

Palestinians in Israel Warn of Bid to ‘Criminalise’ Political Activity

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Members of one of the main Palestinian parties in the Israeli parliament have accused authorities of seeking to criminalise their political activity following the arrest of more than two dozen party officials.

Senior Balad members including secretary general Awad Abdel Fattah were among those detained by police in dawn raids on their homes on Sunday. Computers and documents were also seized.

Balad is one of four Palestinian-dominated parties that make up the Joint List, the third largest faction in Israel's parliament, or Knesset, which represents the fifth of Israel's population who are Palestinian.

Police said the Balad officials were suspected of involvement in irregular political funding, including the concealment of donors, some reportedly from overseas. Reports in the Israeli media suggested the party had been receiving undeclared donations from Qatar.

The party denies those allegations.

Jamal Zahalka, leader of Balad's parliamentary faction and one of the party's three members of the Knesset (MKs), accused Israeli authorities of targeting the party because of its political activities on behalf of Palestinians in Israel.

"This is a political move, not a legal one," Zahalka told Middle East Eye.

"It is part of a long-running campaign of persecution and efforts to criminalise political activity among Palestinians in Israel."

Thorn in side

Neither Zahalka nor his two fellow Balad MKs were among those arrested.

Zahalka tied the arrests to the [outlawing](#) late last year of the popular northern wing of the Islamic Movement, an extra-parliamentary faction led by Sheikh Raed Salah.

The Islamic Movement, which offers extensive welfare services to Israel's Palestinian minority, had become a thorn in Israel's side by opposing policies designed to severely limit access by Palestinians to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

Both Salah and a former Balad MK, Said Nafa, are currently serving jail terms. Salah was

found guilty of using a sermon to incite against Israel, while Nafa was convicted of meeting a “foreign agent” during a visit to Syria.

At a press conference in Nazareth on Sunday, leaders of the Palestinian minority defended Balad.

Mohammed Barakeh, head of the Follow-Up Committee, an umbrella body representing the minority’s national and local leaderships, said that, if the Balad arrests were justified, police should have first raided the official residence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu has faced a series of corruption investigations over the past two years, but is yet to be questioned by police.

“The suspicions [against him] are much more serious and harsh,” he said.

Under scrutiny

Balad’s main political platform has long infuriated the Israeli authorities. It demands that Israel be reformed from a Jewish state into a “state of all its citizens”, or a liberal democracy.

Balad also calls for educational and cultural autonomy for Palestinian citizens, and favours setting up an elected decision-making body to represent the minority’s interests. Israeli officials are vehemently opposed to such moves.

Ahmed Saadi, a politics professor who has researched Israeli surveillance of Palestinian citizens, said the arrests were the latest step against a party whose leaders have been under near-constant scrutiny and attack for more than a decade.

He noted that Balad’s original leader, Azmi Bishara, had been living in exile in Qatar since 2007, under threat of arrest if he returns.

Bishara was accused of treason for assisting the Lebanese militia Hezbollah during Israel’s attack on Lebanon the previous year – an allegation that has been widely [disputed](#).

“The goal is to weaken the party by constantly harassing, arresting, fining and punishing its leaders,” Saadi told Middle East Eye.

“Smear campaigns and character assassination in the Israeli media are intended to create a public atmosphere hostile to the party and to intimidate and frighten its supporters.”

Earlier this year, more than 150 Balad officials and activists were [questioned](#) by the police as part of the current investigation.

Bid to oust MK

Zahalka said the crackdown on the party had intensified in recent months.

In July, the Knesset passed a so-called Expulsion Law, sponsored by Netanyahu, that allows a three-quarter parliamentary majority to expel a sitting MP. The legislation’s barely veiled intent is to oust Haneen Zoabi, viewed as Balad’s most outspoken legislator.

