



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, April 19*

### Headlines:

- **Israel: No Talks with Palestinian Inmates on Hunger Strike**
- **Bargouti Receives a Cold Shoulder from Palestinian Leadership**
- **Crisis Looms in Gaza as Hamas Struggles to Deal with Power Shortage**
- **Palestinian PM, UNRWA Head Meet to Discuss School Impasse**
- **Kahlon Announces Sweeping Tax Cuts for Working Families**
- **Top Hamas Leader Says Group Not Seeking War with Israel**
- **UN to Recruit Israeli Doctors For Peacekeeping Missions**
- **US to Review Iran Sanctions for First Time Under Trump**

### Commentary:

- **CMEC: “Eyes Wide Shut: Israel’s Counterproductive Settlement Enterprise”**  
– By Dan Rothem, Senior Consultant, S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace
- **AI-Monitor: “How Palestinian Hunger Strike Leader Rattled Israeli Politicians”**  
– By Mazal Mualem, Israel Pulse Columnist, AI-Monitor

# News Excerpts

April 19, 2017

## Voice of America

### **Israel: No Talks with Palestinian Inmates on Hunger Strike**

Israel will not negotiate with hundreds of Palestinian prisoners who launched a hunger strike to press for better conditions, a government minister said Tuesday, adding that the organizer of the protest has been placed in solitary confinement. If sustained, the strike led by Marwan Barghouti, a Palestinian leader jailed during the second Palestinian uprising, would be the largest in recent years. It could heighten Israeli-Palestinian tensions at a time of renewed U.S. attempts to restart stalled peace negotiations.

See also, [\*“Netanyahu Slams New York Times for Barghouti Op-Ed” \(Jerusalem Post\)\*](#)

## Ynet News

### **Barghouti Receives a Cold Shoulder from Palestinian Leadership**

The prisoners' hunger strike has only been going on for one day, but it seems that ever since it started, all Fadwa Barghouti, Marwan Barghouti's wife and representative in the outside world, has been doing is trying to explain time and again that her husband's protest is not a whim intended to serve his personal interests. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is not interested in riling up the region before his scheduled meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump, and in Ramallah they are convinced that only personal political interests are behind the initiators of the prisoners' protest. Thus, only about half of the Fatah members joined the strike.

See also, [\*“Thousands of Palestinians Demonstrate in Solidarity with Prisoners” \(Jerusalem Post\)\*](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **Crisis Looms as Hamas Struggles to Deal with Power Shortage**

The Gaza Strip's severe power shortage will grow even worse unless its generating plant receives new fuel supplies, the Gaza Electricity Authority warned on Tuesday. Since Sunday, the power plant has been operating at minimal capacity, with the result that Gazans have power only for five or six hours a day, rather than the usual eight. Gaza's Health Ministry warned on Tuesday that the power shortage could create health problems and urged the international community to step in. It said the lack of steady power to hospitals, coupled with a shortage of fuel to operate emergency generators, could cause the hospitals to collapse. Moreover, it added, the hospitals are already treating only urgent cases, endangering the health of patients who must wait for treatment.

## Times of Israel

### **Palestinian PM, UNRWA Head Meet to Discuss School Impasse**

PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah met with the head of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in a bid to end a dispute over modifications to the way Israel is portrayed in the Palestinian educational curriculum. The meeting with Commissioner-General Pierre Krahenbuhl on Monday came just 3 days after the PA's Education Ministry announced it was suspending ties with UNRWA over reported plans by the international agency to soften Israel's image in its curriculum, calling the plan an “affront to the Palestinian people, its history and struggles.”

## **Kahlon Announces Sweeping Tax Cuts for Working Families**

Promising to ease the financial burden of Israel's working families and return billions of shekels to the public, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon announced a series of intended tax cuts at an impromptu press conference. Called the "Net Family Plan," Kahlon's program includes benefits like subsidies for after-school activities, extra tax points for men and women with children up to six years old, expansion of work grants and reduced taxes on baby clothes, shoes and mobile phones. Tuesday's Tel Aviv press conference highlighted tensions between Kahlon and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Kahlon hastily announced the press conference and did not inform Netanyahu of it in advance. The move was seen as revenge by the finance minister against Netanyahu, who has repeatedly taken credit in the past for Kahlon's economic initiatives.

