



NO PATIENCE FOR PATRIARCHY

FIRST-TIME KNESSET MEMBER AIDA TOUMA-SLIMAN IS A PALESTINIAN, AN ARAB, A COMMUNIST AND A FEMINIST WHO FIGHTS FOR THE RIGHTS OF ALL ISRAELI WOMEN.

By Eetta Prince-Gibson

One after another, the women speak into the microphone to give their testimony before the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality. Their hair pulled back underneath hats and head scarves, elbows and knees covered, each one describes the embarrassment of being asked by mikveh attendants about the frequency and quality of their sex lives, whether they slept in the same bed as their husband, and about their menstrual cycles. An older man with a long grey beard and dressed in ultra-Orthodox garb interrupts one woman to explain the halacha or Jewish law. But the woman sitting at the head of the oval table, dressed in a crisp, cap-sleeve shirtwaist dress, swiftly cuts him off. “You will have your turn to speak,” she says, civilly but firmly, then turns back to the woman. “Please continue,” she says gently.

This session has been convened at the request of Orthodox women, outraged that Israel’s Chief Rabbinate has instructed ritual bath attendants to ask all women bathers a series of intrusive questions in an effort to prevent Reform and Conservative women from using state-

sponsored ritual baths. Afterward, the woman who was interrupted would tell me the chair is her “hero” and that “she really cares about me as a woman.” That woman is Aida Touma-Sliman.

Touma-Sliman, 53, is a self-declared atheist from a Christian Arab family, who serves in the Knesset as a representative of the Communist bloc in what is known as the Joint (Arab) List. It may seem odd for her to be the champion of religious Zionists and ultra-Orthodox women, but Touma-Sliman has made a name for herself—among both those who admire her clear sense of purpose and commitment and those who oppose her opinions and determination—as an outspoken foe of injustice, no matter to whom or where. “I may not know much about religion, but I know a lot about patriarchy and feminist solidarity,” she says.

Every day Touma-Sliman makes her way through a minefield of conflicting issues on what seems an impossibly narrow path. She is one of two Arab women—the other is Haneen Zoabi, also from the Joint List—and 18 Arabs in the Knesset; she is a member of the Christian minority within that Arab minority; she is a progressive feminist within a patriarchal Arab society,

and a Palestinian member of parliament in a Jewish state who is actively striving to establish a secular democratic country.

TOUMA-SLIMAN IS A WOMAN OF energy, who often flashes her dimpled smile as she gears up for yet another political discussion or ideological argument. But when I meet her in her paper-strewn Knesset office, I notice her curly dark hair is graying and she looks weary. “Let’s talk,” she says, forgoing any initial formalities. “But don’t expect me to say things that you want to hear.”

I have known Touma-Sliman for years because she has long been a force in Israel’s feminist circles. She was the first woman appointed to the Supreme Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, the umbrella group that speaks for and represents the Arab citizens of Israel, and was a co-founder of the International Women’s Commission for a Just Palestinian-Israeli Peace. In 1992, she founded Women Against Violence, the first Arab feminist group to oppose domestic violence, and served as the organization’s CEO until she stepped down in 2015 when she was elected to the Knesset.

Although she now represents the Joint List, Touma-Sliman is a member of the Communist party, called *Jabba* in Arabic and *Hadash* in Hebrew, historically an Arab-Jewish partnership, although the vast majority of its voters are Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. Founded in 1948, the party was the heir to the pre-state Communist party that existed during the British Mandate and has changed names and structures several times. It was never strongly Marxist; rather, it served as a moderate voice for peace, supporting the two-state solution and strongly advocating equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel and rights for all workers. “In the Arab community, being a Communist is regarded as being part of the group that fights for its rights,” says Touma-Sliman, who was drawn to the Communist party in her teens, officially joined in the 1980s when she was 21 and later edited its Arabic-language newspaper. “It was the Communist party that stood up for the Arab population during the years of martial law. Being a Communist means being proud of our history and preserving our culture.”

Arab politics is a microcosm of its own in the world of Israeli politics: Until recently, the nation’s small Arab parties ran against each other for Knesset seats, essentially canceling each other out by jockeying for the same constituency. Typically, the Communist party, through different coalitions, has managed to win three or four seats in the 120-member Knesset. Most of its Members of Knesset (MKs) have been Arab, though not the one person Touma-Sliman considers her role model: Tamar Gozansky, who, until she retired, was the only Jew and the only woman legislator in the party. “Tamar Gozansky was an excellent parliamentarian, a proud Jew, who fought against the occupation and for peace, women’s rights and workers’ rights,” says Touma-Sliman. “I have always admired her.”

