



INTERVIEW WITH AHMAD SAADAT

Leading from Prison, Ending Negotiations, and Rebuilding the Resistance

In the spring of 2002, at the height of the second intifada in the West Bank, during what Israel called Operation Defensive Shield, Israeli forces conducted large-scale arrest campaigns across the occupied territory, as well as full-scale invasions of numerous Palestinian cities. Ahmad Saadat and Marwan Barghouti, whose interviews we publish here, are two of the most prominent and well-known Palestinian political figures arrested in that campaign, in time also becoming leaders of the prisoners' movement.

Ahmad Saadat is the secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and a former member of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). He is the highest-ranking official of a Palestinian faction currently imprisoned by the Israeli occupation regime. Saadat's imprisonment is not atypical for political leaders in Palestine, many of whom have been arrested and detained, with or without charge, by Israel. However, the circumstances surrounding both Saadat's initial arrest and the first four years of his detention were unique.

One critical aspect of the 2002 arrests was the security collaboration between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israeli occupation forces. Owing to its high-profile nature and the PA's level of involvement, Saadat's arrest in particular stands out as one of the most telling examples of such close cooperation.

Approximately one year into the second intifada, on 27 August 2001, Israel assassinated Abu Ali Mustafa, Saadat's predecessor as head of the PFLP. Mustafa was killed when Israeli Apache helicopters fired rockets into his Ramallah office. Less than two months later, Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi, who promoted the idea of forced expulsion of Palestinians and advocated the targeted assassination of Palestinian leaders, was himself assassinated at the Hyatt hotel in Jerusalem on 17 October 2001. His assassination was widely understood as retaliation for the killing of Abu Ali Mustafa.

By 3 November, less than three weeks after Ze'evi's assassination, the PA arrested over sixty PFLP members across the West Bank. Although the PA High Court insisted that there were no grounds on which to hold many of those who had been arrested, the Palestinian security forces ignored the court's orders and continued to detain the PFLP men.

In the ensuing months, Saadat remained in hiding, and both PA and Israeli intelligence kept his family under close surveillance. On 15 January 2002, on the pretext of discussing the mass arrests of PFLP members with a view to resolving the issue, Tawfiq Tirawi, head of PA intelligence, arranged to meet with Saadat. Upon arrival at the hotel where the meeting

was to be held, Saadat was immediately arrested and taken to the PA presidential compound in Ramallah.

Saadat, the four PFLP members who were suspected of carrying out Ze'evi's assassination, and Fuad Shubaki (long-considered Arafat's right hand man and accused by Israel of responsibility for the Karine A arms shipment; see Quarterly Update in JPS 123) were all held at the presidential compound in the weeks leading up to the Israeli siege of the compound on 29 March 2002. After thirty-three days of siege and a curfew imposed on the entire town of Ramallah, Arafat gave in to Israeli pressure to formally charge and imprison the six men. On 1 May, Arafat agreed to a major concession to regain his freedom of movement: the transfer of Saadat, Shubaki, and the four PFLP members to the nominally PA-run Jericho prison.

The Jericho prison was under the watch of U.S. and UK observers, ostensibly overseeing the relatively newly minted PA security forces. On 14 March 2006, the international observers withdrew, and fifteen minutes later, the Israeli army laid siege to the prison, shelling the facility from morning until almost midnight during "Operation Bringing Home the Goods." The PA guards laid down their weapons and surrendered almost immediately, but the prisoners, especially Saadat and his five companions from the 2002 siege, stood their ground. Israeli forces destroyed the prison room by room until, eventually, the prisoners were forced out. Ahmad Saadat never turned himself in, but was arrested after the Israeli army seized the prison.

Tried by an Israeli military court in 2006, Saadat was convicted of leading an illegal terrorist organization. While in Israeli custody, including three years in solitary confinement, Saadat participated in numerous hunger strikes to improve the conditions of prisoners, and since 2011 he has been one of the most vocal leaders of the prisoners' movement.

In Palestinian politics, Saadat has come to symbolize many things: steadfast militant (munadil), victim of PA betrayal, party leader, prisoner, and more. But Saadat is also a brother, husband, father, and now grandfather. Like so many prisoners, he has suffered from restrictions placed not only on his political work, but also on his family's ability to visit him in prison, and as an extension of Israeli punishment, on their ability to obtain permits for personal travel, and thus, their daily movement.

While his interview and the one with Marwan Barghouti that follows reflect the opinions and stances of two prominent leaders calling for collective action, they also provide a glimpse into the trajectories of two men who were cut off at the pass during a critical historical moment of resistance.