See also, [\*"Netanyahu Bristles After Kahlon Keeps Him in the Dark on Tax Breaks" \(Times of Israel\)\*](#)

## **Top Hamas Leader Says Group Not Seeking War with Israel**

A senior Hamas official said Thursday that the Gaza-based terror group is not looking to start another round of conflict with Israel. "We are not seeking a war and are committed to the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire as long as Israel is," said Khalil al-Hayya, who was elected the deputy leader of the group's executive committee in Gaza in February. The remarks come after several weeks of raised tensions between Hamas and Israel, particularly over the assassination of a senior Hamas leader that the group blamed on Israel.

See also, [\*"Hamas 'Not Seeking War with Israel'" \(Jerusalem Post\)\*](#)

See also, [\*"Kulanu Minister: Prepare for War with Hamas this Summer" \(Arutz Sheva\)\*](#)

## **UN to Recruit Israeli Doctors For Peacekeeping Missions**

In an effort to recruit field doctors to join its peacekeeping forces and missions around the world, the UN is taking a closer look at Israel. Next month, a group of UN officials will be visiting Israel to meet potential candidates. The candidates need to have a medical degree, more than 5 years of experience and knowledge of English or French. Preferred medical specialties include emergency medicine, trauma specialists, pediatricians and psychiatrists. According to Israel's Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon, Israel's security forces and medical first responders, who have experience working in disaster zones, provide a source of desirable human capital for such positions.

## **US to Review Iran Sanctions for First Time Under Trump**

The Trump administration will review whether the lifting of sanctions against Iran is in the United States' national security interests. In a letter to House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that Iran remained compliant with the 2015 nuclear deal agreed by the Obama administration, but highlighted concerns that Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism. Under the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the State Department must update Congress on Iran's compliance every 90 days. This is the first time this has happened since Donald Trump took office.

See also, [\*"Iran Shows Off New Air Defense Systems, Declares Death to Israel" \(Times of Israel\)\*](#)

## **Eyes Wide Shut: Counterproductive Settlement Enterprise**

By Dan Rothem

- The construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has become the primary point of contention between the international community and Israel. Aside from the international consensus regarding the illegality of the settlement enterprise, it is, together with Israel's military dominance of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the starkest manifestation of Israel's 50-year-old occupation of lands it seized in the 1967 war from Jordan and Egypt. In the eyes of the world, continued settlement expansion on Palestinian lands symbolizes Israel's insincerity about achieving a two-state solution, undermines the ability to establish a territorially-contiguous Palestinian state, and further discredits the peace process at large.
- There are close to 600,000 Israeli settlers in 143 localities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Of them, 385,900 settlers live in 131 West Bank settlements and 203,300 live in 12 Jewish settlement-neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. A couple of thousands more reside in 97 small settlement 'outposts' throughout the West Bank that were established largely in violation of Israeli law, as well as in 13 residential complexes inside Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem.
- Israeli settlements are spread throughout the West Bank in a manner that undermines Palestinian territorial integrity. Israel's civil and political systems distinguish between various criteria of settlements. Primarily, between settlements in East Jerusalem, where Israeli law applies, and settlements in the rest of the West Bank, which Israel controls militarily; and between settlements which were built by the pragmatic political Zionism that sought to consolidate Israel's hold on areas that in the 1960s and 1970s were not yet designated as the basis for a Palestinian state, and settlements that came out of religious Zionism which to this day sees redemption of the land as a central part of Jewish salvation. Understandably, the international community is tone-deaf to the various historical, political, and statutory dynamics that support the settlement project. In its view, all settlements are illegal and illegitimate and are a central barrier to progress toward peace.
- Notably, the first decade of the settlement project focused on consolidating Israeli control over areas it identified as beneficial for its security. But such territory-based security strategy is dated, and according to the analysis of hundreds of former Israeli generals and security officials, today the majority of settlements are a burden on Israeli security, encumbering Israel's ability to respond both strategically and tactically. Put simply, the presence of Israeli civilians amidst potentially-hostile Palestinian population requires the allocation of military resources to protect that population on ongoing basis and limits the military's ability to respond effectively in times of emergency.
- To be sure, there are real and legitimate Israeli security needs. And in the context of a two-state solution they can be met by the de facto demilitarization of the Palestinian state together with the multi-layering of Israel's security capabilities. In other words — the need to answer settlements- and settler-related needs is political in nature and is at odds with professional appraisals of Israeli security needs.

