially in education and culture, to withstand the efforts of Israel's Zionist institutions to strip Palestinian citizens of their rights and erase their identity. Its chief demand has been for "a state for all its citizens" — equal rights for Jewish and Palestinian citizens.

Balad's chief rival is the joint Jewish-Arab party of Hadash, whose Communist ideology puts a premium on a shared program of action between Jewish and Arab citizens. However, its Jewish supporters have shrunk to a tiny proportion of the party. It too campaigns for equal rights.

And the final party, Raam-Taal, is a coalition led by prominent Islamic politicians.

The three parties have between them eleven seats in the 120-member Knesset, with one held by a Jewish member of Knesset, Dov Chenin, for Hadash.

Abdel Fattah said his Balad party had been urging the other parties to create a coalition in time for the next general election to overcome the new threshold.

So far it has faced opposition from Hadash, which is worried that an alliance with Balad would damage its image as a joint Jewish-Arab party. A source in Hadash [told](#) Israeli daily Haaretz in late September: "Hadash is not an Arab party, and there's no reason it should unite with two Arab parties."

Abdel Fattah said Hadash's objections were unreasonable given that both Balad and the Islamic faction believed it was important to include Jewish candidates on a unified list. "Eventually they will have to come round to a joint list unless they want to commit political suicide," he remarked.

Falling turnout

Balad has been under threat at previous general elections. The Central Elections Committee, a body representing the major political parties, has repeatedly voted to ban it from running. Each time the decision has been [overturned on appeal](#) to the Supreme Court.

In 2007 the party's former chairman, Azmi Bishara, was accused of treason while traveling abroad and has been living in exile ever since.

But the representation of all the parties is now in danger from the raised threshold. Over the past thirty years, turnout among Palestinian citizens has dramatically fallen to little more than half of potential voters, as the minority has seen its political demands for equality greeted with a wave of laws entrenching discrimination.

Among the anti-democratic measures passed in recent years are laws that penalize organizations [commemorating the Nakba](#), the Palestinians' dispossession of their homeland in 1948; that provide a statutory basis to [admissions committees](#), whose function is to prevent Palestinian citizens living on most of Israel's territory; and that make it impossible for most Palestinian citizens to [bring a Palestinian spouse to live with them](#) in Israel.

Uncompromising stance

Last week, Balad MKs [boycotted the opening ceremony](#) of the Knesset, following the summer recess, in protest at Zoabi's treatment.

At a press conference in the parliament, her colleague, Basel Ghattas, warned: "The day is approaching when Arab MKs will think there is no use participating in the political sphere. We are discovering more and more that we are personae non gratae at the Knesset."

On Facebook, Lieberman responded that he hoped the Arab MKs would "carry out this 'threat' as soon as possible."

The increasingly uncompromising stance towards all the Palestinian minority's political factions marks a shift in policy, even for the right.

Although no Israeli government coalition has ever included a Palestinian party, and the Nasserist al-Ard movement was banned in the 1960s, Jewish politicians have generally viewed it as safer to keep the Palestinian parties inside the Knesset.

Analyst Uzi Baram [observed in Haaretz](#) that even Menachem Begin, a former hardline prime minister from Netanyahu's Likud party, believed it would be unwise to raise the threshold to keep out Arab parties. If they were excluded, Baram wrote, it was feared "they would resort to non-parliamentary actions."

'Paving the way toward fascism'

Zoabi petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court against her suspension from the Knesset in early October. However, the judges suggested she first use an arcane appeal procedure before the Knesset's full plenum to demonstrate she had exhausted all available channels for lifting the suspension.

Israeli legal scholars have noted the irregularities in the ethics committee's decision to impose a record-long suspension on Zoabi. The committee's task is to regulate parliament members' behavior inside the Knesset, not political speech outside it.

Aeyal Gross, a constitutional law professor at Tel Aviv University, [warned](#) that the Knesset's treatment of Zoabi was "paving the way towards fascism and tyranny."

Gross noted the extreme severity of the committee's punishment of Zoabi, contrasting it with that of another MK, Aryeh Eldad. In 2008 he called for Ehud Olmert, the prime minister at the time, to be sentenced to death for suggesting that parts of the occupied territories become a Palestinian state.

Eldad was suspended for just one day, even though it was a clear example of incitement to violence in a country where a former prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was murdered by a right-wing extremist, citing similar justification for his actions.

Tyranny of the majority

The Supreme Court, which has shifted rightwards in recent years, may not be sympathetic to Zoabi's appeal against her suspension.

In September the court [jailed](#) Said Nafaa, a former MK from her Balad party, for one year after he was convicted of visiting Syria in 2007 with a delegation of Druze clerics and meeting a Palestinian faction leader in Syria.

The crime of [making contact with a foreign agent](#) is the only one in Israeli law in which the defendant must prove their innocence.

The court may also be wary of making unpopular rulings at a time when it is under concerted attack from the Israeli right for being too liberal.

Ayelet Shaked, of the settler Jewish Home party, which is in the government coalition, has [introduced a bill](#) that would allow a simple majority of the Knesset to vote to override Supreme Court rulings.

Human rights lawyers warned that the bill would further erode already limited protections for minority rights.

Debbie Gild-Hayo, a lawyer with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, [warned](#) that protections for minorities from the tyranny of the majority would be in severe jeopardy as a result. "These proposals wish to break down the checks and balances that are fundamental to democracy," she said.

Zoabi remained defiant. She [noted](#) that, while she was being hounded, the legal authorities had ignored genocidal remarks made by Jewish politicians against Palestinians during the summer attack on Gaza.

"They're putting me on trial over a trivial, meaningless matter, while ministers and MKs who incited to racism and incited to violence and even to murder aren't being investigated, even after complaints were filed against them."

She added: "If I am indicted, I'll turn the hearings into the most political trial in Israel's history."

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