This interview was originally published in JPS's Arabic-language sister publication Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filistiniyya. It was conducted via an intermediary who delivered the questions to Saadat in prison in January 2014. The original Arabic interview was translated into English by Anny Gaul.

How has prison changed you on a personal level? What is your life like? What do you read and how do you keep up with the political situation? Are you able to write?

My prison experience both forged and tempered my political outlook and my party affiliation, but my time in prison has also been enriched by my lived experience of the struggle on the outside. On and off, I've spent a total of twenty-four years in prison, and here I am, incarcerated once again with the rest of my comrades. I spend my time reading and engaging in activities related to our

struggle as prisoners, which includes my comrades' education and teaching a history course from the Al-Aqsa University curriculum. The bulk of my writing pertains to the needs of the PFLP prisoners' organization and to issues of national interest. I also try to support the members of the PFLP leadership on the outside whenever I can. If I had to describe how my current detention has changed me, I would sum it up by saying that I observe political events with more detachment, as I am afforded the opportunity not to be immersed in the day-to-day details of political and organizing work on the outside. This perspective has only served to strengthen my belief in the soundness of the PFLP's vision, whether ideologically, politically, or in terms of its praxis, including its positions on pressing/existential issues that are presently surrounded by controversy: the negotiations, [intra-Palestinian] reconciliation, and our prospects for emerging from the current crisis and impasse.

You were arrested in 2002 and detained in a PA prison in Jericho under the supervision of American and British guards. In March 2006, you were transferred to an Israeli prison, and sentenced to a thirty-year term. Can you compare your experiences in "international custody" and in Israeli prisons?

Briefly, being detained under British and American supervision made plain the aberrations resulting from the Oslo process. Under the so-called Gaza-Jericho agreement, I was placed in the PA prison in Jericho, in trust for the Israelis, under American oversight.

For political reasons, and specifically the Kadima party's general election campaign that year, the Israeli government reclaimed me as their charge in 2006, uncovering the true meaning of the term "*al-Himaya*"*—the moniker for the wave of political arrests carried out by the PA in compliance with Israeli security dictates. The term was touted to the public by the PA to justify the widespread arrests.

Basically, my view is that [in Jericho], the Americans and the British conspired with the Israelis, and the PA security forces surrendered, leaving us unable to defend ourselves or fight for our freedom. It pains me to say that no lessons were learned or conclusions drawn from this spurious episode and that other similarly misguided operations continue to be carried out under different names.

Practically speaking, it was the foreign monitors who ran the Jericho prison, and the role of Palestinian officials, from the minister of the interior to the lowliest policeman, was simply to enforce the Israelis' directives and core requirements. This not only resulted in our detention, but it also led to the arrest of scores of other militants, who were rounded up both in Jericho and other places. Being in an Israeli prison is a completely different experience: there, we face Israel's deliberate policy to break our will, trample our human rights, and sap our militant energies—for the detainees in general, and the leaders of the prisoners' movement in particular, prison effectively becomes another battleground against the occupation.

Can you describe your relationship with your family while you've been in prison, and your relationship with your new granddaughter?

For me as a human being, my family, however narrowly or widely it is defined, has been and remains the most injured party. They've paid a heavy price for my repeated arrests while remaining a major source of support for me as a militant.

* Literally, protection, in Arabic.

My brother, Muhammad, fell in the prime of his youth; and my parents, my siblings, and my children have all been deprived of my love for them. Except for my wife, Abla, and my eldest son, Ghassan, whose Jerusalem IDs allow them to travel to the prison without needing a permit from the Israelis, my family has not been able to visit me for the last eight years since my latest arrest. For four and a half of those years, three of which I spent in solitary confinement, even Abla and Ghassan could not visit, and my communication with them was restricted to letters.

In brief, I have been gravely neglectful of my duties towards my family. I hope the day comes when I can make it up to them, however belatedly. As for my granddaughter, she inherited the “security threat” genes, so in the absence of first degree kinship[†] between us, she is forbidden from visiting me—not to mention, of course, the “security reasons” that are perpetually invoked.

How do you spend your days in prison? And how do you keep up with PFLP affairs? Does captivity limit you in that regard? Do you rely on the outside leadership to guide the party?

I try to reconcile my party obligations with my overall commitments as a nationalist whether in prison or on the outside. Naturally, the fact that I’m in prison limits my ability to fulfill my duties as the secretary-general of the PFLP—so I rely on both my comrades’ collegial spirit in the party leadership and on the democratic processes that govern the exercise of their leadership. Those two factors have contributed to the injection of fresh blood in our ranks. Young people constituted over half of the participants at our most recent congress.