It wasn’t easy for Touma-Sliman to be elected to the Knesset. She started vying for a Knesset seat in 1992 on the Hadash party list, but Hadash didn’t win enough votes to earn Touma-Sliman a seat. As the 2015 elections approached, the threshold number of votes needed for a party to

make it into the Knesset was raised, decreasing the chances for the small Arab parties to win seats. To preserve their representation, the four major Arab parties broke precedent by coming together to form the Joint (Arab) Party and presenting a single slate. Touma-Sliman was slated fifth. In an unexpected upset, the Joint Party gained 13 seats and became the third-largest party in the Knesset.

Although it is an opposition party, as the third-largest party in the Knesset the Joint Party is entitled to chair several committees. Touma-Sliman originally hoped to chair the education committee but soon

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recognized the value of the Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality. It’s an important perch. “I care about all women, but Palestinian women who are citizens of Israel face multiple layers of discrimination—as Arabs in Jewish society, as women and as women in our own patriarchal society,” she says. “So the committee provides me with an opportunity to advance my agenda and serve all of my constituencies.”

She convenes the committee at least twice a week to deal with topics that she identifies or issues brought up by feminist activists, members of women’s groups or other MKs. She comes well-prepared, reading relevant research and media reports and setting a clear agenda, one determined by her values and ideologies—

communism, feminism and Palestinian self-determination. She offers an example of a hearing she chose not to hold. Early in her tenure, she was asked to address the complaints of women flight attendants on El Al, who were forced to wear high heels. “I feel for them, I hate wearing heels,” she says, “but these women have privilege and benefits, and they aren’t high on my list of priorities. I care about the people who have no benefits, no rights.”

In her two years on the committee, she has convened sessions on gender-based violence in all sectors of Israeli society and is working on a bill to remove the term “honor-killings” from any and all formal documents, requiring instead that they be referred to as murder. She has also dealt with discrimination in women’s health care; the stereotypical representation of women (especially Arab women) in the media; poverty in all sectors; the conditions in the only women’s prison in Israel; gender gaps in education at all levels; and gender gaps in the civil service.

“Touma-Sliman comes from the grassroots and is connected to feminist activities,” says Hamutal Gouri, director of the Dafna Fund, Israel’s only feminist philanthropy. “She has made the committee into a place where representatives of feminist organizations meet with government officials, politicians and representatives of state institutions like the police and the office of the attorney general—and so it’s not only a very important forum for networking, it’s a forum to demand state accountability.”

This has created unlikely alliances, such as the one she has formed with MK Benny Begin, son of former Prime Minister Menachem Begin and a representative of the right-wing Likud movement, which heads the coalition. He is also a member of the women’s committee, one of the few men assigned to the committee by their parties. Says Begin: “Touma-Sliman is an excellent chairwoman. She sets an agenda according to what is genuinely important for all women. I am proud that by working together she and I were able to obtain a five-year allocation for advisors on the status of women in Arab municipalities. We hope this will empower Arab women and

improve the situation of all the Arabs, who are economically disadvantaged.”

But how does a veteran, die-hard member of the Likud find any common ground with a communist member of the Arab party who believes in Palestinian self-determination? “Of course we don’t agree on ideas about Israel as a Jewish state or the Israeli-Arab conflict—in fact, our ideas are diametrically opposed,” says Begin. “But if we can’t distinguish between our positions on different issues, we will never be able to do anything for the people who live here.”

Not all MK’s can get past these differences. An MK from one of the opposition parties is less enthusiastic than Begin. She asked not to be identified because, she says, “as a feminist, I do not want to be seen criticizing other women.” But she adds: “Yes, it is good that there are Arab women in the Knesset. But Touma-Sliman pushes the Palestinian issue in our faces, and that makes it difficult to cooperate with her. When Touma-Sliman goes out on peace marches, calls for an end to what she calls ‘the occupation’ and condemns Operation Protective Edge in Gaza (in 2014), there are limits even to feminist solidarity,” she continues. “And even if I do agree with her on some women’s issues, because she is so pro-Palestinian, the men in my party wouldn’t tolerate me supporting her.”

