

The New Mandela

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MARWAN BARGHOUTI HAS spoken up. After a long silence, he has sent a message from prison. In Israeli ears, this message does not sound pleasant. But for Palestinians, and for Arabs in general, it makes sense.

His message may well become the new program of the Palestinian liberation movement.

I FIRST met Marwan in the heyday of post-Oslo optimism. He was emerging as a leader of the new Palestinian generation, the home-grown young activists, men and women, who had matured in the first Intifada.

He is a man of small physical stature and large personality. When I met him, he was already the leader of Tanzim (“organization”), the youth group of the Fatah movement.

The topic of our conversations then was the organization of demonstrations and other non-violent actions, based on close cooperation between the Palestinians and Israeli peace groups. The aim was peace between Israel and a new State of Palestine.

When the Oslo process died with the assassinations of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, Marwan and his organization became targets. Successive Israeli leaders – Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak and Ariel Sharon – decided to put an end to the two-state agenda. In the brutal “Defensive Shield operation (launched by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, the new leader of the Kadima Party) the Palestinian Authority was attacked, its services destroyed and many of its activists arrested.

Marwan Barghouti was put on trial. It was alleged that, as the leader of Tanzim, he was responsible for several “terrorist” attacks in Israel. His trial was a mockery, resembling a Roman gladiatorial arena more than a judicial process. The hall was packed with howling rightists, presenting themselves as “victims of terrorism”. Members of Gush Shalom protested against the trial inside the court building but we were not allowed anywhere near the accused.

Marwan was sentenced to five life sentences. The picture of him raising his shackled hands above his head has become a Palestinian national icon. When I visited his family in Ramallah, it was hanging in the living room.

IN PRISON, Marwan Barghouti was immediately recognized as the leader of all Fatah prisoners. He is respected by Hamas activists as well. Together, the imprisoned leaders of Fatah and Hamas published several statements calling for Palestinian unity and reconciliation. These were widely distributed outside and received with admiration and respect.¹

NOWADAYS, MARWAN Barghouti is considered the outstanding candidate for leader of Fatah and president of the Palestinian Authority after Mahmoud Abbas. He is one of the very

few personalities around whom all Palestinians, Fatah as well as Hamas, can unite.

After the capture of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, when the prisoner exchange was discussed, Hamas put Marwan Barghouti on top of the list of Palestinian prisoners whose release it demanded. This was a very unusual gesture, since Marwan belonged to the rival – and reviled – faction.

The Israeli government struck Marwan from the list right away, and remained adamant. When Shalit was finally released, Marwan stayed in prison. Obviously he was considered more dangerous than hundreds of Hamas “terrorists” with “blood on their hands”.

Why?

Cynics would say: because he wants peace. Because he sticks to the two-state solution. Because he can unify the Palestinian people for that purpose. All good reasons for a Netanyahu to keep him behind bars.

SO WHAT did Marwan tell his people this week?

Clearly, his attitude has hardened. So, one must assume, has the attitude of the Palestinian people at large.

He calls for a Third Intifada, a non-violent mass uprising in the spirit of the Arab Spring.

His manifesto is a clear rejection of the policy of Mahmoud Abbas, who maintains limited but all-important cooperation with the Israeli occupation authorities. Marwan calls for a total rupture of all forms of cooperation, whether economic, military or other.

A focal point of this cooperation is the day-to-day collaboration of the American-trained Palestinian security services with the Israeli occupation forces. This arrangement has effectively stopped violent Palestinian attacks in the occupied territories and in Israel proper. It guarantees, in practice, the security of the growing Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Marwan also calls for a total boycott of Israel, Israeli institutions and products in the Palestinian territories and throughout the world. Israeli products should disappear from West Bank shops, Palestinian products should be promoted.

At the same time, Marwan advocates an official end to the charade called “peace negotiations”. This term, by the way, is never heard anymore in Israel. First, it was replaced with “peace process”, then “political process”, and lately “the political matter”. The simple word “peace” has become taboo among rightists and most “leftists” alike. It’s political poison.

Marwan proposes to make the absence of peace negotiations official. No more international talk about “reviving the peace process”, no more rushing around of ridiculous people like Tony Blair, no more hollow announcements by Hillary Clinton and

¹Members of the extended Barghouti family, by the way, play a major role in Palestinian affairs across the entire spectrum from moderate to extremist. One of them is Mustapha Barghouti, a doctor who heads a moderate Palestinian party with many connections abroad, whom I regularly meet at demonstrations in Bilin and elsewhere. I once joked that we always cry when we see each other – from tear gas. The family has its roots in a group of villages north of Jerusalem.

Catherine Ashton, no more empty declarations of the “Quartet”. Since the Israeli government clearly has abandoned the two-state solution – which it never really accepted in the first place – keeping up the pretense just harms the Palestinian struggle.

Instead of this hypocrisy, Marwan proposes to renew the battle in the UN. First, apply again to the Security Council for the acceptance of Palestine as a member state, challenging the US to use its solitary veto openly against practically the whole world. After the expected rejection of the Palestinian request by the Council as a result of the veto, request a decision by the General Assembly, where the vast majority would vote in favor. Though this would not be binding, it would demonstrate that the freedom of Palestine enjoys the overwhelming support of the family of nations, and isolate Israel (and the US) even more.

Parallel to this course of action, Marwan insists on Palestinian unity, using his considerable moral force to put pressure on both Fatah and Hamas.

TO SUMMARIZE, Marwan Barghouti has given up all hope of achieving Palestinian freedom through cooperation with Israel, or even Israeli opposition forces. The Israeli peace movement is not mentioned anymore. “Normalization” has become a dirty word.

These ideas are not new, but coming from the No. 1 Palestinian prisoner, the foremost candidate for the succession of Mahmoud Abbas, the hero of the Palestinian masses, it means a turn to a more militant course, both in substance and in tone.

Marwan remains peace oriented – as he made clear when, in a rare recent appearance in court, he called out to the Israeli journalists that he continues to support the two-state solution. He also remains committed to non-violent action, having come to the conclusion that the violent attacks of yesteryear harmed

the Palestinian cause instead of furthering it.

He wants to call a halt to the gradual and unwilling slide of the Palestinian Authority into a Vichy-like collaboration, while the expansion of the Israeli “settlement enterprise” goes on undisturbed.

NOT BY accident did Marwan publish his manifesto on the eve of “Land Day”, the world-wide day of protest against the occupation.

“Land Day” is the anniversary of an event that took place in 1976 to protest against the decision of the Israeli government to expropriate huge tracts of Arab-owned land in Galilee and other parts of Israel. The Israeli army and police fired on the protesters, killing six of them.²

Land day was a turning point for Israel’s Arab citizens, and later became a symbol for Arabs everywhere. This year, the Netanyahu government threatened to shoot anybody who even approaches our borders. It may well be a harbinger for the Third Intifada heralded by Marwan.

For some time now, the world has lost much of its interest in Palestine. Everything looks quiet. Netanyahu has succeeded in deflecting world attention from Palestine to Iran. But in this country, nothing is ever static. While it seems that nothing is happening, settlements are growing incessantly, and so is the deep resentment of the Palestinians who see this happening before their eyes.

Marwan Barghouti’s manifesto expresses the near-unanimous feelings of the Palestinians in the West Bank and elsewhere. Like Nelson Mandela in apartheid South Africa, the man in prison may well be more important than the leaders outside.

²The day after, two of my friends and I laid wreaths on the graves of the victims, an act that earned me an outbreak of hatred and vilification I have seldom experienced.