

Palestinian Woman Wins Major Votes at the Engineers Association Elections

An Interview with Nadia Habash

In August 2021, for the first time since 1985, a leftist list won the Palestinian Engineers trade union elections. The “Determination List” headed by Nadia Habash, a professor of architecture at Birzeit University, will lead the association until 2024. It is the first time the association will be headed by a woman.

Nadia Habash is a well-known Palestinian academic and architect, with a solid record in political activism. In July, she was brutally arrested by the Palestinian Authority amid the protest that occurred following the murder of the Palestinian activist Nizar Banat by the PA. Meanwhile, the Israeli forces had put a travel ban on Habash for 29 years, which prevented her from participating in international lectures and conferences.

Sari Harb, program manager at the RLS Regional Office for Palestine and Jordan in Ramallah, spoke with Nadia Habash, about the Engineer Association’s elections and upcoming program:

You were the first woman in the history of Palestine to be nominated for the position of Head of Palestinian Engineers Association (PEA). You were also the first and only woman to be the Chairperson of a PEA subcommittee. Why did you decide to run for these elections?

The decision to run for these elections came for two reasons: the first reason was objective and the second was subjective. The objective reason had to do with the urgent need to bring about change, especially since the ruling party is in control over public institutions and bodies, and the Palestinian Authority at large. This huge infiltration has been subject to criticism and condemnation by a multitude of people. It is also completely unacceptable to see that since the leaders of some of the most professional associations and popular organizations belong to the ruling party, they did not achieve much because they would not dare to confront Fatah.



In this respect, the objective situation had become ripe (so to speak), meaning that people are craving to see changes on the ground. Since the presidential, legislative, and local council elections were postponed after the people were prepared to run for elections or practice their right to choose their representatives, people got deprived of this right in that period.

The Palestinian Engineers Association (PEA) elections were the first elections after that postponement, thus many people were having high hopes regarding it. In fact, everyone started looking at the PEA elections as an element which could lead to change, especially since the “one-party policy” is no longer acceptable. Therefore, the objective circumstance was strongly present.

On the subjective level, I personally accumulated a lot of experiences from my work on the association and national levels, as well as my academic and professional achievements. This made my chances of winning quite high. When I analyzed things from this angle, I felt a great sense of responsibility. After we listed our names as candidates for the leadership of the PEA and collectively analyzed the situation, we found that my chances of winning further increased because I taught at Birzeit University and many of the engineers were my students. This created a kind of trust and mutual respect. Another reason was that I was the Head of the Palestinian Engineers Association’s Ramallah branch – the only woman who held that position, and also the first woman PEA Council member before that. This proves my experience on the association level. Therefore, my patriotism, association experience, and desire to confront the prevailing authority were great levers.

As mentioned earlier, people seek change, and so they are eager to see public leaders who can confront the dominant authority. What happened to me before the elections period (i.e., attacks, beating, dragging, and arrest by the PA security services during a solidarity protest) enhanced the trust of some towards me. They saw me as a person who challenges and confronts and does not back off or compromise. I also do not aspire to become a minister, which further strengthened the voters' trust towards me. They do not want to elect someone who succumbs to the PA. Therefore, all these factors came together harmoniously, as my personal qualifications (including my vast experience in different fields) were suitable for my nomination, and enhanced voters' trust as they considered me a person who earnestly desires to achieve change.

My decision to run for these elections was because I understand the current reality and the objective and subjective circumstances. I realized that I have a great chance of winning and that I must carry a great responsibility. It was hard for me not to respond to this call and battle, although I was planning for a different kind of lifestyle this year (such as writing books and conducting analytical works). I had not been planning to get involved again, especially since I previously ran for these elections and saw that that the younger generation should be given a chance. However, when I saw that I had the greatest chance of winning among the listed candidates, I felt a great sense of responsibility, so I put myself and my personal plans on a side and aimed to seize the opportunity. People are craving for change, and for the sake of breaking the monopoly and "one-color" domination, I did not hesitate to put my plans and personal interest on a side. Hence, the decision was to wage this battle and take this struggle upon myself.

What is the program of the Palestinian Engineers Association (PEA)?

We cannot announce the PEA program before its approval by the relevant conference. We are currently preparing the general program and will announce it about two months after the PEA elections. The Palestinian Engineers Association's program includes plans related to the PEA Council and branches, and these plans will be submitted to the conference and shall be announced after the conference approves them.

What is your personal vision for the work ahead?

I participated in the PEA elections because I have a clear vision and objectives, and my aim is to develop the engineering sector and associations in general, and the

Palestinian Engineers Association (PEA) in particular. My program within the PEA is the same as my electoral program. This was actually presented to the voters (i.e., the engineers), and I assume that I was elected for this reason as well as my personal characteristics.

My vision is multifaceted regarding association work in Palestine. For example, our struggle is on the national and association demand level, which actually used to be the role of labor unions before the inception of the Palestinian Authority (PA). During that period, the Associations Complex was leading the struggle on that level; factions were working secretly, and actions were openly carried out by popular organizations, labor unions, and professional associations.

After the PA came to power, there was a period of unclarity and apathy towards the people (including towards professionals) and a lack of freedom and independence. The reality became distorted, and we started living the illusion of independence.

Consequently, many people adopted the false belief that our struggle is on the association level only for the attainment of rights. Therefore, after establishing the Palestinian Authority, the national struggle was no longer part of the associations' programs. Even if we focus solely on association action, we realize that a problem lies in the affiliation of many associations with the ruling party. This distorted the work of associations and failed to defend some important rights.

