A FACE FROM JERUSALEM

Zahira Kamal

A Politician and an Activist



Zahira Kamal is a woman who turned awareness into an institution and experience into a movement. Born in Jerusalem in 1944 into a conservative middle-class family, the daughter of educator Ahmad Badawi Kamal, she was raised on the values of religious openness, respect for knowledge, self-accountability, and human dignity. Her national consciousness was formed even before her political affiliation, when as a child she witnessed Raja' Amasha burning the British flag in 1955 – a scene that ignited within her a spark that would never fade.

For her engagement, Zahira chose the Arab Nationalist Movement in 1962, then joined the Democratic Front at the time of its founding, eventually becoming one of its leaders. Her push for renewal and democracy culminated in the founding of FIDA Party, whose secretary-general she became in 2011. Zahira paid a heavy price for her path: administrative detention in 1979, five preventive arrests, and seven-and-a-half years of house arrest, during which she was banned from movement and from entering the West Bank and Gaza. Yet she transformed the experience into a school of its own: reading, engaging in dialogue, developing language, and cultivating awareness inside prison.

Zahira has not merely been a political activist; she was the engine of the Palestinian women's movement. She founded the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees, from which emerged institutions that became milestones: the Women's Studies Center, the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling, Asala Association, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, and the Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center. She viewed institutions as a form of resistance, a space to empower women and a framework to protect society from marginalization.

In public life, Zahira moved between teaching at UNRWA, working with the UNDP, and serving at the Ministry of Planning, eventually becoming the first Minister of Women's Affairs in 2003. She then became the director of the UNESCO Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center, where she led a project that documented the roles of Palestinian women in three volumes, a work that has become a national reference.

Zahira has traveled the world from America to China, yet Jerusalem has remained her root and compass. A woman shaped by books, refined by experience, and molded by truth, her message to the next generation is to remain a steadfast voice that defends justice, equality, and the freedom of the Palestinian people.

Most recently, Zahira has mastered professional painting, embracing creativity, renewal, and enjoyment during her retirement in the heart of Jerusalem.