

The fate of Marwan Barghouti, the most famous Palestinian political prisoner of Israel, explored

Marwan—Tomorrow's Freedom, by Sophia Scott and Georgia Scott

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Opening London's annual Palestine Film festival, held between November 17 and November 30, will be two screenings of the film *Marwan: Tomorrow's Freedom*, a film about Marwan Barghouti.

The most well-known of Israel's Palestinian political prisoners, he has consistently featured in polls as the favourite to succeed 87-year-old Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Barghouti is serving five life sentences plus 40 years in an Israeli jail, after his unlawful arrest and imprisonment by the Israeli authorities during its two-month long military operation in 2002 to suppress the second Palestinian Intifada in the occupied West Bank.

Told by his wife Fadwa and their family, activists, human rights lawyers, journalists and leaders, the film was made over several years and released in 2022. It captures the Palestinian prisoners' struggle against Israeli oppression and provides some context to the October 7 attack and seizure of 240 Israeli hostages by Hamas.

Hamas demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners in return for the hostages. Israel was at that time holding around 5,100, including 33 women, 165 children and 1,200 held without charge in administrative detention that can be renewed indefinitely—a number that has now doubled. So widespread is the practice that almost every single family has had someone arrested and detained by the Israeli security forces.

The film covers Barghouti's life and time in prison, his family visits, campaigns for his release, and dwells on his hunger strike in 2017, highlighting the appalling conditions of his and other Palestinians' detention in Israeli jails. But while it paints a vivid picture of the appalling suffering his lengthy incarceration has inflicted upon both Barghouti and his family, it underplays the political issues involved.

Born in 1959 in Kobar, near Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, Barghouti joined Yasser Arafat's Fatah, the dominant faction within the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) that was committed to the achievement of a Palestinian state by armed struggle. He went on to found the Fatah youth movement. Arrested at the age of 18 by Israel for his militant activities, he was sentenced to four-years in prison.

One of the leaders in the West Bank during the First Intifada that

started in December 1987, he was arrested by Israel and deported to Jordan until he was allowed to return in 1994 under the terms of the 1993 Oslo Accords. The Accords envisaged a Palestinian statelet alongside Israel to be policed by the PLO-controlled Palestinian Authority. Israel's fascistic and racist forces that now infest Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government refused to consider any such face-saving formula for the Palestinian bourgeoisie—to the extent of supporting the November 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for signing the Oslo Accords, signalling the de facto end of the so-called "two state solution".

Barghouti, a supporter of the Accords, was elected in 1996 to the Palestinian Legislative Council, holding the position of Secretary-General of Fatah in the West Bank. As the prospect of a two-state solution receded, he began to call for popular protests and said that "new forms of military struggle" would be features of the "next Intifada" to achieve a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

During the Second Intifada that broke out in September 2000, Barghouti was the political leader of Fatah's armed branch, the Tanzim, established to counter the Islamist groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad that had rejected Oslo and supported the continuation of the armed struggle. Israel responded by seeking his arrest and mounting an assassination attempt in 2001 that narrowly missed him, killing his bodyguard.

In April 2002, with Israel blocked by Washington from arresting Arafat, soldiers arrested Barghouti at his house in Ramallah in the West Bank and took him to Israel. They sought to make an example of him as the highest-ranking Palestinian official taken into Israeli custody and prove that the Palestinian national movement was, in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's words, "a gang of murderers and terrorists."

In an Israeli civilian court Barghouti faced 26 charges of murder and attempted murder stemming from attacks carried out by Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades on Israeli civilians and soldiers the court claimed he had supported and authorized. His legal fate was a foregone conclusion. At least 95 percent of the half million Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza prosecuted in Israeli courts by that time had been convicted, mostly based on plea

bargains because of the near impossibility of successfully contesting the charges at trial.

