

The only Palestinian woman in Israel's parliament

Arab parties faces most hostile Knesset in history

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Nazareth. When Israel's 18th parliament opened today, there was only one Arab woman among its intake of legislators.

Haneen Zoubi has made history: although she is not the first Arab woman to enter the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, she is the first to be elected for an Arab party.

Sitting in her home in Nazareth, the effective capital of Israel's 1.2 million Palestinian citizens, she is dismissive of her predecessors, two women elected on behalf of Zionist parties. "They were worse than decorations," she said. "Decorations don't do any harm, but these women damaged our society. They were no role models at all."

Ms Zoubi, 39, a representative of the Tajamu Party, known for its Palestinian nationalist platform, has already shown she will not be following in their path. On a recent induction day for Knesset members, she made headlines locally when she pointed out to an official who repeatedly referred to "the territories" that he meant "the occupied Palestinian territories".

Her election is not Ms Zoubi's only pioneering moment. She was the first Palestinian citizen to graduate from a media studies course in Israel, at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and she established the first media classes in Arab schools. For the past six years she has headed an organisation exposing Israeli media bias.

Her priority now, she said, is to advance both the cause of the fifth of the country's population who are Palestinians, commonly referred to as "Israeli Arabs", and the cause of Palestinian women in Israel.

"I don't want to become the Knesset address for Arab women's issues. I need to raise the interest of the men in my party on women's issues, not allow their interest to wane because they can dump the issue on me."

But she said she does represent a demand among the minority's women for change and political involvement. "Women congratulate me in the street. Even women I know who are usually supporters of the Islamic movement or who were planning to boycott the election because of [Israel's recent attack on] Gaza came and told me they voted for me."

Alongside her will be nine male Arab party legislators: two from Tajamu, four from an Islamic party and three from the Communist party. A remaining one is Jewish.

They will be facing the most hostile Knesset in history. Of the parliament's 120 members, at least 65 are classified as belonging to the right and far-right and may yet form a governing coalition.

Avigdor Lieberman's party, Yisrael Beiteinu, which threatens to strip Israel's Palestinians of citizenship unless they pledge loyalty to a Jewish state, has 15 seats. One of the National Union's four legislators, Michael Ben-Ari, a former member of an outlawed anti-Arab terrorist group, is appointing two extremist settlers from Hebron as parliamentary aides.

"In a proper state, Lieberman's programme would be declared illegal. But the real concern is not his platform but that it has been legitimised by the main Zionist parties," including Kadima, whose leader is Tzipi Livni, and the Likud Party of Benjamin Netanyahu, who is attempting to cobble together a ruling coalition.

Tajamu is almost universally despised by Jewish legislators. Its founder, Azmi Bishara, is living in exile after he was accused of treason over the 2006 Lebanon war; its officials are hounded by the secret police, the Shin Bet; and, as in other recent elections, Zionist parties attempted to bar Tajamu from running. The courts overruled the move.

Ms Zoubi said she will not be fazed. "The Knesset is always hostile to Arab Knesset members and we are well used to their racist language. Even the building shows us we are not welcome. Everywhere there are Jewish symbols – from the Star of David on the flag to the menorahs – that we as Palestinians cannot identify with."

Like other Palestinian citizens, she has watched the TV news bulletins showing Jewish legislators, even cabinet ministers, shouting down Arab legislators in the Knesset chamber and having them ejected.

The racist discourse that lies behind Knesset debates is a concern, she said. "It is frustrating and exhausting having always to be on the defensive about why I identify as a Palestinian, why I am not a Zionist, why the Jewish state is not democratic and cannot represent me, why I am entitled to citizenship. It is a Sisyphean labour."

She admits to boycotting the first Knesset election after she turned 18.

"There is a significant group in our society that calls for a boycott, saying we will always be excluded from the political system here. But we need a Palestinian voice in the Knesset. I and the other Palestinian MKs are an obstacle to the Zionist parties' success in trying to control our society's consciousness."

The party's platform – developed by Mr Bishara – is to reform Israel from a Jewish state into a "state of all its citizens", a programme now advocated by all the Arab parties.

"The Jewish public don't like self-confident, unapologetic Arabs, which is why Azmi was always feared. But actually I think there is a base of support even among Jews for reforming Israel into a proper democracy, maybe as much as 30 per cent."

She hopes that her election – by breaking one of Jewish society's stereotypes about the Palestinian public – may start to win over more Israeli Jews to the party's programme.

In the meantime, she said, Tajamu will work to oppose confiscation of Arab land and house demolitions, and demand proper infrastructure in the minority's communities, as well as have their educational and economic rights recognised.

But she is critical of the Palestinian minority's dominant political demand for many decades: equality. "The struggle solely for equality treats me as a number, it reduces me to part of a mathematical formula. It ignores my history, identity and narrative as a Palestinian. I want to be a full Israeli citizen, but it must not come at the expense of my people's collective rights to an identity and a past."

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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