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Mustafa Barghouti: Palestine Will Be Free

Thursday 27 May 2021, by [BARGHOUTI Moustafa](#), [DALLASHEH Leena](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2021).

Palestinian leader Mustafa Barghouti talks to *Jacobin* about why the mass demonstrations of recent weeks are just the beginning of a renewed movement to free Palestine.

Dr Mustafa Barghouti is the secretary general and cofounder of the Palestinian National Initiative ([PNI](#)), and founder and chairman of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society ([PMRS](#)). As presidential candidate in the [2005 elections for the Palestinian Authority](#), Barghouti lost to Mahmoud Abbas in a contest that — like all elections since the creation of the provisional self-government body with 1993's Oslo Accords — took place under highly undemocratic conditions. Since then, Barghouti has been a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and served as the minister of information in the short-lived [Palestinian unity government in 2007](#).

A former member of the Palestinian People's Party (formerly the Palestinian Communist Party), Barghouti has been a lifelong democracy activist and an advocate for radical nonviolent resistance. One of the leading voices for the political unity of the Palestinian people, he has worked tirelessly for decades to bring together the “three components” — Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, in Israel, and in diaspora — into a single political project.

In a recent conversation with [Leena Dallasheh](#) for *Jacobin*, Barghouti insists that the powerful demonstrations seen in recent weeks in historic Palestine are just the beginning of a growing resistance movement. They discuss Palestinian unity and the ultimate goal of creating a Palestinian national project, as well as international strategies to advance the cause of Palestinian liberation.

LD | A ceasefire was declared between Israel and Hamas at 2 a.m. on Friday, May 21. I was wondering if you could give us an overview of the situation on the ground in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip since then?

MB | All military action has stopped completely, but the intifada continues — the popular uprising in Palestine and its mainly peaceful, nonviolent demonstrations are ongoing. We had a very huge number of demonstrations twice today, Friday. The first was at 2 a.m., when the declaration of ceasefire was issued — people just went out to the streets without planning. There was a huge gathering in Gaza, and then big demonstrations in Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah, Bethlehem, and really everywhere. It was a celebration of what people considered a victory.

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Starting again at noon on Friday, huge demonstrations clashed with the Israeli army in many spots, especially in Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, and Hebron. And the army attacked demonstrators with stun grenades as well as tear-gas bombs, but also with metallic rubber-coated bullets. In Jerusalem, too, they attacked the worshippers with stun grenades and tear-gas bombs, but it didn't last long.

So, actually, despite the ceasefire, what we have is a continued atmosphere of uprising. In a way, the

message was clear: the military action may have stopped, but the struggle for liberation continues. The struggle for ending the system of occupation and ethnic cleansing and apartheid goes on.

Sheikh Jarrah in particular was still closed. The army closed it; they do not allow anybody to enter the neighborhood, either journalists or even medical doctors. Meanwhile, settlers are free to come and go, and do what they want.

LD | Some have speculated that the clashes that began in Jerusalem and the increased protest afterward are the beginning of a [third intifada](#). What do you think?

MB | Yes, I actually think we are already in an intifada. But each intifada is very special and different in its characteristics. Today's demonstrations are a real uprising. What I am seeing is a very clear level of commitment to the three basic principles that characterized the First Intifada: self-organization, self-reliance, and challenging the Israelis around the occupation and the system of discrimination.

So we believe that this uprising will continue, but we also believe that, this time, the goal is a bit different from the [first](#) and [second intifadas](#). The combination of participants is different. There are two major characteristics: first of all, there is an amazing and unprecedented level of unity —maybe [for the first time] since 1936 — among all components of the Palestinian people, whether they live in the 1948 area (which is known as Israel), or whether they live in occupied Palestinian territories (the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza), or in the diaspora.

“It's not just ending occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It's about also ending the illegal settler-colonial system and the system of apartheid that Israel has created.”

But the other thing — and a very important one — is that the uprising is around a common goal. And that's my second point: the goal is not like before — it's not just ending occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, including East Jerusalem. It's more than that. It's about also ending the [illegal settler-colonial system and the system of apartheid that Israel has created](#).