- The international community has stood united, but helpless, against settlement construction. Two items dominated the settlement agenda in the context of the peace process: the demand that Israel freeze all settlement activity, and the implications that such ‘realities on the ground’ would have on permanent borders between Israel and Palestine in a two-state solution.
- Regarding a settlement freeze, aside from the illegality of settlements, the international community has demanded that Israel cease building on land designated for Palestinian statehood or, at the very least, that the sides are supposed to be negotiating over. But the consistent call for such a comprehensive settlement freeze has failed. Partly, the international community never deployed its full political or financial powers to obtain a freeze. But not less important, a complete settlement freeze contradicts the assumption, shared across the entire Jewish-Israeli political spectrum, that large settlements located close to the 1967 lines will come under Israel’s sovereignty in any peace agreement, and therefore is domestically unjustifiable.
- In the public domain, Israelis over-prioritize to a remarkable extent support of, and opposition to, settlement construction. Popular discourse defines states, organizations, and leaders as ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ Israel according to their positions on settlements. By and large, Israelis also fail to recognize the difference between boycott, divestment, or sanction efforts that target the entire state of Israel and a differentiation policy that aims to distinguish between Israel-proper and the settlements, legitimizing the former while targeting the latter.
- Regarding permanent borders, the international position has remained consistent: the 1967 lines — the 1949 armistice lines that separated Israel-proper from the Jordanian-held West Bank until the break of the 1967 war — would serve as the basis for Israeli-Palestinian borders. The Palestinian state should be contiguous and viable. Practically, Israel should not control the borders between Palestine and Jordan, and Palestine and Egypt, and the West Bank should not be divided into several isolated cantons.
- For the most part, the international community accepted Israel’s position that large concentrations of Israeli settlers, loosely referred to as settlement ‘blocs,’ represent a major development that mandates changes to the 1967 lines. A most helpful reality is that while the settlements are spread throughout the West Bank, the majority of settlers, close to 75 percent of them, reside in close proximity to the 1967 lines, lending themselves to rather simple exchange of territories.
- In practice, land swaps would serve as a bridging mechanism between the needs of the two parties. Israel would annex areas close to the 1967 lines where most of the settlers live, so as to minimize to the extent possible the number of settlers that would need politically-sensitive evacuation once a two-state agreement is implemented. In return, Israel would swap to Palestine unpopulated areas from Israel-proper.
- However, there is not an agreed definition, nor a delineation, of the settlement ‘blocs’ that would serve as the basis for land swaps. The difference between the Israeli and Palestinian interpretation of such ‘blocs’ is stark. The Palestinians focus on the most concentrated and densely built-up areas that are adjacent to the 1967 lines. These areas constitute just short of 2 percent of the Palestinian territories, and are home to roughly 60 percent of the 600,000 Israeli settlers.

- According to the Palestinian position, in the context of a two-state solution the remaining 40 percent of the settlers — those 240,000 settlers that essentially reside in the emerging Palestinian state — would need to evacuate, rapidly. Undoubtedly, all Israeli leaders view such a number as falling way above what Israel can politically withstand.
- For its part, Israeli leaders, in an attempt to significantly reduce the number of settlers slated for evacuation, envision ‘blocs’ that stretch deep into the West Bank engulfing roughly 6-10 percent of the Palestinian territories. In demographic terms, this vision of ‘blocs,’ while varying according to different leaders, includes 82-91 percent of the total settler population within them, leaving 52,000-102,000 for prospective evacuation. Understandably, Palestinians view Israel’s definition of ‘blocs’ as too intrusive, undermining the territorial contiguity of their prospective state. Separately, the prospects of Israeli settlers remaining under Palestinian sovereignty in the new Palestinian state has been raised by various observers as an option. As expected, this idea has not gained traction in Palestinian circles and therefore falls outside the scope of an agreed-upon two-state solution.
- It would be wise of the international community to keep in mind the two ways in which settlement construction can destroy the two-state solution.
- One way, understood almost intuitively, is to increase the number of settlers that would need evacuation beyond what would be politically feasible. But not less important, the second way to kill the two-state solution is to create geographic realities that threaten the integrity and viability of the Palestinian state. Specifically, the vital organs of Palestine lie inside the ‘blocs’ as Israel defines them. This is especially true of the few empty areas in and around East Jerusalem, the Arab parts of which would necessarily become the future Palestinian capital. If Israel consolidates its hold on the surrounding areas of the future Palestinian capital, it will essentially cut it off from its Palestinian environment, tearing out the beating heart of Palestine from the body that is the West Bank.
- For many decades now, successive Israeli governments have acted against the interests of the Israeli people. Israel needs to retain a solid Jewish majority that underpins both its Jewish and democratic characters. Barring a partition of the land into two nation states, demographic realities west of the Jordan river point to an imminent loss of the Jewish majority. In turn, the metastasizing occupation of the Palestinian people will take care of what remains of Israel’s democracy.
- It is imperative that Israel’s friends in the international community look beyond the politicking and ideological intransigence of Israel’s current leadership as they re-assesses their view of the two-state solution and its applicability, the orchestration of the peace process, and their policies vis-a-vis Israel and its settlement project.

