

Tensions rise as Palestinians jailed in Israel launch hunger strike

By [Ruth Eglash](#) April 19 at 2:54 PM

RAMALLAH, West Bank — It has been three days since more than 1,000 Palestinian political prisoners detained in Israeli jails declared an open-ended hunger strike, turning tensions up a notch in the decades-old, intractable conflict.

The protest is a peaceful one, say the prisoners, a fight to improve deteriorating living conditions imposed by the Israeli Prison Service. Allowing more family visits, educational options and more public telephones are their central demands. Palestinian Authority literature also mentions torture, unfair trials, detention of children, medical negligence and solitary confinement experienced by prisoners.

But Israelis say the strike is not about living standards. Conditions for jailed Palestinians, many of whom have killed Israelis, exceed international standards, they say.

It's about politics, the Israelis insist: a battle for leadership within the Palestinian Authority over who might replace Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas when the time comes.

The issue is an emotional one for both sides. To Palestinians, the prisoners are political fighters tried by a foreign entity and held in foreign jails; to Israelis, they are terrorists with Israeli blood on their hands.

As the hunger strike goes on, both sides fear an eruption of violence should one of the prisoners die.

About 6,500 Palestinian prisoners are jailed in Israel, and more than 800,000 Palestinians have been incarcerated at one time or another over the past 50 years, according to the Palestinian Prisoners Club, a 24-year-old support group for Palestinian detainees.

While Palestinian hunger strikes are not new, what sets this one apart is the involvement of Marwan Barghouti, a senior member of the West Bank's ruling Fatah party and in many ways Abbas's natural successor.

A onetime advocate for peace, Barghouti turned militant, leading Palestinians through two "intifadas," or uprisings, against Israel. He has spent the past 15 years in jail, convicted by an Israeli court of five counts of murder and membership in a terrorist organization.

During his lengthy incarceration, Barghouti has maintained a hard line toward Israel and has acquired an almost mythical status among Palestinians. Graffiti of his defiant face appears on the separation wall between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Public opinion surveys consistently show that he is one of the most popular Palestinian leaders.

“I don’t think Marwan needs to go out of his way to improve his public standing, but the strike will strengthen him,” said Ghassan Khatib, a professor of political science at Birzeit University near the West Bank town of Ramallah.

“I’m almost certain he sees himself as the natural leader of the Palestinian people, and running for the presidency might be his only ticket out of jail,” Khatib said.

Whether Barghouti manages to improve prison conditions or not, he looks set to firm up his support and, along the way, challenge Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

For Abbas, who is set to meet with President Trump on May 3, an escalation of Palestinian violence sparked by the strike could overshadow his visit to the White House.

For Israelis, the situation will test legislation passed by the Israeli parliament two years ago that permits authorities to force-feed hunger striking prisoners if their lives are in danger. The law was upheld by Israel’s Supreme Court but drew criticism from the international community and from the medical world, who say force-feeding prisoners against their will is unethical.

Hoping it will not reach that point, Israeli authorities have tried to break the strike by removing the leaders, including Barghouti, from the general prison population and enhancing medical staff at the prisons.

Adding to the tension, an op-ed written by Barghouti was published by the New York Times on Sunday. Israelis were angered not only by his words, but also by the newspaper’s identification of him merely as a “Palestinian leader and parliamentarian,” failing to mention his militant activities. The newspaper later amended his biography.

“Calling Barghouti a ‘political leader’ is like calling Assad a ‘pediatrician,’ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, referring to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. “They are murderers and terrorists.”

Israel’s deputy minister for diplomacy, Michael Oren, called the column “journalistic terrorism” and said that the Times’s Jerusalem bureau should be shuttered.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, who is responsible for the prison services, said Barghouti’s transfer to solitary confinement was not due to the article. “When you have an organized strike, you can’t allow the leadership to stay with the other prisoners,” he said.


Erdan said he would not “surrender to such a strike because it will damage Israel’s security” and make it much harder to deter Palestinian attackers. “This is not political, even though Israeli ministers are saying it is,” said Issa Qarakah, head of prisoners’ affairs for the Palestinian Authority. “All [the prisoners] want is to ensure conditions inside the jails are in full compliance with human rights.”

“When you look at Barghouti’s demands, it is clear this is not a real humanitarian issue,” said Erdan. “Israel complies with international law. Everyone knows this is all about Barghouti’s political interests.”

Qarakah said Israel’s refusal to negotiate with the striking prisoners would only bolster their ranks. On Wednesday, the Palestinian Authority turned to foreign diplomats for help to mediate an end to the strike.

Jamal Barakat, whose brother, Salim Barakat, was killed in a 2002 attack orchestrated by Barghouti, said the 57-year-old Palestinian should stay behind bars. Barakat showed little sympathy for the prisoner’s struggle.

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