Yael Dayan, the daughter of Moshe Dayan, former chief of staff and defense minister during the Six-Day War, was the first chairwoman of the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women when it was established in 1992. She served until 2003 and has followed Touma-Sliman’s tenure closely. Dayan blames not her but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for this lack of solidarity. “When we first established the committee, women MKs frequently crossed party lines, and even went against the wishes of their party leaders, to promote feminist causes,” she says. “Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has created a very divisive atmosphere, and politics are much nastier than in my time. That really can’t happen much anymore.” Indeed, in observing the committee for several weeks, I noticed that few

of the other women in the Knesset show up to Touma-Sliman’s committee meetings—and even fewer stay for a substantial length of time. Dayan attributes this to increased polarization and misogyny in the Knesset, adding that women are often pitted against one another.

Late last year, Touma-Sliman was sharply criticized in the Hebrew media because she refused to chair a session of the committee in which the status of women in the army was to have been discussed. When I bring the incident up, she bristles. “According to protocol, I had to convene that meeting because it was assigned to my committee,” she says. “But I really didn’t think that I should be the one to chair it—as a Palestinian, I oppose the army and as a feminist, I oppose militarism. I did convene the meeting, but some of the women MKs from the right-wing parties thought that by criticizing me they could gain some cheap, populist attention in the press and try to portray me as a radical Islamist or something.”

In the media, Touma-Sliman is often compared to the other woman on the Arab list, Haneen Zoabi, who has gained notoriety for her participation in the Mavi Marmara flotilla that challenged the siege of Gaza in 2010, her support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, her reference to Israeli soldiers as “murderers,” and other provocative statements and actions that have turned her into a *bête noir* of Jewish Knesset members.

Touma-Sliman responds sharply when asked to comment on the comparison. “You’re not really going to ask me that question?” she says. “I am disappointed in you—if I were a man, would you be comparing me to another man? Just because Haneen and I are both women doesn’t mean you have to compare us. I think my record stands for itself.”

Yet Zoabi was on the Mavi Marmara and Touma-Sliman wasn’t. “First of all, there’s a misunderstanding: We are a group of different parties, who came together as one list. So of course there are differences between us—Hadash is a party that believes in Jewish-Arab solidarity and has always had a Jewish MK on its list. And we have

different styles. But in the end, we don’t have different political views: We both oppose the occupation and we are both in favor of democracy and equal rights.

“And I want to emphasize,” she continues, “that I think the Israeli media has made Zoabi into a scapegoat. She’s the ‘bad Arab.’ Contrasting us is a way to pretend that there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Arabs and to divide us.”

What is a “good Arab”? I ask. “Someone who supports the State of Israel and doesn’t feel connected to the Palestinians in the West Bank,” she responds. By that definition, Touma-Sliman, too, is a “bad Arab.” “I am a citizen of the State of Israel, even though my family was here long before the Jews took over our lands. I support the right of my people, the Palestinian people, to have a state of their own and I abhor the occupation. I will not deny who I am to make Jews more comfortable.”

THE NEXT TIME I MEET WITH

Touma-Sliman, it’s on Thursday, when the Knesset is not in session and MKs often spend the day at their local headquarters. It’s difficult to find Touma-Sliman’s, which is located in a mixed residential and commercial neighborhood in the Jewish-Arab city of Akko along the Mediterranean in northern Israel. It’s a steep climb up the rickety stairs to her second-floor office.

Her two assistants serve us sweet tea and we talk. Touma-Sliman is more relaxed and more comfortable here than in the Knesset in Jerusalem. She was born in Nazareth, about 25 miles inland, where she grew up with six sisters in a cramped, dingy apartment. Her father, a construction worker who spoke five languages, was offered an opportunity to teach school. “But that was in the 1950s when Palestinians were still under martial law. To teach school, he would have had to collaborate with the Israeli security forces. He refused, even though, as he grew older, teaching would have been so much easier physically. He was a brave man of conscience.”

Her father, she says, was also “a truly liberal man who wanted all of his daughters to have an education. I listened to Western and Arab classical music. I read

Russian, British, and classical and modern Arab literature. So I never felt this separation between worlds of knowledge,” says Touma-Sliman, who is fluent in Hebrew and English in addition to her mother tongue, Arabic.

Touma-Sliman went on to study psychology and Arabic literature at the University of Haifa, where she stood out as a forceful advocate for Palestinian minority rights and led numerous demonstrations, then turned to social, and later political, activism. “Maybe because my parents respected each other, I came to the simple understanding that no one has the right to hurt or control another person,” she says. “So that is why I founded an organization for women suffering from violence. And it’s why I fight for workers’ rights and for minority rights.”