The PFLP recently held its national congress.[‡] Although its outcomes and resolutions were not made public, news leaked of a major disagreement that overshadowed the meeting and led to the resignation of ‘Abd al-Rahim Malluh, the deputy secretary-general, as well as some high-ranking officials. We also heard that the congress insisted on your renewing your bid as party leader. Doesn’t continued detention hinder your leadership of the party and why hasn’t the PFLP afforded others the opportunity to join the leadership?

Given that we are a democratic left-wing party, differences in opinion and judgment within the leadership are only natural. We are not all carbon copies of one another; that would be contrary to nature. However, it is not because of our differences that a number of comrades left the party leadership—and I don’t use the word “resign,” because they are still members of the PFLP. The party will still benefit from their presence and participation, since they will continue to contribute their valuable and varied expertise as militants. As they have stated in several media outlets, the motive for leaving their posts was to open the way for a number of young cadres to join the top ranks of the leadership.

Here, I must reiterate my esteem and appreciation for that initiative, which further cemented the path first trodden by our founding leaders, among them George Habash, Abu Maher al-Yamani, and Salah Salah. As for my reelection as secretary-general despite my imprisonment, this was not my

[†] Only first-degree relatives (parents, siblings, spouses, and children) are allowed to visit their relatives in prison.

[‡] Elected to a four-year term, the national congress is the PFLP’s supreme governing body, which formulates and amends the party’s strategy, program, and internal rules; discusses and rules on committee reports; and elects the central committee (executive).

personal choice, but the choice of my comrades—the delegates to the congress and the party cadres. I consider it my duty to respect their confidence in me, and to redouble my efforts as I confront the challenges of discharging my responsibilities.

Do you think the Prisoners' Document (the National Reconciliation Document)⁵ is still valid? And if so, what is impeding its implementation? If the document needs amending, what changes do you propose?

The Prisoners' Document remains a politically sound basis to bring about reconciliation and usher in national unity. It also lays out the framework for leadership structures, with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in their vanguard, founded in democratic nationalism, that is, democratic elections and popular participation wherever possible.

Actually, the document has already been amended by the agreements that have come out of years of bilateral talks between Fatah and Hamas. This will necessarily lead to the overhaul and rebuilding of the PLO's institutions, especially the Palestinian National Council (PNC). It will also consolidate the document and enable us to go from political coexistence in the Palestinian realm to true national unity whether in terms of actions or platforms.

Because of the conditions surrounding its creation, the text of the Prisoners' Document remains ambiguous in places, particularly as regards the approach to negotiations and the most effective strategy to adopt in confronting the occupation.

Twenty years after Oslo, there is no peace and no state—only negotiations and political division. How do we break the impasse?

Two decades on, the results of the negotiations have conclusively demonstrated that it is futile to continue the process according to the Oslo frameworks.

Carrying on with fruitless negotiations and the current split in Palestinian political ranks are indistinguishable as far as I'm concerned. The prerequisite for the establishment and consolidation of national unity is a unanimous commitment to a clear and unified political platform founded in a compromise between the various forces and currents within the Palestinian national movement.

Therefore, if we want to break the present impasse, we must stop staking everything on the negotiations and cease taking part in them. If they do continue, then at the very least, the group concerned must get the negotiations back on track by committing to already well-established principles and conditions, namely: an end to settlements, recourse to UN resolutions, and the release of prisoners and detainees. This includes building on the success of our accession to the UN as a nonmember state to elaborate a comprehensive approach whereby the Palestine question is settled on the basis of international law as expressed in UN declarations and resolutions to which Israel is made to adhere; and finally, continuing our membership bid to join all UN institutions, particularly the International Court of Justice.

⁵ The National Reconciliation Document, widely known as the Prisoners' Document, was issued on 11 May 2006. Produced by Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails representing Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad, the PFLP, and the DFLP, the purpose of the initiative was to resolve the feud between Fatah and Hamas and unify Palestinian ranks. It has been at the basis of every subsequent Palestinian reconciliation attempt.

Finally, we must work to implement the terms of the reconciliation agreement by immediately forming a national reconciliation government and setting up a transitional leadership structure. This transitional body would be committed to rebuilding and strengthening the PLO and to holding PA legislative and presidential elections, as well as national council [PNC] elections within six months (although this timeframe could be extended, if need be). Most important of all, however, the public must be mobilized around a unified political platform of national resistance in all its forms.