My view of association work in the current period can be summarized as follows: First, it is important to mix and combine between professional association work and national action. This is because associations and popular organizations/frameworks must remain the protectors of the national agenda. Therefore, a great responsibility falls on professional associations, especially because they have large numbers of members. For example, the PEA alone has more than 30,000 members, not to mention several other associations/unions, such as those related to physicians, pharmacists, agricultural engineers, and dentists. This constitutes an organized part of society with a suitable framework. Hence, we must benefit from these organizations and frameworks in our national struggle, as well as fighting on the association level to oblige public and private sector employers to maintain the rights of their employees. This duty should be constantly followed up by professional associations in general, especially the Associations Complex, with whom we have decided to work jointly on public issues (at the level of association demands, human rights issues, and public issues). It is imperative to tackle these aspects collectively on the association and

national levels. This decision of collective action can create significant power and rejuvenate the role of the Associations Complex.

Do you consider the elections a reflection of people's faith in change?

Yes indeed, especially since voters have constantly had a PEA Chairman who empathized with and succumbed to PA pressures for long periods of time. Many voters see that the Association (i.e., PEA) failed them in the past and does not attain their rights and aspirations. Therefore, they were convinced that real changes must take place and that the alternative leadership should be convincing. The desire for change and merely electing an alternative leader are not sufficient for change. Rather, the alternative leadership should seek and bring about change, especially since the confrontation is with the ruling party. Changes would not occur if the alternative leadership is ineffective and incapable of introducing a different pattern of work. The alternative leadership should also have the ability to tackle a load of problematic issues.

What are the main obstacles for the Palestinian Engineers Association (PEA)?

The main obstacle is the reluctance of many engineers (i.e., "the base") to identify and work with the PEA, and this is considered a great threat for other associations as well. Therefore, professional associations must tackle this serious matter. Of course, there are reasons behind the base's remoteness from the Association due to the latter's failure to represent them and defend their causes. These persons would not have distanced themselves from the Association if it had not failed to represent them and achieve their demands and aspirations. And so, the most important task of associations is to truly represent engineers and achieve their demands and speak on their behalf. Also, associations should not do favoritism with employers, whether at the governmental level or vis-à-vis business owners.

However, the said obstacles have a solution. For example, the PEA branch of Nablus is quite active nowadays and involves hundreds of engineers in its activities (such as the marathon to support Palestinian prisoners).

The attendance in these activities is excellent and reaches several hundreds of persons. Although some activities only started recently, yet they nevertheless contribute to building trust. Such activities are very suitable for the public concerns and aspirations. Therefore, the first remedy is to restore the lost trust between the base and the PEA. We must eliminate all

obstacles and build mutual trust between the base and the Association so that most engineers would become more involved in PEA activities.

Another reason for the remoteness of many engineers from the PEA is the general circumstances and difficult economic situation. This is because many engineers are focused on making a better income to live a dignified life. Consequently, association work saw a decline due to people's preoccupation with meeting their basic life needs. In fact, many governments on the Arab and international levels have the interest of seeing association work fade away.

In general, there seems to be degradation of values and principles, and many people refrain from working on the association level while absorbed in personal matters. The post-Oslo period saw an increase in selfishness and individualism. We find growing discrimination between people, as well as caring too much for material things and external appearances. This made many engineers seek to maximize their income and refrain from working at the association level. We also faced this problem during the election period. There was also the distortion of ethical aspects, such as growing fraud and deception. For example, many engineers are bullied by people who defraud and underestimate their work. The aforementioned factors made many engineers focus on their personal interests and disregard the public benefit.

On the broader level, the Israeli occupation and its practices of land expropriation, assaults, arrests, and violations of human rights clearly affected Palestine's professional associations. Our association must strongly speak out against Israeli crimes, such as the confiscation of lands (including absentee properties), the Judaization of Jerusalem and Sheikh Jarrah evictions, house demolitions in Areas "C" (especially Bedouin areas) under the pretext of no building permit. These issues are not considered obstacles for our Association but rather responsibilities that we must bear. Several factors impede our resistance of these challenges, yet in those cases we must resort to popular struggle to strongly confront the Israeli Occupation, and to fulfil our role and duty as children of this country.

Another obstacle facing the PEA is the absent role of legislative bodies that can stipulate governing laws and regulations in our society, in addition to the division between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where both authorities demand exclusive power but lack certain elements of legitimacy.

The freedom of opinion and freedom of expression are witnessing several violations, both from the Israeli Occupation and the Palestinian Authority: Does this affect the work of associations?

This definitely affects the work of associations [including the PEA]. For example, prior to getting elected, I was subjected to harassment by the PA due to participating in activities that enable people to express their opinion. It is a serious problem to do censorship on each other as a result of harassment, restriction of freedoms, and pressure on associations. In this respect, the PEA Council no longer wanted to take positions that would not satisfy the PA or that could create a clash with the PA for different reasons and objectives. This was also done to avoid problems or embarrassment. Therefore, the answer to your question is yes, these harassments and pressures do affect the work of associations, both directly and indirectly, through what we call "self-censorship" [which restricts human freedoms]. This was greatly disappointing for our voters in the past, whereas the PEA always found itself before such restrictions.

Furthermore, the suppressing of the freedom of expression in Palestine from the Israeli side has reached an unprecedented level, with the latest decision by Benny Gantz to label a few respected Palestinian civil society organizations as terrorist organizations based on "Secret evidence", which aims to gradually destroy the civil society, and demonize the Palestinian struggle for freedom and liberation. What was especially sad about this decision were the shy responses from many international official and non-official institutions and bodies, as they were insufficient and unbecoming of its significance.