That's why what we see here is a unified struggle. And the youth in particular are very clear about this. This is a third characteristic: the unprecedented level of young people joining us. Many young people who never participated in anything are joining, and with great enthusiasm, and I think that's what we will see in the in the coming days.

That's what we want: we want this uprising to continue until we are free, and it will take different forms. The struggle is nonviolent, and I think what happened is that the Palestinians managed to correctly combine nonviolent resistance and their need to [defend themselves](#) with military action, when they are attacked by the Israeli aggressors.

LD | As you point out, many claim that the so-called Palestinian unity “[from the river to the sea](#)” is actually starting to happen these days. Can you explain what led to this unity?

MB | The Israeli oppression is what unified us. Human Rights Watch described that oppression very well in [their report](#); it was also [described by B'Tselem](#), the Israeli human rights organization. But even before that, the first recognition of this situation happened maybe two years ago, in a report by some of the most prominent human rights leaders in the world. What they showed is that Palestinians in general — those in the occupied territories and those inside the '48 areas, as well as those who live in the diaspora — are subject to the same system of apartheid.

LD | Why is Palestinian unity happening now?

MB | The struggle has matured, and several factors played a role in that. Sometimes people take time to realize the kind of problems they face. In the case of our people in the '48 areas, I think they've reached a point of understanding that the Zionist movement is not going to allow equality. And that, if the system remains as is, they will always be fourth- or fifth-class citizens. And especially so after the passage of the racist law in the Knesset, [the nation-state law](#).

The law says that Eretz Israel — that's what they call historic Palestine — is exclusively for the self-determination of Jewish people.

I think that the Palestinian people inside Israel have reached the point of understanding that equality will not happen unless we bring down the whole system. And the same applies to the West Bank. Although in the West Bank we are under military occupation, we are also suffering from the same — or even worse — system of apartheid.

In my opinion, people have come to understand exactly what's happening to them, and then they have decided to act. Of course, as usual, the trigger was Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

LD | My next question is actually related to Jerusalem. The last several rounds of escalations, particularly in the West Bank, have centered around Jerusalem and, in fact, Jerusalem was used by the Palestinian Authority as an excuse of sorts for postponing last month's presidential and parliamentary elections.

MB | The excuse used by the Palestinian Authority [that Arab residents in East Jerusalem could not participate] was not correct. The Palestinian Authority was afraid of the results of the election. We [the Palestinian National Initiative] would not have accepted elections without Jerusalem —impossible, of course — but we have come, on the contrary, to believe that we can still run elections despite Israeli objections and despite Israeli restrictions. We wanted to transform the elections in Jerusalem into an opportunity for nonviolent acts of resistance. And I still believe this would have been the best opportunity to show the world how people are trying to cast their votes at the ballot box, and that the Israeli army is trying to stop them. What could be a better image to expose the Israeli system of apartheid?

But, unfortunately, the Authority used Jerusalem as an excuse and tried to present those people calling for elections as if they were opposed to holding it in Jerusalem. But that's not true: we all wanted it in Jerusalem. And we actually have discussed this matter in Cairo — we decided together that, if Israel prevents elections, we would proceed anyway by making it a nonviolent act of resistance.

By the way, what the Authority asked for then was the same procedure that was included in the Oslo process [restricting eligible Palestinian voters in East Jerusalem]. This procedure is insulting to us Palestinian people, and we should not have accepted it.

“We wanted to transform the elections in Jerusalem into an opportunity for nonviolent acts of resistance.”

We should not keep accepting it — we want something more. Why would you restrict the voting to only 6,500 people, voting in post offices as if they were voting for another country and without allowing their central election commission to be present? In 2005, when I ran for president, Israel denied anybody the right to campaign. So, when I did, I was arrested four times in one month. Each time I went to Jerusalem, I was arrested.

The Oslo addendums were changed by Israel in 2005 and 2006. That's why we thought that even

asking for the same arrangements is insulting to us — and we should insist that all people in Jerusalem have the right to vote.

LD | Beyond elections, Jerusalem seems to be becoming much more contentious, both as a central location for the Palestinians and for Israel. Of course, Jerusalem has always been important, but do you have an explanation as to why it seems that it has been the epicenter of every recent confrontation?

