

The Zuabis

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THE SOLE CONTRIBUTION of Ya'ir Lapid to Israeli folklore so far is his saying that he would not join a move to block Binyamin Netanyahu, since this would mean joining forces with “*the Zuabis*”.

This needs explanation to a foreign audience. The Zuabi family is a large Hamula (extended Arab family) located in Nazareth and the vicinity. Several members of this family served in the Knesset in the early days of Israel, all as members of Zionist parties or Arab factions attached to Zionist parties.

The present member of the Knesset bearing that distinguished name is Ms. Hanin Zuabi, the 44 year-old representative of the Arab nationalist Balad party. The founder of the party, Azmi Bishara, left Israel after being accused of security offenses. He said that because of his severe diabetes, he could not afford to go to prison.

Hanin, however, is widely hated on her own account. She has a knack of getting under the skin of Jewish Israelis. She is intentionally provocative, abrasive and infuriating. Once she was physically attacked by one of Avigdor Lieberman's female storm troopers while making a speech from the Knesset rostrum. She did not flinch.

But her main claim to glory (or hatred) was the audacious decision to go aboard the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara that tried to run the blockade and take supplies to Gaza. The incident, in which 9 Turkish activists were killed by Israeli commandos, raised a tsunami of emotions in Israel. Hanin Zuabi was branded as a traitor. Many Arab citizens admire her courage, but that did not prevent her party from losing a seat in the recent elections. However, Zuabi kept her seat in the Knesset.

She is now the pet hatred object. In a recent article, a leading journalist put her picture next to that of Sarah Netanyahu and called them the two most hated women in Israel—one on the left, one on the right.

So if Lapid had refused to cooperate with Hanin, few Jewish Israelis would have criticized him. What aroused a storm of protest was a single letter. Lapid did not refuse to cooperate with Hanin Zuabi but with “the Zuabis”—in the plural. This was understood to mean all members of the three Arab factions in the Knesset.

“*Racist!*” the cry arose from many sides. “*Inexcusable!*”, “*intolerable!*”, “*detestable!*”

THESE CRIES might have sounded convincing, except for one fact: in all the present efforts to build a new government coalition, no one even suggested including the “Arab” factions.

There are three “Arab” factions. (“Arab” in quotes, because one of them, the communist “Hadash”, has one Jewish MK, the popular Dov Hanin. However, the voters of the party are almost all Arab. The size of its Jewish vote did actually decrease this time.)

The members of these factions live practically in a parliamentary ghetto. They function like other members, have full rights, one them is a deputy speaker and presides over sessions, in theory they can even make their speeches in Arabic, though all of them choose to speak in Hebrew.

Yet there is a glass wall between them and their colleagues. There is a tacit agreement among the Jewish members that they should not be included in coalitions. The closest they ever got was in 1993, when Yitzhak Rabin depended on their support, without including them in his coalition. Without it, the Oslo agreement would never have happened, nor would Rabin have been assassinated. The fiercest denunciation of his policy was that he had no “Jewish majority”, that he was giving away our God-given land with the help of Arab factions. One of the most bitter accusers was Binyamin Netanyahu.

ONE MAY well ask how the Arabs got into the Knesset in the first place.

This was by no means a foregone conclusion. After all, in Israel's Declaration of Independence the new state was defined as “Jewish”. Why should Arabs be allowed to participate in enacting the laws of the Jewish State? Why should they be citizens at all?

There was a lively debate about this in the secret deliberations at the time of the founding of the state in 1948. It was David Ben-Gurion who made the final decision. He was concerned about world opinion, especially at a time when Israel was fighting for admission to the UN. Since Ben-Gurion was a politician, he was very good at combining the national interest with his own.

The first Knesset was elected in January 1949, while

¹I remember voting near the army convalescence camp where I was recovering from my wounds.

the war was still going on.¹ At the time, the Arabs who remained in Israel after the mass flight and expulsion were subject to “military rule”, which made the life of every individual Arab, down to the smallest detail, totally dependent on the military governor.

Ben-Gurion saw to it that the Arab citizens—while enjoying a free vote—voted for his party, Mapai. The heads of the extended families were told that life would be made miserable for them if they did not deliver the prescribed number of votes for the party. Each one was told how his people must vote—for Mapai itself or for one of the Arab factions set up by Mapai precisely for this purpose. Thus it was easy to check how each family had voted.

