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Palestine

The hunger strikers need us to speak out

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV508 - May 2017 -

Publication date: Thursday 18 May 2017

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A hunger strike that has involved more than 1,500 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails is starting its fourth week, and Israeli authorities are continuing a crackdown against it.

Around one in four Palestinians confined in Israeli prisons are participating in the hunger strike that was launched on April 17 to raise [a host of demands around the conditions and treatment they endure](#), ranging from contact with their families to medical care and an end to solitary confinement. Israeli officials have responded with a crackdown—some hunger strikers have been thrown in solitary, while others have been dispersed throughout Israel's system of jails. More prisoners are suffering serious health consequences, including muscle atrophy and loss of balance, [according to the strike's media committee](#).

One of the best-known hunger strikers is Marwan Barghouti, a leader of the First and Second Intifadas who has been behind bars for the last 15 years. His son, Aarab Marwan Barghouti, talked to Brian Bean in Chicago after a demonstration in solidarity with the hunger strikers about the state of the struggle now and the importance of solidarity.

What are the causes of the hunger strike, and what goals do the strikers hope to achieve?

The hunger strike started on April 17 with more than 1,500 Palestinian political prisoners. They are united to raise their voices against the inhumane conditions of the prison.

A lot of the hunger strikers are in bad health, so they want to improve medical care. Some have been imprisoned for years without trial. And, of course, all of them have not been able to visit their families on a regular basis. They want to be able to touch their families. They want visitation time to be one and a half hours instead of 45 minutes, and they want better conditions for family members when they go visit.

Personally, I used to visit my father a lot before I was 16. Then after I turned 16, I could only visit him once every two years. That's illegal under international law, but it happens to a lot of families. Yesterday, I met with the father of a prisoner named Mohammad, and he told me that he only was able to visit his son six times in the last 16 years.

The demands are for humane conditions and human rights. This strike is called the "dignity and freedom hunger strike"—dignity because it is time to say enough to inhumane conditions in prisons, and freedom because they are all freedom fighters.

Everyone should understand that these individuals are not in prison for being a criminal. These are freedom fighters, and they are guilty only of raising their voice against the occupation.

This is, of course, [not the first hunger strike](#) by Palestinian prisoners. From [Khader Adnan](#) and [Samer Issawi](#) to [Mohammed Allan](#) and others, there is a long history of Palestinian resistance engaging in hunger strikes to protest the apartheid system of Israeli courts and prisons. How is this hunger strike situated in that history of struggle?

The hunger strike is the most peaceful way you can stand up against the prison authorities. This hunger strike is different than the ones carried by individuals like Khader Adnan. Those would strike for 70 or 90 days because they used to take vitamins and other things to keep them alive. This one is more like [the hunger strike that happened in](#)

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[1992](#). They only take salt and water. [according to news reports, some hunger strikers had started taking vitamins].

They are not asking for a lot, and now is their time to say "Enough." They have the strongest mentality you can imagine.

We are not only talking about my father, who has long experience at fighting against the occupation, and who has been in prison for more than 21 years of his life, who was kicked out of Palestine for seven years. We are talking also about Karim Younis, who has been imprisoned for 35 years, the longest political prisoner of this struggle. We are talking about some people who are really sick and want treatment, and they can't get it.

They are heroes—that's why they are in prison in the first place. They are people who have given literally everything for Palestine, all these years. I don't think they are going to give up, no matter what.

The Israeli government displays such arrogance. Anyone who reads the demands of the hunger strikers can see they are easy to meet. It is probably surprising to most people that these demands have not been met already. But they haven't. So the hunger strikers are going to take it as far as they need to in order to get their demands met.

Another difference that accounts for the size of the hunger strike is that it involves freedom fighters from many different Palestinian parties and factions.

All the Palestinian parties are included in this. Every day, more groups of prisoners are joining the strike. They are all united in asking for dignity and freedom. Political leaders are taking part in the strike—my father, Marwan Barghouthi; Karim Younis' Ayman al-Sharbat; [Ahmad Sa'adat](#).

These prisoners are united, with the same plan. The Israeli prison authorities tried to negotiate with them individually, and they all answered that the Israelis needed to negotiate with our leaders.

How was this unity achieved between different wings of the Palestinian resistance?

I would say that the main reason is the political leaders in prison. These are prominent, high-profile people—they are respected, and everybody listens to them.

My father's main message since the Intifada is to be united. Unity is the only strength we have. He has been working to build this, and it has been achieved in prison. You don't have people saying "this guy is Hamas," "this guy is Fatah," "this guy is al-Jabhah [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine]." They are all together and have been working on this for many years.

My father has been there for 15 years, and he has been building this base along with Ahmad Sa'adat and the others. They have finally achieved unity and we can see it in this hunger strike.

Yesterday, you and I were part of a demonstration in Chicago showing support for the hunger strike. What has solidarity looked like in Palestine and internationally?

Solidarity is so important because it puts pressure on the Israeli government. The Israeli government has taught us through its history that it will not move or negotiate without being pressured to do so.

