

Captain Ella, the First Arab Woman Promoted to IDF Major, is Outspoken Supporter of Israel

“Captain Ella” Waweya, a 33-year-old native of Qalansawe, Israel, and the first Arab woman to reach the rank of major in the Israel Defense Forces, is a living testimony to Israel’s diversity.

Waweya is a decorated army officer who received the President’s Award of Excellence in 2015 and the Outstanding Award from the Head of Operations Division in 2018. Yet, the major initially concealed her military service from family and friends.

The first person Waweya told about her IDF service was her brother, when she invited him to attend the President’s Award ceremony where she was being honored a year and a half after her enlistment.

“He didn’t understand what I was talking about,” she recalled.

So, she sent him a picture of herself in uniform.

“I heard in his voice that he was shaking,” she said. After telling her brother that she had been in the military already for a year and a half, he agreed to come to the ceremony.

“I’ll be with you but don’t tell anyone,” he told her.

Despite promises to keep her identity secret, after her story was published in the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper and website, her military service in the IDF became widely known.

At first, Waweya said her family was shocked. She recalled

that her mother threw away her uniform the first time she found it.

However, her family came to accept her decision to serve, and when “Captain Ella” was made an officer, her mother did attend the ceremony.

“We hugged each other for 15 minutes on the stage and just cried,” she said. “We had never bonded as much before.”

Now Waweya is the face of the IDF for the Arab society in Israel and outside its borders, with videos and information being shared about her on social media (here and here). She no longer hides her service and regularly posts about the Israeli military on her social media accounts.

But Ella Waweya didn’t dream about entering the IDF. She recounted having an identity crisis when she was young.

Although she was raised in a religious Muslim family, she wanted to part of Israeli society. She said she remembers asking herself if she was Palestinian or Israeli.

She also said she recalls watching the Qatar-based Arab news channel Al Jazeera during the Second Intifada and being upset over the coverage of Israel. She wanted to be able to show the side of Israel that she knew.

“When I saw Arabic media I thought, ‘Someone needs to give a different perspective on this,’” she said.

For Waweya, the turning point came when she received her Israeli ID card at age 16. Then, she knew she was an Israeli.

She said she remembers seeing Israeli soldiers at bus stops and wanting to be a soldier herself.

“I didn’t know I could join the IDF as an Arab Muslim,” she said in an interview.

Instead, she volunteered in an Israeli hospital for her year of national service, and also enrolled in an Israeli university to study communications, with the goal of becoming a journalist.

It was while working at the hospital, chatting with a Bedouin security guard, when her understanding changed. The guard, who had served in the military, asked her why she chose national service over the IDF. That was when she realized it was possible to enlist as an Arab Muslim.

Shortly afterwards, she was invited to attend a media conference in the southern city of Eilat as part of her studies. The conference became the turning point in her life.

She said she recalls a panel discussion at the conference about conscription of ultra-Orthodox Jews. A member of the audience was explaining why the ultra-Orthodox should not serve in the army. Waweya raised her hand and explained that she disagreed. She felt that all Israelis should serve in the army and that she herself would like to serve.

"All of a sudden—I did not understand why—everybody got up on their feet and applauded me," she said. "I was very young and innocent."

An Israeli military reporter, Roni Daniel from Channel 12 news, and IDF spokesperson, Brig. Gen. Yoav "Poli" Mordechai, approached her after the conference and congratulated her.

Mordechai instructed the head of his office to take her contact details and, two days later, Waweya received a summons for an interview at the IDF Spokesperson's office in Tel Aviv. Shortly afterwards, she enlisted and began working for the military press office.

Waweya said that, up until that point, she was not even aware that the military had non-combat positions.

Now, almost a decade later, Waweya has not only achieved acclaim and promotions—becoming the highest ranking Arab Muslim woman in the Israeli military—but has also gained the respect of the Arab press worldwide and become an inspiration for other Arabs to enlist or do national service.

“One man told me, ‘if you as a woman were not afraid to go and enlist, how should I as a man be?’” she said.

Waweya said she is encouraged by the 2020 Abraham Accords and the warming relations between Israel and various Arab nations.

“I feel that there is a change, but there is so much more work to do,” she said. “This is my place, to change the image in the Arab society and to show the togetherness of the State of Israel.” {eoa}

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