

Going It Alone? Unilateralism VS.Negotiation. Talking with Marwan Barghouti

Friday 20 October 2006, by [BARGHOUTI Marwan](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2006).

Marwan Barghouti is a member of the Revolutionary Council of Fateh. He is currently serving a life sentence in an Israeli jail, but is viewed by all observers, including Israelis, as a potential future Palestinian leader. His imprisonment is seen as a political act and his release will constitute a substantial part of any future political breakthrough.

This interview originally appeared in the Lebanese paper al-Shira'. This is the first publication of the interview in English.

Question: How do you envisage the future working relationship between President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) who is affiliated with Fateh Movement and a Hamas-led government in the light of Israel's unilateral policy and the international boycott of the Hamas government?

I consider that the building of democratic Palestinian institutions consolidates the Palestinian struggle and leads to the solidification of the partnership between the various powers. The presidential, local, and legislative elections are an achievement that is a source of pride for the Palestinians and a badge of honor for Fateh adherents because it is their movement that has pioneered and founded this democratic structure. Now the national partnership is being embodied in the Palestinian Authority (PA) through the president and the government - i.e., between the movements of Fateh and Hamas - and it encompasses all members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

In my estimation, the possibility of returning to the negotiating table and the so-called peace process has dwindled considerably, if not completely. This has been the case, especially since Camp David and Ehud Barak's declaration that 'there is no Palestinian partner.'

Ariel Sharon adopted this statement and made it his mantra, and embarked on the liquidation of the PA, including its president Yasser Arafat. There seems to exist a general consensus in Israel regarding the strategy of unilateral solutions that ignore the Palestinians altogether. Israel's recourse to such a strategy stems from its reluctance to accept a solution that will give the Palestinians the minimum level of their inalienable national rights. Unilateral steps will not lead to stability, security, or peace. Peace can only be attained by an end to the occupation and a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian areas occupied in 1967; the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital; and the guarantee and implementation of the right of return of the Palestine refugees.

Will Hamas be able to reconcile between the logic of the continuation of armed resistance with the logic of the PA and the political process?

This question should be addressed to Hamas. Nonetheless, Hamas enjoys a majority in the PLC and has formed a government on its own; it has the right to choose its policy and to represent it as it sees fit. That said, Hamas bears the responsibility to preserve the national gains achieved by the Palestinian people locally, regionally and internationally. It should also be stressed that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) remains the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the highest political reference. The fact that the PLO now finds itself beleaguered with stagnation and erosion, and needs radical and comprehensive reform, does not invalidate this legitimacy. I hope that both Hamas and Islamic Jihad will join the organization, for they have an important role to play in the Palestinian arena. I am hoping mechanisms can be found for a prompt rebuilding and restructuring of the PLO institutions, and I am looking forward to the convening of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) with its new frameworks, in order to preserve the national unity within the organization. I believe that according to the interim constitution, the PA powers are distributed between the elected president and the elected government, and Hamas has to take these facts very seriously into consideration. It is deplorable that a power struggle appears on television at a time when the real powers in Palestine are falling into the hands of the occupation, and while the Palestinian people together with the PA, the president and the PLC are all still under occupation. The fact is that Fateh was able to reconcile between the political, the diplomatic, the negotiations, and the control of the PA, on the one hand, and resistance and the intifada, on the other, bolstered by international legitimacy as well as laws and resolutions pertaining to Palestine. Will Hamas be capable of doing the same?

The immediate future will tell. In my view, Hamas must hold on to the resistance option and reject free concessions, although it is going to find great difficulty combining between the PA and resistance.

What does Hamas's new position signal when it talks, for the first time, about the possibility of coexistence with Israelis within two states on the bases of a long-term truce?

There is a consensus among all the Palestinian forces and factions that the goal of the Palestinian people at this historical juncture is the establishment of an independent, fully sovereign state within the borders of 1967, with its capital Jerusalem, and the exercise of the right of return for all the Palestine refugees. This is what was agreed upon in the Cairo Declaration, which is an indirect acceptance of the principle of the two-state solution.

In a message to the UN, the new PA Foreign Minister, Mahmoud al-Zahhar, reportedly talked about a two-state solution, and the leaders of Hamas have reacted positively to the principles of peace as put forward by the Arab countries. I think Hamas and its government are looking for reciprocation and a price for their agreement to any political move. They are right to insist on a genuine reciprocation; it is neither acceptable nor logical to give free concessions.

How do you envisage getting out of prison in the light of rumors that you may be included in a prisoners exchange between Israel and Hizbullah?

First of all, let me stress that my major preoccupation remains the freedom of the Palestinian people, and I hope - even believe - that the moment is close at hand when they will obtain freedom, independence, and the right of return. The liberation of Gaza is but the beginning of the end of this protracted occupation. I am certain that those who have succeeded in forcing the occupiers out the Gaza Strip are able to do the same in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The occupation is living its final stages and the Israeli attempts to salvage it are bound to meet with failure. It is difficult to

really savor personal freedom unless the Palestinian people have achieved freedom first. In the past few decades, several prisoner exchange deals have taken place, and I am deeply confident that our people will not forget or abandon their prisoners. Nor can I envision a Palestinian leader or government signing an agreement that does not stipulate the release of all prisoners - whose number is growing by the day - and leaves them hostages in the occupier's hands. Ever since my detention, many rumors have been circulated with respect to my release. Sometimes it was as a swap with Azzam Azzam, the Israeli spy who was incarcerated in Egypt, or with [Jonathan] Pollard, or in return for the search for Ron Arad. Other times it was as part of an exchange with Hizbullah, or as part of an initiative to bolster and support Abu Mazen. The truth of the matter is that I am still in prison and with me are ten thousand male and female detainees, most of whom were jailed at a young age and are still languishing in Israeli prisons.