Without these captive votes, it would have been difficult for Ben-Gurion to set up his coalitions during his 15 years in office.

AFTER THE Naqba of the 1948 war, the remaining 200 thousand or so “Israeli Arabs” were in a state of shock. They neither had the means nor dared to oppose the government in any way.

The only exceptions were the communists. During the 1948 war, the Zionist leadership was closely allied with Stalin, who provided us with almost all our arms. This alliance continued for some years, until Israel’s tightening ties with the West and Stalin’s mounting anti-Semitic paranoia put an end to it.

By that time, the Israeli communist party had built up a strong position within the Arab community in Israel. It was in practice an Arab party, though Moscow dictated, for reasons of its own, that the General Secretary be Jewish. The relations between the party’s leadership and the government were full of contradictions—while the party was tolerated because of Israel’s ties with Moscow, from time to time it was persecuted by the Shin Bet as a *Fifth Column*.

Since no other Arab party (except Mapai’s aforementioned Arab Quislings) was tolerated at all, the communist party enjoyed what practically amounted to a monopoly in the Arab street. Its hold on the Arab towns and villages in Israel came close to the stranglehold Mapai had until 1977 on the Jewish population. Woe to the Arab who dared to oppose it!

After Ben-Gurion was kicked out by his own party in 1963, the official attitude towards the Arab citizens gradually became more liberal. Military rule was officially abolished in 1966 (it was one of my first votes in the Knesset). Eventually, new Arab parties were allowed to be set up and entered the Knesset. The relations between the Arabs and the state entered a new phase—a phase very difficult to define.

ISRAEL IS officially defined as a “*Jewish and democratic state*”. Some consider this an oxymoron—if it’s Jewish, it cannot be democratic, if it’s democratic, it cannot

be Jewish. Official doctrine has it that the state is Jewish in its character, but that all citizens enjoy (or should enjoy) equal rights.

As a matter of fact, Israel has never really come to grips with this basic contradiction: what is the status of a national minority in a state that is totally identified with the national majority? To wit, how can Arab citizens really be equal in a state that claims to be “*the nation-state of the Jewish people*”?

From the Law of Return, which applies only to Jews and their descendants, through the Law of Citizenship, which makes a sharp distinction between Jews and non-Jews, to dozens of minor laws which bestow privileges on people who are defined as “*individuals to whom the Law of Return might apply*”—there is no real equality. In practice, discrimination, open or hidden, permeates society.

Many Israelis assert that they abhor discrimination, but claim that other democratic countries do not treat their own national minorities any better.

A THIRD generation of “Israeli Arabs” is now growing up. It is no longer cowed by the government, but lives in a mental limbo. They proudly define themselves as Palestinians and support the Palestinian struggle in the occupied territories, but also are becoming more and more Israeli. Another Zuabi, Abd-al-Aziz, a member of the Knesset many years ago, coined the phrase: “*My state is at war with my people*”. The most prominent Arab Knesset member at present, Ahmad Tibi, once a close advisor to Yasser Arafat, is to my mind the most Israeli of all Knesset members, both in character and behavior.

Actually, Arabs are far more integrated in Israeli society than many people realize. Jewish patients in government hospitals are often unaware of the fact that the doctor and the male nurse treating them are Arabs. In football matches between Jewish and Arab teams, Jewish hooligans shout “*Death to Arabs*” and their Arab equals shout, with equal enthusiasm, “*Allah is Great!*”

A few years ago, Lieberman proposed that the Arab towns and villages located in Israel near the border with the West Bank should be joined to the future Palestinian state, in return for Jewish settlements in the West Bank on the other side of the border. There was a storm of protest from the Arab population. Not a single Arab spokesman supported the idea.

However, the growing bitterness of the Arab citizens is driving the Arab members to more and more extreme positions and strident utterances, while the Jewish right-wing politicians become more and more extreme in their anti-Arab racism. Thus the gulf between the two camps in the Knesset is getting wider, not narrower.

So Lapid was shrewdly courting the mainstream when he expressed his contempt for the “Zuabis”. Hanin Zuabi, of course, was flattered.