MB | This is not new. It's been like that going back to the Crusaders' time. The turning point in the struggle to liberate Palestine from the Crusaders was Jerusalem. So Jerusalem always had this importance. It's the birthplace of three religions, and there are three important religious places.

Jewish people have full access to Jerusalem, regardless of where they live in the world, while Palestinian Muslims and Christians do not — even those who live in the West Bank, and, of course, those who live in Gaza. So this restriction of freedom of worship has been an important factor.

But the specific attack on worshippers in Jerusalem was, of course, a motivating factor. And the other problem is the settler colonialists in East Jerusalem. The Israeli settlers kept invading the Al-Aqsa mosque and promoting the idea of Judaizing big parts of the Aqsa area. So that, of course, is very provocative. It's a mixture between a religious provocation and mostly national provocation.

LD | The previous round of conflicts at the beginning of Ramadan was actually at Bāb al-ʿĀmūd — [Damascus Gate](#). And before the Sheikh Jarrah evictions, there was a similar conflict in Silwan, also in Jerusalem. So there seems to be an increased settler incursion into East Jerusalem.

MB | That's absolutely right. In Silwan, they are planning to evict 120 homes. In Sheikh Jarrah, they want to evict 500 people. Those are people who were ethnically cleansed back in 1948; now they want to repeat ethnic cleansing and replace the people who live there with legal settlers who have no relationship and no ownership of the place.

Bāb al-ʿĀmūd was another example of a space that Israelis tried to take over. This was where people used to breathe and relax during Ramadan. What is happening in Jerusalem is that people are attacked in their religious places and in their homes.

Jerusalem is also politically very important: it is the capital of Palestine. Don't forget that the last Camp David negotiations between [Yasser] Arafat and [Ehud] Barak failed specifically because of Jerusalem. And that led to the Second Intifada.

LD | You touched on this, but I would like you to elaborate on your vision for a renewed Palestinian national political project. How do you view that unfolding?

MB | I see that political project consisting of four points. First, a complete and total end to occupation, including the occupation of East Jerusalem. Second, the guaranteed right of return for all Palestinian refugees who have been obliged to live outside their country. Third, end the system of the settler colonial project, and, fourth, bring an end to the system of apartheid in all parts of historic Palestine.

“If you end the racist apartheid system, then refugees will come back. There will be no discrimination against them.”

In addition to all these factors, if you end the racist apartheid system, then refugees will come back. There will be no discrimination against them. These people will have the right to come back — just

as they are allowing Jewish people to come to Palestine and get Israeli residency and nationality in the airport, regardless of where they live and who they are. Meanwhile, Palestinians, who have lived there for thousands of years, are deprived of their right to be there. Even those who still live in Jerusalem have to prove that they are entitled to this temporary residence.

Imagine: they occupy your town, East Jerusalem, and they make everybody there a temporary resident, while Israeli settlers become permanent residents. I don't think there has ever been a system of apartheid like that; it's much worse than what they built in South Africa.

LD | I agree. So, how do you see the road forward?

MB | We need to establish Palestinian unity politically. We need a unified Palestinian leadership for a popular nonviolent resistance, and we need a new national project strategy that is an alternative to what has failed — specifically the Oslo process and the Oslo agreement, and the singular reliance on negotiations without any struggle to change the balance of power.

LD | In addition to the focus on the internal Palestinian strategy, is there also an international component?

MB | Of course. The strategy we have been proposing for the last five years — and I think now this strategy is fully or partially being adopted by other groups — consists of six major points. First, popular nonviolent resistance. Second, boycott, divestment, sanctions, internationally and locally. Third, maintaining the steadfastness of the people [*sumud* in Arabic: staying in the land and resisting], because this is the most important element in keeping Palestinian people on the ground. Fourth, unity and the establishment of a national unity leadership. Fifth, the integration and unity of the struggle of all the three components [Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, in the diaspora, and in Israel].

“We can find a way of making Palestinian liberation a joint struggle.”

And, finally, the last point is working with progressive Jewish people all over the world. We want to work with those who are against Israeli apartheid and occupation — those who see what Israel is doing and see that it is really harming their reputation as Jewish people. What Israel is doing is contradicting the moral values Jewish people believe in. And that's why I think this sixth component is an important one — we can find a way of making Palestinian liberation a joint struggle.

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