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A prisoner as a beacon of hope?

The Fatah politician Marwan Barghouti has been jailed in Israel for the last 15 years. His wife, Fadwa Barghouti, explains how he views the current state of affairs in Palestine.

The name of Marwan Barghouti features prominently in any discussion about change within the Palestinian political leadership. In the eyes of the Palestinian public Barghouti is a national hero enjoying strong support. Israel, on the other hand, considers him a terrorist who should remain in prison for the rest of his life. On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of his arrest on 15 April 2002 as well as a large-scale hunger strike Palestinian prisoners began on 17 April 2017, KAS-Ramallah met with Fadwa Barghouti, his wife and sole means of communication with the outside world.

Freedom fighter or terrorist? Barghouti's role within the Palestinian resistance

Marwan Barghouti was born in 1959 in a village near Ramallah. He joined the Fatah movement already as a teenager and established the student wing of the party, Shabiba, during his time at Birzeit University. As the leader of the youth wing, he became one of the faces of the first Intifada (1987-1993). Due to his political involvement, he was first jailed by Israel in the late 1970s and deported to Jordan during the first Intifada, where he joined Fatah's leadership in exile. Along with the Palestinian leadership under Yasser Arafat that was based in Tunis, he was permitted to return to the West Bank under the terms of the Oslo Accords – an agreement that Barghouti supported for a long time – between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. Back in the West Bank, his views changed and he became convinced that Israel is not willing to conclude the peace agreement. This conviction led him to become a supporter of a new resistance movement that contributed to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in the year 2000.

On **15 April 2002** Marwan Barghouti was again captured by Israel and indicted for i.e. complicity in murder and active membership in a terrorist organization. He was convicted by an Israeli civil court in December 2002 and sentenced to five times life imprisonment plus 40 years.¹ Israel considers Barghouti a **terrorist** who represents the bloody face of the Second Intifada. Within the Palestinian society, however, he can rely on **strong and broad support** as the public perceives him as a “man of the street”. Pictures of the imprisoned Barghouti, often in Che Guevara iconography, are omnipresent in the streets.

Although Barghouti does not distance himself from the violence of the Second Intifada, he does not think of it as an appropriate instrument anymore to advance the chances for Palestinian statehood. Today, his wife Fadwa explained to KAS in this interview, he believes in peaceful popular resistance in addition to negotiations with Israel.

According to public opinion polls KAS-Ramallah conducts regularly with the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR), Barghouti is the only Fatah official with realistic chances of beating a Hamas candidate at the **presidential elections**.

Barghouti has always distinguished himself from the Fatah leadership with his own positions since the early years of his political activism. Nonetheless – and despite his absence –, he received the most votes of all candidates for the **Central Committee**, Fatah's highest decision-making body, at the

¹ The sentence refers to terror attacks in Tel Aviv (05.03.2002, three dead), the West Bank (15.01.2001, one dead; 12.06.2001, one dead) as well as a thwarted attack (planned for 26.03.2002 in Jerusalem). For the complete ruling, see Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12.12.2002, [<https://goo.gl/N17ekC>].

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last party congress in November 2016. But high hopes that he would be assigned a leading position within the party remained unfulfilled. Instead, Mahmoud al-Aloul, the former governor of Nablus, was named deputy chairman of Fatah and Jibril Rajoub was named secretary of the Central Committee on 15 February 2017.

Marwan und **Fadwa Barghouti** married in 1984. They have four kids which were all born before and during the Second Intifada. Fadwa Barghouti is a lawyer and leads the campaign for her husband's release. For this reason, she is active in giving talks and meeting politicians abroad.

KAS-Ramallah: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deadlocked. In addition, domestic challenges are increasing and with it the pressure on the Palestinian Authority (PA). How does your husband, Marwan Barghouti, assess the situation?

Fadwa Barghouti: The political situation is difficult. There is neither a peace process nor political initiatives. The unemployment is continuously on the rise and the economic development is getting not better but worse. The Palestinians are living under constant pressure and many are losing hope in the peace process. The situation of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails is one of the few issues that the Palestinian society agrees on regardless of their political affiliation.²

Your husband has been in an Israeli jail for the last 15 years. How does he stay in touch with the outside world?

I have not been working as a lawyer for the past five years, so I can focus completely on leading the campaign to release my husband. I have a team that supports me. There are only two people allowed access to my husband: his lawyer and me. He is not a

² Currently there are approx. 6.000 to 6.500 Palestinians in Israeli jails, among them 300 children (between the age of 11 and 16), 53 women and four members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (the parliament). About 458 are serving a life sentence and about half of the prisoners have been convicted. Cf. [ad-dameer.org/statistics], [B'Tselem; goo.gl/QMKPa].

normal prisoner. He is a leader that must be in contact with his people. That is what we are working for. Today, I am his only means of communication with the outside world.

Israelis and Palestinians alike are losing confidence in the two-state solution. What does your husband think about this?

He sees little hope for a two-state solution. When I meet politicians abroad, I always appeal to them to save what is left of the two-state solution. At the same time, my husband does not think of the one-state solution as a viable alternative. It would only lead to violence, confrontation and ideological conflicts. That is why the international community must assume responsibility and put pressure on the Israeli government to accept the two-state solution. The Israelis already live in a state of their own. We want to live side by side with them in our own state.

President Abbas' strategy has always been negotiations with Israel. What strategy would your husband pursue to solve the conflict?