The absence of Arafat has, among other things, resulted in a leadership crisis in Fateh. Will the new generation of leaders be capable of filling this vacuum and solving the looming crisis?

Arafat's martyrdom has caused a big void both in Fateh and nationally. He is a symbol and an irreplaceable leader and I would have wished he would have accepted to hold the 6th conference of the Fateh Movement before his untimely demise. We tried hard, I and other leaders and cadres of the movement, to convince him to do it, as no conference had been held in over two decades. In my view, it is the cause of the failings and stagnation of Fateh. The outcome of the latest legislative elections is but one of the results of having failed to hold the conference, added to that is the absence of organization and cohesion within the movement, and the lack of innovation on the leadership level. This has led many prominent and capable leaders and cadres both from the homeland and the Diaspora to choose not to form part of the leadership councils. We are anticipating a conference that will embody the unity of the movement and will consolidate its position as the leader of the Palestinian national struggle. The time has come to open the doors for a young generation of activists which can be entrusted with the leadership institutions of the movement.

The crisis of Fateh has resulted in the movement losing its place in the PA government. Can Fateh live with this unprecedented situation of being in the opposition?

Fateh was and still is the pioneer of the great initiatives, from the armed uprising to the holding of fair and democratic elections. The movement will be a model responsible national opposition and will safeguard the democratic experience. Whoever believes that the fate of Fateh is tied to the number of seats in parliament and the number of ministers in the government is mistaken. The priority for Fateh will remain the realization of the national goals, and holding on to the resistance option in order to achieve these goals.

Is the trend, represented by Marwan Barghouti, within Fateh still alive? And what is your vision for getting Fateh out of its crisis?

I am honored to represent Fateh and its illustrious history of struggle. Fateh has given scores of martyrs, prisoners, and fighters. Over the decades, it has led, and continues to lead in its role as a resistance movement that strives to liberate the homeland and to secure the return of the refugees. We believe in the necessity of consolidating the democratic system among Fateh and the Palestinian people, and in the importance of the partnership between the generations and between the Palestinians in the homeland and the Diaspora.

The arrival of Hamas to the Authority gives rise to the theory of the Islamization of

Palestinian society through the democratic option.

I believe that Hamas is fully aware of the priorities of the Palestinian people in its entirety, which are to end the occupation, to achieve freedom and independence, to secure the return of the refugees, and to safeguard the democratic character of Palestinian society. We will work to preserve the democratic and pluralistic principles within the political order. And we will work to preserve the social, economic and political gains, and protect and fight for individual freedoms and rights of all members of the society. We are proud of our legislation for the empowerment of women which will allow them to have representations in local councils and the PLC - an unprecedented event in the Arab world. Although it falls far short of our ambitions, we will present an amendment to the law with a view of obtaining a 30-percent quota of seats for women in the PLC.

Is Hamas capable of building a state? Or will it, through its presence in the PA, build a broad social base for an Islamic state in Palestine?

As I have mentioned, Hamas is fully cognizant of the priorities of our people. Hamas and its government have to devote all their potentials and capabilities to work towards that end. The preoccupation with internal issues - albeit vital - must not lead the government and everybody else to lose sight of the primary goal of our people, which is freedom and state-building, and for which Fateh has laid the foundation as represented by the PA. This is the task facing the Palestinian people as a whole with all its forces, parties, and institutions. It is incumbent on the Palestinian government to preserve the gains achieved so far, to capitalize on them and to increase them.

Is the option of an economic separation with Israel a solution that will work in favor of the continuation of a peace settlement and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state? Or does it pose the possibility of an intractable economic crisis, according to the estimation of some Palestinians?

The Palestinian economic strategy is supposed to lead to the liberation of the economy from dependence on the Israeli side. However, this requires Palestinian sovereignty over the crossing points, the borders, the airport and seaport. It also calls for the opening of Arab markets to Palestinian products and a future enhancement of the work system. But there are still very real difficulties facing the implementation of this important national aim. It is difficult to build a free economic system under occupation with all its restrictions. The Palestinian government has to encourage Palestinian products and to discourage Israeli products and produce.

How do you anticipate the Palestinians, the PA, and the Hamas government will be able to get out of the present crisis?

There is no doubt that the Palestinians are facing a siege that is growing tighter by the day. They are slipping into chaos on the internal and security levels, and are struggling with a multiplicity of programs and strategies. They will soon be facing a dangerous challenge with the Israeli government's attempt at an imposed solution. They will also have to find ways and mechanisms to counter that, to revive their relations with the international community and to garner its support, and to hold on to the gains they have acquired so far. The way out of this crisis, as I see it, is to immediately embark on a strategic dialogue on the highest level between the leaderships of Fateh and Hamas in order to reach a memorandum of understanding or a strategic agreement between the two movements. The next step would be to present the agreement and to enter into a dialogue with all the forces, factions and figures to sound out their opinion.

Subsequently, a national conference should be held with the participation of Palestinian leadership from the homeland and the Diaspora. This document will have the advantage of representing all the

figures without exception, and includes the incorporation of Hamas and Islamic Jihad within the PLO. Therefore, what is needed is the rebuilding of the PLO institutions and the restructuring of its councils. In addition, a clear-cut mechanism of negotiation between the presidency and the government has to be put in place, as well as a well-defined relationship between the various resistance elements, which will include the creation of a united resistance front. Finally, the government has to be formed anew, with the participation of all the forces, and the proviso that this should take place within a period of not more than three months.

P.S.

*Originally published in english by zmagazine: www.zmag.org