

The Palestinian Prisoners' Strike and Marwan Barghouti's Race to the Top

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Palestinian Prisoners' Day is marked every year on April 17th. It is considered a national commemoration day, a shared general consensus amongst the Palestinian population. This day is encumbered with political and social meaning, and this year it is receiving special attention due to the current prisoner strike led by Fatah senior official, Marwan Barghouti. This prisoners' strike is intended to be turned into a wider struggle that is to be fought on two main fronts; the first is against the State of Israel, and the second is within the Palestinian political sphere itself.

Prison as a Center of Political Power

For Marwan Barghouti, the most popular political figure within Fatah movement, the prisoners' strike is an opportunity to raise his profile within the Palestinian national movement. In 2016 Barghouti won first place in elections for Fatah's Central Committee, despite this he feels excluded from the centers of power and decision-making within the movement. This is all taking place in the run-up to the inevitable struggle for succession that will follow Mahmoud Abbas' passing or resignation as the Palestinian President and Chairman of the PLO. Barghouti is looking for a way to translate the support he got in the internal elections within Fatah into a demonstration of nationwide popular support.

Barghouti has tried to maneuver politically from prison in the past. In 2006 he drafted The Prisoners Document, known also as the National Unity Document, which was signed by senior officials from the PLO, Hamas and The Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This document was intended to structure the incorporation of Islamist factions into the PLO and put an end to the internal rifts which manifested after the elections of that year. The route to this incorporation goes through their acceptance of the idea of a two-state solution. The groundwork for an acceptance by Islamist organizations of a Palestinian state along the premise of 1967 borders, without recognition of Israel, was achieved through internal Palestinian dialogue, initiated by Barghouti. Demonstration of the success of this dialogue can be seen in Hamas' new political document, due to be published soon.

The Prisoners' Demands

Prisoners' strikes are not new within the realm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They take on many forms, ranging from resisting roll calls, cell searches and hunger strikes. They are intended to improve conditions of those incarcerated or raise awareness to political issues.

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Israel has clear and consistent policies which separate different populations of prisoners. In the Israeli prison system, prisoners serving criminal charges have different rights and more freedoms than those held for security reasons. Treatment of security-related prisoners, many of whom are convicted terrorists charged with murder, is in full accordance to the standards and practices of International Law. The demand in the current prisoners' strike is for equal treatment for all prisoners. In the past, prisoners held for security reasons were granted more privileges, which are not defined within international law, but were later taken away after the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit in 2006.

Barghouti has taken upon himself the leadership of the strike, which has been planned a month in advance. This positions him as a leader of all security prisoners, and this is a powerful card to play within the internal Palestinian political game. He has raised a number of [demands](#) of Israeli authorities: (1) Access to public telephones in the security section of the prison; (2) Lengthening of family visiting from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, and allowing for more frequent visits – an increase from once a month to twice a month; (3) Including of second degree kin in family visits (today only kin of the first degree are allowed); (4) Reinstating the option to study at the Open University and sit for the Palestinian matriculation exams; (5) Expanding health services and allowing treatment outside the prison hospital in Ramle; (6) Providing air conditioning in Megido and Gilboa prisons; (7) Adding cable television channels; (8) Allowing family members to bring in books, magazines and newspapers during visits.

The Political Context

The Prisoners' strike erupted at a moment when Barghouti's personal interests aligned with the collective distress of his fellow prisoners. The prisoner issue is one of the most central issues to Palestinian society and is capable of driving a very emotional collective action. Barghouti had expected to be appointed Abbas' deputy after the Fatah elections. The decision not to appoint him was a personal insult. He therefore decided to challenge both Abbas' and Fatah's leadership.

With the strike, Barghouti brings Fatah back to the forefront of Palestinian politics, on the expense of Hamas. It is no coincidence that the strike is called "The Strike of Honor". The name is linked to one of the legendary battles in Fatah history, the battle of Karameh in March 1968, which is considered a milestone in establishing Fatah's primacy within the Palestinian National Movement.

Hamas is aware of Barghouti's attempts at achieving political preeminence within Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, and has not officially announced that it will join the strike but only its general support for it. Hamas' political success in the Palestinian arena after the 2006 elections rests mostly on the Shalit prisoner swap, which was a sign of success for Hamas' armed resistance. Today, Hamas is worried by Fatah's dominance and leadership within prisons and is in a complex political crisis. Abbas is using different economic tools to gain leverage over Hamas. This has resulted in Hamas failing to show improvement in living conditions in the Gaza Strip, where people are living under a severe humanitarian crisis. The strike may generate significant public support, which may very well lead Hamas to officially join it, in an attempt to benefit from the strike's potential success.

In the run-up to Abbas' visit to the White House in May, the Palestinian President seeks to highlight the importance of achieving an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Abbas also plans to present a plan to end the internal rift among the Palestinians. The prisoner strike diverts the

spotlight from these political maneuvers and demands that the Palestinian Authority leadership adjust itself to the agendas of Barghouti, the prisoners' leadership, and the Palestinian public

Barghouti's challenge could turn into an incentive for Fatah's renewal. Fatah is amongst the pioneers of struggle and resistance within the Palestinian national movement, but it has been recently seen as a group rife with political infighting and stagnation. Barghouti's call to the Palestinian public to take to the streets, to protest and support the strike, gives the younger Palestinian generation a sense of pride and recruits them to a cause that has consensus at the heart of the Palestinian society. By rousing the street to action, Barghouti is insinuating to his friends within Fatah leadership that he is not just a prisoners' leader, but also the leader of the street. For Fatah youngsters, Barghouti offers a struggle for personal and class freedom, which gives them a sense of national belonging.

Conclusion

The prisoners' strike creates the potential for violence within and outside the Israeli prison system. This is aligned with part of Barghouti's basic political strategy since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa intifada in October 2000 – support for active struggle with violent patterns, alongside consistent political advancement through negotiations.

By announcing the strike, Barghouti is challenging both Fatah and Hamas leadership, within the prison system and the Gaza Strip. By calling to resist prison authorities, which are the representatives of Israeli state system, Barghouti is re-positioning himself at the forefront of the leadership and is drafting new action models that incorporate both popular struggle and political discourse. This is a direct continuation of his attempts to drum up international pressure for his release after he was sentenced to five life sentences for direct involvement in terrorism during the Al-Aqsa intifada.

The prisoners' strike is the most critical point so far of Barghouti's political career. It is an attempt to brand himself as the Palestinian Nelson Mandela, a far from realistic analogy. His challenge to the existing order is a large gamble; failure to achieve the objectives of the strike along with photos of hunger strikers wasting away, would indeed negatively affect Israel's international reputation, but they could also lead to accusations against Barghouti for direct loss of life. Israel sees the strike as a tactical action which does not stand out from other prisoner struggles to improve conditions. It will try to break the strike before it can gather too much international exposure and political gains for its leaders, Barghouti first among them.

Barghouti seeks to attain Fatah predominance within the Palestinian national movement and leadership of the Palestinian Authority, with a battle waged through prison bars and a dialogue with his people. As long as Barghouti sticks to the two state solution and preaches an un-armed struggle, he maintains for himself and his people a glimmer of hope in future political struggles.