*Dan Rothem is a Senior Research Consultant for The S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace. Based in Tel Aviv, Israel, his main work deals with the peace process and U.S.-Israeli relations.*

**Summary:**

***For many decades now, successive Israeli governments have acted against the interests of the Israeli people. Israel needs to retain a solid Jewish majority that underpins both its Jewish and democratic characters. Barring a partition of the land into two nation states, demographic realities west of the Jordan river point to an imminent loss of the Jewish majority. In turn, the metastasizing occupation of the Palestinian people will take care of what remains of Israel's democracy.***

## **How Palestinian Hunger Strike Leader Rattled Israeli Politicians**

By Mazal Mualem

- The New York Times published on April 17 a clarification to an editorial remark that appeared beneath an opinion piece written on April 16 by senior Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti. The original remark referred to the author as "Palestinian leader" and "parliamentarian." But the real importance of the clarification is that it shifted the debate over the Palestinian detainees' hunger strike back to concrete spheres.
- Barghouti, currently imprisoned in Israel, wrote an editorial under the headline, "Why We Are on Hunger Strike in Israel's Prisons." The aforementioned note about Barghouti beneath the article fails to list the crimes for which he was convicted in 2004, including several terrorist attacks, which led to the deaths of five Israelis.
- The paper came under harsh criticism in Israel for acting prejudicially and intentionally hiding information and context. This was ultimately successful. An April 17 clarification states, "This article explained the writer's prison sentence but neglected to provide sufficient context by stating the offenses of which he was convicted. They were five counts of murder and membership in a terrorist organization. Mr. Barghouti declined to offer a defense at his trial and refused to recognize the Israeli court's jurisdiction and legitimacy."
- In his lengthy editorial, Barghouti explained the motives behind the hunger strike launched April 17 by hundreds of Palestinian detainees imprisoned in Israel. He described the brutalization of Palestinian prisoners by Israel, including instances of physical torture. He wrote, "Palestinian prisoners and detainees have suffered from torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, and medical negligence. Some have been killed while in detention. According to the latest count from the Palestinian Prisoners Club, about 200 Palestinian prisoners have died since 1967 because of such actions. ... Through our hunger strike, we seek an end to these abuses."
- The senior Fatah leader continued, "Having spent the last 15 years in an Israeli prison, I have been both a witness to and a victim of Israel's illegal system of mass arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of Palestinian prisoners. After exhausting all other options, I decided there was no choice but to resist these abuses by going on a hunger strike."
- Yesh Atid Chair Yair Lapid was one of the first Israeli leaders to release a stinging attack on The New York Times for its original editorial note about Barghouti. In a counter-article published on the Times of Israel English-language website, he accused The New York Times of acting irresponsibly when it "didn't even bother to explain to its readers that the author is a convicted murderer of the worst kind. ... He was convicted in a civilian (not military) court on five separate counts of murder of innocent civilians. He was involved in dozens of attempted terror attacks. He caused people to lose their families and led to people being maimed. He destroyed lives."



