

## Exclusive MEMO interview with Haneen Zoubi - Part One



**Hanan Chehata:** Tell me a little about your political career; when did it begin and why the Balad Party?

**Haneen Zoubi:** I graduated in philosophy and media studies and have been interested in politics since I was very young. Gender issues were the first to draw my attention. I became a member of the Balad Party in 1997, one year after it was formally established. Balad was my first choice; it is in my view the only party to promote and address questions of equality and identity within the

abnormal context of citizenship in Israel. Our party takes the issue of citizenship very seriously. We challenge and reject the existing notions of Zionist citizenship while promoting an alternative vision of democratic citizenship instead of ideological citizenship, which inevitably will discriminate against the Palestinian citizenry. The Balad Party calls for equal national rights and for the indigenous people – Arabs - to promote this identity, and the duty of the state to guarantee these rights. This will not happen within the framework of a “Jewish state”, but within a state “for all of its citizens”, which Balad aspires to.

**HC:** You are the first Arab woman to be elected to the Knesset (Israel’s parliament). That is some achievement. What does that accomplishment mean to you?

**HZ:** I was elected in order to represent and fight for my party’s political and social vision. I believe in universal values; our national struggle is and must be based upon universal values of freedom, justice and equality. And we in Balad believe that freedom is the most precious human value and that it is a fundamental element of human dignity. So equality between women and men, the position of women in the society are indications not just of the development of the society but also of the dignity of society itself. There is no justification for a people to struggle for freedom, while oppressing the women. Freedom is a universal value and it should be pursued in the face of all kinds of oppression.

So my election is first of all a statement for the rights of women in full equality, and a woman’s full rights in her personal life; equally she has the full right to share the duty with men in leading society.

**HC:** Your case in some ways echoes that of Dr Azmi Bishara. Could you explain briefly why he now lives in exile, and his current status within your party and as an Israeli citizen?

**HZ:** After Israel’s defeat in the 2006 war against Lebanon, Dr Bishara was charged with treason. Israel used the occasion to suppress an Arab political leader and intellectual who had been leading a political party which challenged Zionism. Dr Bishara and we in Balad have denied consistently the accusations levelled against him. Israel was, however, determined to criminalize the political vision and policies which he advocates. We, of course, do not believe in the impartiality of the Israeli judicial system. We believe that Dr. Bishara was targeted because he challenged the status quo by demanding the loyalty of the state to the citizen, instead of the loyalty



of the citizen to the state. Clearly, he represented a “model” that was perceived as a threat to certain vested interests.

**HC:** You are one of the MPs who travelled to Libya in April and have been attacked for your part in that visit. Can you tell us a little about why you went to Libya and the reaction you received on your return to Israel?

**HZ:** We consider ourselves to be part of the Arab nation; it was Israeli policies which for many years isolated us and tried to distort our Arab identity and culture, and to deny our Palestinian belonging. The invitation of Mu’ammar Al-Gaddafi in his capacity as incumbent head of the Arab summit was a message of formal recognition from the Arab states that we constitute an integral part of the Arab nation. This sort of engagement is very important for us, it raises our moral and our self confidence; moreover it can counteract Israel’s discriminatory and repressive policies which deny identity and historical memory. In a practical sense it can also help to promote cultural relations.

**HC:** What motivated you to take part in the Freedom Flotilla and attempt to break the siege of Gaza?

**HZ:** Taking part in the struggle for my people’s freedom and justice is not an optional issue under any circumstances. It is my duty and my right. It’s a human duty as well as a national one. No human being can accept the humiliation and the suffering of the Palestinians under siege and occupation. The Palestinian people have the right to resist and struggle in order to put an end to occupation.

During the war on Gaza, Israel destroyed and damaged the homes of 100,000 people. Since then they returned to their devastated homes without being able to rebuild them. Israel also destroyed 165 schools and 3,900 public buildings. Today, the average daily income is \$2, unemployment stands at 60% and 85% of the population live below the poverty line. Occupation by itself cannot explain these facts; they must also be seen in the context of Israel’s policies of subjugation, humiliation and repression of the human will as a way of forcing the Palestinians to accept an unjust political settlement.

**HC:** Were you surprised by the violent response of the Israeli commando forces that left nine international civilians aboard the aid ship dead and many more injured?

**HZ:** Actually, yes. Although the Israeli policies of de-valuing Palestinian lives and rights is well known, and despite the fact that Israel has pursued policies which violate the human rights of the Palestinian people systematically in total disregard of international laws or human rights, I did not expect this excessive and unjustified recourse to violence.

The flotilla’s journey was well covered by the international media; there were representatives from over 40 countries, thus reflecting an international consensus. Besides, there was absolutely no excuse to resort to such brute force. We were 600 political activists who intended to break an illegal and inhumane blockade. But it was so clear from the first minute I saw the force approaching that the aim was not just to prevent the flotilla from reaching Gaza but also to deter any such initiative in the future.