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Internationally, we have gotten a lot of supportâ€”from Argentina, from Europe, from the UK. I should mention that a few studentsâ€”one of whom is a friend of mineâ€”went on a hunger strike for days in the streets in Manchester. They inspired some groups in Europe, who started a hunger strike several days ago. I received a video from group in South Africa that is starting a hunger strike. From the Italian Parliament, to Nobel Prize winners, to celebrities, people have sent us their support.

In Palestine, of course, there have been huge protests. Even in the U.S., a lot of people are supporting us. We also saw have seen the success of the [#SaltWaterChallenge](#), with people sending in videos from everywhere to pledge their solidarity.

If we feel like we are alone in this, we aren't going to be able to keep going, which is why it is so important to receive the support, even if it is as small an act as a status update or a video or sharing an article on Facebook. I really encourage everyone to raise their voice for humanityâ€”to raise their voice for the right side.

Can you talk more about the #SaltWaterChallenge? This was something you initiated, right? To challenge peopleâ€”like the ALS Ice Bucket Challengeâ€”to take a video of themselves drinking salt water, the only thing the hunger strikers are consuming, and share it on social media.

The #SaltWaterChallenge was launched in April by some friends and I in the Bay Area. I gathered them in my house and told them: My father has been starving for eight days, and I need to do something – something that is not traditional. I want it to go viral so everyone knows about the hunger strike.

We brainstormed and came up with the idea in less than an hour. The success started when I challenged Mohammad Assaf, the winner of *Arab Idol* – and Ali Jaber, a judge on the show *Arabs Got Talent*. Mohammad Assaf did it a few hours after I challenged him, and Ali Jaber did it live on the *Arabs Got Talent* show.

Many celebrities followed. Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, the Nobel Peace Prize winner from Argentina, did it. I really can't tell you how much it touches us.

The U.S., like Israel, has a system of incarceration that is marked by racism and injustice. It is well known that the Israeli and U.S. states collaborate and collude over their tools of repression. Can this contribute to the potential for solidarity?

A few days ago, I spoke at a rally in San Francisco, and one of the main issues was taking up how African American people are targeted and facing inhumane conditions in prison.

When I was asked to speak, I started doing my research and thinking about what we have in common. I realized that we honestly have everything in common. We are both on the oppressed side.

I was raised to value people like Dr. Martin Luther King, who said that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. I was raised on Nelson Mandela, who said that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinian. I was raised on Angela Davis and Jimmy Carter, who all, except Dr. King, supported the campaign for the release of Marwan Barghouthi and Palestinian political prisoners.

We all have the same cause. We are all seekers for justice.

In your speech at the protest yesterday, you mentioned how much your father opened your eyes and inspired you to fight for justice. Can you talk about that?

Being the son of Marwan Barghouthi means I have to raise my voice no matter what. My father is everything to me, and I will do whatever I have to do for him because he gave me everything. He is my role model, and he sacrificed his life for me and my generation. The least I can do is to raise my voice and reach as many people as I can, especially in the U.S.

My living in the U.S. is so important because I want to talk to people in America. I know that the American people are not the problem. The media are the problem—the media are feeding them with Israeli propaganda. My role is to spread the truth.

It's time for us to expose Israeli propaganda and lies. They trying their best to carry out a character assassination of Marwan Barghouthi, which means a character assassination of the Palestinian people. But I will keep going until everyone knows that there are more than 1,500 political prisoners in Israeli jails protesting for their demands such as visiting their families and being able to touch them.

I haven't communicated with my father personally in two years, and we know nothing about how he is doing to be honest. The lawyers are not allowed to see him—which is, of course, illegal, but Israel doesn't care. None of the other prisoners know how he doing either.

We saw Karim Younis on day 15, and he told us they have not seen my father for eight days. No one has heard anything about him since either.

This leaves me speechless. What kind of world are we living in? How can they not even tell us if he is okay? This behavior by the Israeli authorities represents their policies and their ideology. It is frustrating and I just want to know if he is okay.

What can people do to support the hunger strike?

People can raise their voices and reach out to as many people as they can. We have a lot of supporters for the Palestinian cause.

My father and his fellow prisoners have made it easy to show support because when I tell people that they are on a hunger strike for these demands, people are shocked that they didn't even have those rights in the first place. I want people to talk about this and raise awareness.

My father says that our chains will be broken before we are—he has that kind of determination. He wrote [an article published in the New York Times on April 17](#) that explains why the hunger strike was starting, which I encourage everyone to read. It was attacked by Israeli officials, and they punished him by sending him to solitary confinement just for raising his voice.

Can you see how irrational this is? For raising his voice and writing an article in a newspaper, the Israelis were angered and sent him to solitary confinement.

May 8, 2017

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[1] At the time of IV publishing this article we are now into the fifth week of the strike and in the last few days more than 100 prisoners have been [transferred to Israeli hospitals](#) as the strike reaches a critical point.