- In the past, Lapid's right-hand man in Yesh Atid, Knesset member Ofer Shelah, had actually focused considerably on the possibility that Barghouti might be released one day, and on his popularity among more moderate sectors of the Palestinian public. In 2002, as a journalist, he even expressed the fear that Barghouti's trial could be turned into a show trial, driven more by propaganda than facts.
- Deputy Minister for Diplomacy Michael Oren of the Kulanu Party, a former Israeli ambassador to Washington, called the editorial "journalistic terrorism" and accused The New York Times of "intentional deception." In an interview with Army Radio on April 17, he said, "I have written for the American media for years. The average length of an editorial is 600-700 words. Marwan Barghouti's article is twice as long. Publishing it on a Jewish holiday [the seventh day of Passover] meant that the government of Israel was unable to respond. I think that this was done intentionally. The American Jewish leadership wasn't able to respond either."
- Joining the attacks was Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon of the Likud Party. He wrote on his Facebook page, "The New York Times forgot to mention that he [Barghouti] is a murderer who was sentenced to five life sentences and responsible for the murder of innocent Israelis. ... Not only did the New York Times give a platform to a convicted murderer spreading baseless lies about Israel, The New York Times was also hiding the truth from its readers." Lapid, Oren and Danon all align with the right or center-right of the Israeli political spectrum. Their attacks on The New York Times serve their agendas.
- Their claims were indeed justified, as evidenced by the clarification. Nevertheless, there must now be a serious debate in Israel about Barghouti's claims. For Barghouti, it was a winning move: He succeeded in pushing the issue of Palestinian detainees to the top of the international agenda and embarrassing Israel in the process. At the same time, he also cemented his position as a political leader among the Palestinian public.
- Barghouti is a lot like Israeli politicians in that he has objectives and rivals. As someone who sees himself as the inevitable successor of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Barghouti is building up his image as leader of the Palestinian prisoners' struggle. Detainees' rights are a very sensitive issue in Palestinian society, and he has used it to score himself points. At the same time, the fact that he has since been moved to solitary confinement, coupled by calls in Israel to investigate the "fiasco" that led to his editorial being smuggled out of prison, will inevitably serve him well.
- As far as The New York Times is concerned, publishing an editorial that Barghouti wrote in prison just moments before the launch of the hunger strike he initiated is an important journalist coup, reconfiguring the public agenda. But for Israel, the debate must now focus on the conditions faced by Palestinian detainees. Israel has numerous ways to repudiate the claims of this senior Fatah leader: It could release figures to counter these claims and present its own evidence through official channels. Politicians, especially leaders like Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid who see themselves as future candidates for prime minister, should expand the debate and relate to the actual issues at stake. Perhaps they might even present their own positions on resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

- Obviously Barghouti is a terrorist (as he was convicted), who is justly serving a prison sentence for his crimes. Nevertheless, he is also a political leader and the most famous Palestinian prisoner today. For years, he maintained ties with Israeli politicians from the left. Two former defense ministers from the Labor Party have called for Barghouti's release. In a 2007 interview with Haaretz, late Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer called for Barghouti to be prepared to succeed Abbas as the next Palestinian leader, much like the dialogue that Israel had with late PLO leader Yasser Arafat years earlier. Former Minister Amir Peretz called for Barghouti's release on more than one occasion and even met with him in prison. Joining the calls of Ben-Eliezer and Peretz were former Meretz Ministers Haim Oron and Yossi Beilin.
- Rather than forcing some easy, populist response or other, the editorial, the controversy over it and the Palestinian prisoners' hunger strike would better serve Israel's leaders if they were used to instigate a broader, forward-looking discussion. Such a discussion should inevitably include Barghouti's potential role as a future Palestinian leader.

*Mazal Mualem is a columnist for Al-Monitor's Israel Pulse and formerly the senior political correspondent for Maariv and Haaretz. She also presents a weekly TV show covering social issues on the Knesset channel.*

**Summary:**

***Nevertheless, there must now be a serious debate in Israel about Barghouti's claims. For Barghouti, it was a winning move: He succeeded in pushing the issue of Palestinian detainees to the top of the international agenda and embarrassing Israel in the process. At the same time, he also cemented his position as a political leader among the Palestinian public.... Obviously Barghouti is a terrorist (as he was convicted), who is justly serving a prison sentence for his crimes. Nevertheless, he is also a political leader and the most famous Palestinian prisoner today.***