He does not believe that there can only be one strategy. Negotiations are an important tool. But international humanitarian law also grants people under occupation the right to resist.³ My husband believes in the right balance between negotiations and popular peaceful resistance against the occupation. No people in the world gained their freedom solely through negotiations. The Palestinians have realized by now that the PA's strategy to only rely on negotiations has failed. Popular resistance is a way for the Palestinian people to attract the international community's attention.

There was some disquiet lately within Fatah: Marwan Barghouti did very well in the elections for the Fatah-Central Committee but was not considered for any

³ For more on the "right to resist" see „Zur Zulässigkeit zivilen Ungehorsams gegen militärische Besatzung aus völkerrechtlicher Sicht“, Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste, [goo.gl/XSx6Qh].

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leading position. Is there a conflict between him and the Fatah leadership?

My husband enjoys great support from all levels within Fatah. His success in the last party elections proves it: 91 percent of the delegates voted for him at the party congress in November 2016. The polls conducted by Khalil Shikaki [Director of the Palestinian Think Tank PCPSR] support this as well: While Fatah would receive around 36 percent in parliamentary elections, Marwan would get 59 percent as a presidential candidate. The party would do much better, if he were to run in the elections.

We expected that my husband would be named deputy chairman of Fatah. This would have corresponded with the delegates' vote. My husband has – despite his imprisonment – taken on more political responsibility than other leading party members. That they did not consider him was not fair.

How could he even exert influence from prison?

Let's look at two concrete examples: In 2003, during the Second Intifada, he pushed the international community's demand for a Palestinian cease-fire.⁴ After Hamas won the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council [the parliament] in 2006, he was personally involved in drafting the so called "Prisoners' Document".⁵ It was supposed to form the basis for national consensus to avoid what happened later: the political split between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank. The international community did not pay much attention to the document although Hamas, by approving the document, agreed on a future Palestinian state within the 1967 borders [meaning the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East

Jerusalem].⁶ It also stated that resistance is only permissible within these territories.

Would he have been able to fulfill his role as deputy chairman from prison?

The instances that I described show that he can very well be politically active from prison. Therefore, he would have also been able to be deputy chairman of Fatah. The party base already considers him the actual leader. Only the selfishness of some party members and their rivalry behind the scenes prevented his nomination. Some of them might have also been influenced by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's comments.⁷

Your husband comes from the Fatah youth movement. Today, the youth is standing up to the current conditions: they are frustrated and are demonstrating against the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian leadership. What is Marwan Barghouti's relationship with the youth today?

He is in a constant exchange with the Fatah youth wing. They send him messages and he replies. He is supporting the Palestinian youth. Marwan thinks that the young people are caught in a dilemma: while the political leadership is talking about peace, the situation on the ground is the exact opposite. The diplomatic efforts for international recognition within the United Nations and other international organizations are not helping the youth either to solve their problems: it does not make the Israeli settlements disappear. The Palestinian youth has no confidence in the leadership.

We are now witnessing a large-scale hunger strike of Palestinian prisoners in Is-

⁴ For additional background: CNN, Palestinian officials: Militants offer 3-month truce, 26.06.2003, [goo.gl/j7CNJa].

⁵ Full text: [goo.gl/eV70Dk]; an interview (2006) by bitterlemons.org with Barghouti about the document can be found here [goo.gl/i7CAgG].

⁶ Although the text says that a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders does not come along with the recognition of the State of Israel, which the PLO has already declared but Hamas is still not willing to give.

⁷ Fadwa Barghouti had previously insinuated on Facebook that there might be a connection between Fatah's decision and Netanyahu's comments. Netanyahu commented on the Fatah congress that Barghouti's election radicalized Fatah. Cf. Ahmad Melhem, Why some in Fatah aren't pleased about new deputy leader, al-Monitor, 01.03.2017, [goo.gl/OZ6alw].

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raeli jails. What is behind it and what is Marwan Barghouti's role in it?

Because of the conditions of his detention, my husband is not able to communicate with his people. He cannot engage with the public directly. That he has been successfully running in the elections since 2002 despite these limitations proves his popularity and that the Palestinian people still care about their prisoners. It is the first time that he is taking part in a hunger strike since his imprisonment. The hunger strikers have humanitarian demands. They are protesting for better conditions in the Israeli prisons.⁸ The demands include more regular phone calls with their families, visitation rights twice a month – currently only one visit per month is allowed – and permits for their family members from the West Bank so they can enter Israel to visit them in prison. The hunger strike began on 17 April because Israel was not willing to meet the demands of the prisoners. The student and youth wings of Fatah are showing their solidarity by organizing protests. It is not clear where the strike and the protests will lead. In the face of the challenges Palestinians are facing on a daily basis – e.g. the movement restrictions and the faltering economic development – it is hard to say, if the support for the prisoners will remain on this level. Maybe the people will start demonstrating at the checkpoints. If that happens, Israel should be held accountable because the PA has made it clear: if the government in Jerusalem does not respond to the demands of the Palestinian prisoners, Israel will be responsible for any escalation.

Marwan Barghouti has been sentenced to five times life imprisonment plus 40 years. You have been campaigning for his release for the last 15 years. What keeps you going?

The fortune of the women in Palestine motivates me. To take on responsibility on all levels is part of the Palestinian women's

heritage. I also take heart from the wide support of the public as well as the Fatah base. I also receive a lot of support internationally. Even Nobel Peace Prize winners are backing my husband's release. But the greatest source of energy is my husband himself: he puts his own fate after that of his people.

⁸ See also Shlomi Eldar, Fatah's Barghouti pushes hunger strike for 3.500 prisoners, al-Monitor, 05.04.2017, [goo.gl/MA2OWV].