

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMAL ZAHALKA

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Jamal Zahalka is a member of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. He is one of 11 Arab members in a parliament of 120 members. On March 5, 2010, he spoke at Carleton University as part of Israeli Apartheid Week. Prior to his talk, he spoke with the Leveller.

Can you talk a bit about the party you head in Israel and its goals?

I was first elected as a member of the Knesset in 2003 and re-elected in 2006. I represent the Al Tajamou party (the National Democratic Assembly party). We are struggling for the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel and for justice for the Palestinian people.

We challenge the character of Israel as a Jewish state and demand that Israel be a state for all its citizens. We challenge Zionism within democracy.

Do you consider Israel a democratic state?

In the framework of Israel as a state for the Jewish people, you have a democratic process: there are elections, people vote, there's relative freedom of speech. But this is misleading, as it was built by expelling Palestinians from their homeland and forcefully creating a demographic majority of Jewish citizens.

This regime governs people other than Jewish people. Palestinians are segregated because of Israeli politics and policy. Refugees are denied their right of return, Gaza is under siege, and Jerusalem is separated from the West Bank. This segregation is unprecedented in the world.

We should take the Israeli regime as a whole—its ethnocracy, racial colonialism, apartheid. You cannot say it is a democratic regime. Although there is a democratic process, it is a process without democratic values.

How does your party reconcile sitting in the Knesset?

We decided to participate in the political process for two reasons: to serve our community and to express our political views. Of course there are contradictions in our reality; we are living in a state that is built on the destruction of our people.

We demand not only formal citizenship, but full citizenship, which means the state should be changed to one without Zionism and one for all

citizens. We demand cultural autonomy for our people.

You want Israel to become a state for all its citizens, which would contradict Israel's self-definition as a Jewish state. How do you envision that happening?

I don't know what will happen, but you cannot establish a real democracy if the state is not for all its citizens. And even if there's a political settlement, even if Israel withdraws from the West Bank and there's a Palestinian state, the problem is the nature of the state of Israel. It is a Jewish state that belongs to one group of citizens.

The basis of democracy, first of all, is that citizens are equal and the state belongs to all of them. I think human rights and indigenous peoples' rights are superior to the goals of a particular group. The Israelis don't have the right to oppress Palestinians.

The situation of the Palestinians is often compared to what took place in South Africa under the apartheid system, and you have used the word "apartheid" to describe the two.

Whatever the description and whatever the name we give to the Israeli regime, it's from the same family of apartheid in South Africa. There is a democratic regime for Jewish people and a regime based on racial discrimination for Palestinians. Some people prefer calling it racial colonialism; others call it ethnocracy. Whatever name given it, it's based on a Zionist ideology.

There's a chance, opportunity, space, and horizon for people to live in democracy, freedom, and peace, but only if Zionist hegemony ceases. We should adapt the principle that racism should be defeated not compromised with.

In Ontario, MPPs voted unanimously on a motion to denounce Israeli Apartheid Week.

Israel and its advocates want to silence supporters of Palestine. They want the occupation to continue; they want the colonialism, oppression, settlements, and the siege of Gaza to continue. Israeli Apartheid Week breaks this conspiracy of silence.

If politicians in the West and in Israel are angry about Israeli Apartheid Week, then it's on the right track, because the goal is to fight the silence. I think this is an ethical, moral, and political responsibility of any



Photo Chris Bisson

decent man and woman.

What do you think of the boycott, divestment, sanctions (BDS) campaign?

In principle we should understand that Israel is not ready for a settlement with Palestinians. There is an urgent need for international pressure on Israel to force it to end its occupation and change its policies. Governments and the international community, human rights organizations, and people around the world should pressure Israel to stop the crimes against Palestinians.

BDS is a good initiative but I think other things should be done as well. Governments should boycott the Israeli foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman. He called for the Arab members of the Knesset to be killed and

yet still was received in Italy, France, Germany, and England.

We need to show the Israeli government cannot do what it wants without any reaction. BDS has many levels and I hope this campaign will succeed in putting real pressure on Israel.

Last summer, more than 45 households of Palestinians in East Jerusalem were evicted, and many reports discussed the "Judaization" of Jerusalem.

After the possession of Jerusalem post-1967, the Israeli authorities were worried about the so-called demographic balance. The proportion of Palestinians in Jerusalem wasn't supposed to exceed 28%. Now the proportion of Palestinian is 33 to 35%. Israel has gotten nervous.

Ethnic cleansing in

Jerusalem has become a common occurrence, done through many means, including household evictions. The Judaization of East Jerusalem is one of the main goals of the Israeli government today.

I think the government is preparing for a settlement according to Clinton's principle, that is, what's Jewish-dominated will go to Israel and what is Arabic-dominated will go to Palestine. It wants to make facts on the ground, so when negotiation time comes, Jerusalem will be part of Israel.

This is a way of negating the two-state solution, because I don't think Palestinians would agree to any settlement without East Jerusalem. Palestine without East Jerusalem is like a body without spirit.

Some argue that having you come here and speak is a form of democracy. Do you face any repercussions in talking about how Israel is an apartheid state?

Before coming, there was an attack on me in an Israeli newspaper. Many Israeli politicians said I should be forbidden from going abroad. Others said I should be treated as a traitor and punished.

But this is part of our struggle and our confrontation with Israeli policies. You mentioned that the fact that I am here may mean something about Israeli democracy. A question like this was raised in the Knesset last time I spoke about how Israel stole 90% of Palestinian land. I told them, "Take your democracy and give me my land." We want the land.