A month earlier, Zoabi was saved by Knesset guards from being [mobbed](#) by fellow MPs as she made a speech in the chamber. She had referred to the “murder” of 10 humanitarian activists by Israeli commandos during an attack in 2010 on an aid ship to Gaza, the Mavi Marmara.

In February, the Knesset’s ethics committee suspended all three Balad MPs from the parliament for several months after they met Palestinian families in Jerusalem to help them retrieve their sons’ bodies for burial. Israel has held on to many of the bodies of Palestinians killed during stabbing or shooting attacks or during clashes with security services.

Over the past 13 years, Balad candidates have faced repeated decisions from the Central Elections Committee, a body dominated by Israel’s main Zionist parties, blocking them from standing for election. Israel’s supreme court has overturned the bans.

The Shin Bet, Israel’s domestic intelligence service, has in the past referred to an “inherent threat” in Balad’s ideology rejecting Israel as a Jewish state.

It has also [vowed](#) to “thwart” lawful political activity by Palestinian parties if it challenges Israel’s Jewish character.

Range of allegations

Saadi said his study of Israel’s archives showed a long tradition of the authorities using a narrow range of charges against Palestinian leaders in Israel to discredit their political activity.

“Allegations such as corruption, meeting a foreign agent, incitement, and using violence against the police are regularly exploited,” he said.

“Israel wants a Palestinian population without leadership, without political organisation, without a political vision, and without demands. It believes the clock can be turned back to the state’s earliest years when we were treated only as religious and tribal groups.”

Jafar Farah, head of Mossawa, an advocacy group for Palestinian citizens, said the current campaign of persecution against the political leadership had started in the late 1990s, during Netanyahu’s first government.

Supporters of the right, said Farah, were incensed that the previous government, under Yitzhak Rabin, had relied on Palestinian legislators to help push the Oslo accords through the Knesset, in defiance of rightwing opposition.

“This is a process that is nearly two decades old and aims to place all the parties under suspicion,” Farah told MEE.

“Almost daily we receive reports of young political activists being called in for interrogation by the Shin Bet,” he said. “They are questioned about who they know and warned off with threats. They are told, ‘We are watching you’ and ‘Take care, this could damage your career prospects’.”

Farah said, given the current international political climate, it had been relatively straightforward for Netanyahu to ban the northern Islamic Movement last November, using the pretext of links to Hamas and “terrorism”.

Netanyahu did so despite a report in the Haaretz newspaper revealing that cabinet ministers had admitted the Shin Bet was unable to find any ties to terror.

“Weakening Balad is more complicated because it is secular,” said Farah. “So Israel is pursuing a more complicated process to make its actions [against Balad] look credible.”

Influence minimised

The current police investigation against Balad follows a lengthy financial audit conducted by a government-appointed watchdog known as the State Comptroller back in 2013.

Zahalka said the comptroller’s officials had pored over the party’s documents and accounts for six months “from morning till night”.

Zahalka said the donations in question were intended for “completely legitimate purposes”.

There have been mounting indications, in addition to the Expulsion Law, that the Israeli right wishes to minimise the influence of Palestinian parties in the Knesset.

A Threshold Law was passed in 2014 raising the proportion of votes needed to win a place in the Knesset too high for the Palestinian parties to clear it. In response, they formed the Joint List.

On the eve of the 2015 election, Netanyahu issued a much-criticised video warning that “Arabs are coming out in droves to the polls”. It appeared to swing many extra votes behind him at the last moment.

Zehava Galon, leader of the small Zionist left party Meretz, [criticised](#) other Jewish parties last month for collaborating on legislation to allow absentee voting in Knesset elections to “reduce the influence of Israel’s Arab citizens on the results”.

There are estimated to be hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews living abroad who would be enfranchised by the proposal.

And last week, Avigdor Lieberman, for the first time since he was appointed defence minister, [called for](#) several Palestinian communities in Israel to be transferred to the West Bank. He said the move was necessary because Palestinian citizens “demand more and more autonomy”.

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