Two mobile phones are on her desk—one, with the number she readily gives out to the public, rings incessantly; the other, with the number that only her two adult daughters know, is silent. A man calls to suggest that Touma-Sliman sponsor a bill to lower the standards for Arabs’ acceptance into Israeli universities as a form of affirmative action. Speaking in colloquial Arabic, she politely thanks him for his suggestion, puts down the phone and says, “That’s just what we need—to make ourselves into second-class citizens by choice. But at least he cares, so I have to listen to him.” A woman calls and Touma-Sliman chats with her for a few moments. “She’s very elderly and calls every Thursday. She just needs someone to talk to,” she explains.

While we talk, her assistants run up and down the stairs, ushering in an unscheduled guest, reminding her of appointments. One of them makes sure to inform me that it was Touma-Sliman who, on International Women’s Day in early March, collected money from MKs from all the parties in the Knesset to provide a gift for the building’s cleaning and other contract workers who have no tenure or job security. No cameras recorded this and she issued no press releases.

Her assistants call her “Kind Aida.” But I’ve also heard her referenced to as “Scary Aida.” It’s true she can be impa-

tient and she has no trouble cutting anyone off if she thinks they are wasting time or missing the point—as she did with the rabbi in the session on the ritual baths. “Scary? Me?,” she retorts. “I know people say that about me, but that’s not what I’d call myself. I know I have to be patient, and usually I manage, even though patience isn’t one of my stronger qualities,” she adds. “I’m just very demanding. I wouldn’t call myself scary.”

So what would she call herself?

“OK, OK, I know what you’re asking,” she says. “You are trying to get me into identity politics. I’m a Palestinian and an Arab and a feminist and a communist. My identity is made up of many components, and different parts are more important at different times. Actually I usually emphasize the part of my identity that others are trying to deny,” she continues. “So among some men, I emphasize my feminist identity. Among Jews, I emphasize my Palestinian identity.”

She pauses. “If Jews understood what Palestinian identity is, they wouldn’t be so afraid of us. Palestinian identity isn’t about being anti-Israeli—it’s about affirming our own history and culture. Ultimately, Jews and Arabs will have to live here, in peace, and we will each be proud of who we are.”

Touma-Sliman’s views on the West Bank continually get her into hot water, especially with the right wing. Last June, Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon castigated her for attending the United Nations conference on “Fifty Years of Occupation.” The ambassador was quoted in the Israeli press as saying that it is “shameful that a member of Knesset is abusing her position and is working together with the Palestinians to harm Israel at the UN.” He added: “Her presence at this anti-Israel gathering, with the sole purpose of defaming our country, crosses all red lines.” Touma-Sliman disagrees: “My constituency, Jews and Arabs, believes that the occupation must come to an end and that we must establish a Palestinian state in the 1967 border with East Jerusalem as its capital. I say that in the Knesset and I say that abroad. Danny Danon, who was a leader of the settlements in the occupied West Bank before

he went to the UN, may not like this, but it is my responsibility to ensure that this position is brought to the entire world.”

We sip another round of sweet tea and then, somewhat abruptly, Touma-Sliman declares that the interview is over. She’s going home to spend a few rare moments with her daughters—and says she has no intention of inviting me along. “Sure, Arab culture is very hospitable,” she says. “But I keep my daughters separate from my public work. I chose to be in the public eye, they didn’t.”

As she stuffs some of the papers on her desk into a scuffed, overfilled laptop bag, she tells me that she has been lonely ever since her beloved husband, Jiris Sliman, died from cancer in 2011. “My husband was truly my partner,” she says. “He was supportive of all my struggles and campaigns, and he encouraged me, no matter how tired I was. I miss being with him, I miss the couple that we were. He is still with me, in my mind and my heart.”

She pauses. “Being a widow covers you in layers and layers of oppression and discrimination because Palestinian society is still so patriarchal,” she adds. “When my daughter became engaged, her groom’s father came to talk to me about the arrangements. He expected to speak to a man—at least to my brother. Hah! He didn’t know what he was getting into.”

Touma-Sliman reflects that she has far more autonomy than many of her constituents. “I have much more power than women who have brothers who watch their every move or women who live in a village where everyone gossips about them all the time,” she says. “So if it’s hard for me—it must be so much harder for women who are much more disenfranchised than I have ever been.”

Feminists, she says, must never be satisfied when a few women manage to break out of old patterns. “As feminists, we must learn to create new patterns for men and women,” she says as she gets up to leave. “Well, at least I’ll be home tonight, with my daughters.”

On her way home, though, she says she plans to make one stop, just for herself. “I think I’ll go to watch the sun set over the sea.” ☽