Barghouti sought to turn the tables on Israel and expose the fraudulent nature of his trial. He refused to defend himself against the charges and evidence based on confessions extracted under torture and ill-treatment, arguing that Israel had no authority to try him as an official of the PA under the Oslo Accords.

Presenting himself as a symbol of Palestinian resistance, Barghouti declared, “My crime is not ‘terrorism’—a term apparently only used to describe the deaths of Israeli civilians but never the deaths of Palestinians. My crime is that I insist on my freedom, freedom for my children, freedom for the entire Palestinian people. And if indeed that is a crime, I proudly plead guilty.”

The filmmakers interviewed the French International Criminal Lawyer Simon Foreman, who was recruited by the Inter Parliamentary Union (an international organisation of national parliaments whose primary stated purpose is to promote democratic governance, accountability, and cooperation among its members) to review Barghouti’s arrest and trial. He criticized Barghouti’s arrest, his ill-treatment in detention and the trial itself. He concluded that “the numerous breaches of international law... make it impossible to conclude that Marwan Barghouti was given a fair trial” and that his arrest on Palestinian territory and transfer to Israel were unlawful.

Barghouti’s conviction and vindictive sentencing for the maximum possible term served to remove a popular political successor to Arafat.

Since his sentencing, Barghouti has—like other Palestinian prisoners—endured solitary confinement and stringent restrictions on family visits that include a ban on bringing in books, clothing, food and other items, and taking photographs with relatives. As a “security” prisoner, he is not even allowed to make phone calls to his family who need Israeli permits to visit him, which are regularly refused on spurious “security” pretexts. Many a time, his wife Fadwa attempted to visit him in accordance with the arrangements only to be turned away after waiting all day to see him. Many prisoners suffer from medical neglect. They have to pay for their own treatment and even then are not provided with adequate healthcare. Sick patients have even been denied water.

Barghouti has on several occasions gone on hunger strike, most recently in 2017 along with 1,500 other prisoners in at least six jails from various Palestinian parties and factions.

In July, Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, said, “Israel’s unlawful carceral practices were tantamount to international crimes which warranted an urgent investigation by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. All the more as these offences appeared to be part of a plan of ‘de-Palestinisation’ of the territory. This threatened the existence of a people as a national cohesive group.”

Barghouti’s wife, a lawyer, has fought an unrelenting battle for his release, a demand that the *World Socialist Web Site* supports unconditionally, along with the immediate and unconditional release of all Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Last summer, she met with senior Arab leaders in Jordan, Egypt

and the Arab League as well as diplomats in the United States and Europe to urge them to secure Barghouti’s release and to gain international support for her husband to head the Palestinian Authority when Abbas retires. The Jordanian and Egyptian foreign ministries made no commitment to secure his release, but the meetings indicate their interest in finding a Nelson Mandela-like figure to head and rescue the corrupt PA, which has lost all political credibility over the 30 years it has worked as Israel’s subcontractor.

After Mandela’s release in 1990, after 26 years in prison, he was placed at the head of the African National Congress-led government and charged with ensuring that capitalism survived the end of Apartheid in South Africa through the political demobilization of the working class and the elevation of a tiny handful of black South Africans at the expense of the vast majority. The ANC was no more able than its national bourgeois counterparts in the Middle East and Africa to provide any solutions to the social and economic problems confronting the working class and peasantry. Its only response to steeply escalating social tensions has been repression, arrests and the lethal crushing of protests and strikes.

The PLO has pursued similar policies, making its peace with US imperialism and pursuing wealth and privilege for a narrow layer after the first intifada, following the path from opposition to co-option. The Palestinian bourgeoisie, dependent upon imperialism and fearful of the working masses below it, cannot resolve the fundamental democratic, economic and social problems confronting the masses.

There is no way forward for the Palestinian working class other than through the class struggle and socialist revolution. This means breaking with the capitalist politics of the Palestinian nationalist factions, secular and Islamist, and building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, uniting Arab and Jewish workers in a struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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