

Palestine's Nelson Mandela

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I HAVE A CONFESSION to make: I like Marwan Barghouti.

I have visited him at his modest Ramallah home several times. During our conversations, we discussed Israeli-Palestinian peace. Our ideas were the same: to create the State of Palestine next to the State of Israel, and to establish peace between the two states, based on the 1967 lines (with minor adjustments), with open borders and cooperation.

This was not a secret agreement: Barghouti has repeated this proposal many times, both in prison and outside.

I also like his wife, Fadwa, who was educated as a lawyer but devotes her time to fight for the release of her husband. At the crowded funeral of Yasser Arafat, I happened to stand next to her and saw her tear-streaked face.

This week, Barghouti, together with about a thousand other Palestinian prisoners in Israel, started an unlimited hunger strike. I have just signed a petition for his release.

MARWAN BARGHOUTI is a born leader. In spite of his small physical stature, he stands out in any gathering. Within the Fatah movement he became the leader of the youth division.¹

The Barghoutis are a widespread clan, dominating several villages near Ramallah. Marwan himself was born in 1959 in Kobar village. An ancestor, Abd-al-Jabir al-Barghouti, led an Arab revolt in 1834. I have met Mustafa Barghouti, an activist for democracy, in many demonstrations and shared the tear gas with him. Omar Barghouti is a leader of the international anti-Israel boycott movement.

Perhaps my sympathy for Marwan is influenced by some similarities in our youth. He joined the Palestinian resistance movement at the age of 15, the same age as I was when I joined the Hebrew underground some 35 years earlier. My friends and I considered ourselves freedom fighters, but were branded by the British authorities as "terrorists". The same has now happened to Marwan—a freedom fighter in his own eyes and in the eyes of the vast majority of the Palestinian people, a "terrorist" in the eyes of the Israeli authorities.

When he was put on trial in the Tel Aviv District Court,

¹The word "Fatah" is the initials of "Palestinian Liberation Movement, in reverse.

²Gush Shalom published a statement this week suggesting that by the same logic, Menachem Begin should have been sentenced by the British to 91 life terms for the bombing of the King David hotel, in which 91 people—many of them Jews—lost their lives.

my friends and I, members of the Israeli peace movement Gush Shalom (Peace Bloc), tried to demonstrate our solidarity with him in the courtroom. We were expelled by armed guards. One of my friends lost a toenail in this glorious fight.

YEARS AGO I called Barghouti the "Palestinian Mandela". Despite their difference in height and skin color, there was a basic similarity between the two: both were men of peace, but justified the use of violence against their oppressors. However, while the Apartheid regime was satisfied with one life term, Barghouti was sentenced to a ridiculous five life terms and another 40 years—for acts of violence executed by his Tanzim organization.²

There is another similarity between Mandela and Barghouti: when the apartheid regime was destroyed by a combination of "terrorism", violent strikes and a worldwide boycott, Mandela emerged as the natural leader of the new South Africa. Many people expect that when a Palestinian state is set up, Barghouti will become its president, after Mahmoud Abbas.

There is something in his personality that inspires confidence, turning him into the natural arbiter of internal conflicts. Hamas people, who are the opponents of Fatah, are inclined to listen to Marwan. He is the ideal conciliator between the two movements.

Some years ago, under the leadership of Marwan, a large number of prisoners belonging to the two organizations signed a joint appeal for national unity, setting out concrete terms. Nothing came of this.

That, by the way, may be an additional reason for the Israeli government's rejection of any suggestion of freeing Barghouti, even when a prisoner exchange provided a convenient opportunity. A free Barghouti could become a powerful agent for Palestinian unity, the last thing the Israeli overlords want.

Divide et impera—"divide and rule"—since Roman times this has been a guiding principle of every regime that suppresses another people. In this the Israeli authorities have been incredibly successful. Political geography provided an ideal setting: The West Bank (of the Jordan river) is cut off from the Gaza Strip by some 50 km of Israeli

territory.

Hamas got hold of the Gaza Strip by elections and violence, and refuses to accept the leadership of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), a union of the more secular organizations which rules the West Bank.

This is not an unusual situation in national liberation organizations. They often split into more and less extreme wings, to the great delight of the oppressor. The last thing the Israeli authorities are willing to do is release Barghouti and allow him to restore Palestinian national unity. God forbid.

THE HUNGER strikers do not demand their own release, but demand better prison conditions. They demand, inter alia, more frequent and longer visits by wives and family, an end to torture, decent food, and such. They also remind us that under international law an "occupying power" is forbidden to move prisoners from an occupied territory to the home country of the occupier. Exactly this happens to almost all Palestinian "security prisoners".

Last week Barghouti set out these demands in an op-ed article published by the New York Times, an act that shows the newspaper's better side. The editorial note described the author as a Palestinian politician and Member of Parliament. It was a courageous act by the paper (which somewhat restored its standing in my eyes after it condemned Bashar al-Assad for using poison gas, without a sliver of evidence).

But courage has its limits. The very next day the NYT published an editor's note stating that Barghouti was convicted for murder. It was an abject surrender to Zionist pressure.

The man who claimed this victory was an individual I find particularly obnoxious. He calls himself Michael Oren and is now a deputy minister in Israel, but he was born in the USA and belongs to the subgroup of American Jews who are super-super-patriots of Israel. He adopted Israeli citizenship and an Israeli name in order to serve as Israel's ambassador to the USA. In this capacity he attracted attention by using particularly virulent anti-Arab

rhetoric, so extreme as to make even Binyamin Netanyahu look moderate.

I doubt that this person has ever sacrificed anything for his patriotism, indeed, he has made quite a career of it. Yet he speaks with contempt about Barghouti, who has spent much of his life in prison and exile. He describes Barghouti's article in the New York Times as a "journalistic terror act". Look who's talking.

A HUNGER STRIKE is a very courageous act. It is the last weapon of the least protected people on earth—the prisoners. The abominable Margaret Thatcher let the Irish hunger strikers starve to death.

The Israeli authorities wanted to force-feed Palestinian hunger strikers. The Israeli Physicians Association, much to its credit, refused to cooperate, since such acts have led in the past to the deaths of the victims. That put an end to this kind of torture.

Barghouti demands that Palestinian political prisoners be treated as prisoners-of-war. No chance of that.

However, one should demand that prisoners of any kind be treated humanely. This means that deprivation of liberty is the only punishment imposed, and that within the prisons the maximum of decent conditions should be accorded.

In some Israeli prisons, a kind of modus vivendi between the prison authorities and the Palestinian prisoners seems to have been established. Not so in others. One gets the impression that the prison service is the enemy of the prisoners, making their life as miserable as possible. This has worsened now, in response to the strike.

This policy is cruel, illegal and counter-productive. There is no way to win against a hunger-strike. The prisoners are bound to win, especially when decent people all over the world are watching. Perhaps even the NYT.

I am waiting for the day when I can visit Marwan again as a free man in his home in Ramallah. Even more so if Ramallah is, by that time, a town in the free State of Palestine.