Where do you think the current negotiations will lead?

Anyone following Israeli and U.S. government positions can see that the chances are nil for reaching a political agreement enshrined in international law and UN resolutions, i.e., in accordance with the rights of the Palestinian people to return, to self-determination, and to national independence.

I don't think any Palestinian leader, no matter how flexible, can comply with Israeli or American demands and relinquish those basic principles. The most these negotiations can do is prolong crisis management as a cover for Israel to continue its settlement projects on the ground, to stave off international opprobrium, and to impose its vision of a Palestinian political entity amounting to little more than a protectorate. The negotiations also allow the United States to defuse tensions and contain the conflict in Palestine, and to devote its full attention to regional issues it considers fundamental, namely Syria and Iran.

The Palestinian national movement needs to be rebuilt. How can this be done and what are its political prospects?

I agree with you that the Palestinian national movement needs to be rebuilt. I believe the starting point must be the reconfiguration of all factions, whether nationalist or Islamist, to streamline their programs and agendas and bolster our reevaluation of how best to proceed with our struggle against the occupation. This includes a reassessment of the PLO both as an organ and as an umbrella organization that represents all Palestinians, wherever they may be, and whatever social or political outlook they may have. Organized as a broad national and democratic front, this body would be vested with the highest political authority to lead our struggle.

I see our political prospects as follows: on the strategic level, we should reinstate the elements of our national program that were dismantled by the PLO's dominant leadership in favor of pragmatic expediency, and reconnect the organization's historic goals regarding the conflict with its current ones—in summary, the creation of a united, democratic, state throughout historic Palestine. Tactically speaking, we should unite around a common platform with the Islamist component of the Palestinian national movement around our common ground, namely the rights to return, to self-determination, and to the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Popular resistance is being touted as an alternative to armed resistance. Is there a conflict between the two? And if they are complementary approaches, how can they be combined?

The daily struggle of the prisoners' movement is a part of the broader Palestinian struggle. Anyone who has followed popular Palestinian activism over the past three years or so will find

that in large part, it has revolved around supporting the battles of the national prisoners' movement. This is nothing new—at every stage of our national struggle, prisoners have played a prominent and galvanizing role. At the very least, I pledge to the men and women of the PFLP, both from among the rank and file and the leadership that, along with my PFLP comrades in prison, we meet their hopes and expectations specifically as concerns mobilizing the front [PFLP], strengthening its presence, and upholding the national Palestinian movement in general.

As demonstrated by people's revolutions elsewhere, espousing popular resistance does not require favoring one form of struggle over another. Restricting popular resistance only to nonviolent struggle empties it of its revolutionary content. The Palestinian intifada was a model for popular resistance and our compass as we navigated through multiple and effective spheres of resistance: peaceful, violent, popular, factional, economic, political, and cultural. Not only does the scholarly literature reject the logic of breaking resistance up into various forms and methods, but the reality of the challenges the Palestinian people face in their struggle against the Israeli occupation precludes such an approach: we are up against an all-encompassing settler-colonialism that relies on the most extreme forms of violence conventionally associated with occupation combined with apartheid policies. And the hostility they [the Palestinian people] encounter extends to all segments of our population, wherever they may be located.

What is necessary, then, is the creative combination and integration of all legitimate methods of struggle enabling us to deploy each type or method of resistance according to the specific conditions warranted by different political junctures. On the wider, national level, we need a unified political program that, first and foremost, provides the means to put resistance into practice. And we need political stances and discourses that are similarly united around resistance. Lastly, we need a mutually agreed-upon, overall national framework, which defines the principal forms of resistance that will determine all resistance actions. We must exercise the ability to put forward this form or that with careful attention to the specific circumstances, and according to the needs of a particular situation or political moment—without ruling out any one form of resistance.

Calls for nonviolent popular resistance and slogans about the rule of law and confining the use of arms to the PA are mere pretexts to justify targeting the resistance and answering to the Israel's security dictates. The rule of law is meaningless if it flies in the face of our right to resist the occupation and denies the logic of such resistance. And as for the monopoly on the use of force, it makes no sense if that force is not directed at the enemy.

What is your reading of the Arab uprisings, and how do they impact the Palestinian cause?

The Arab uprisings came in response to the popular need for democratic and revolutionary change in the political systems of every Arab country. While this is the overarching framework for understanding these revolutions, the particularities of each country vary, as do the conclusions we reach. I think that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions both fit the framework described above. In each case, swift and dynamic changes marked by mass collective action caused the internal balance of power to shift and ushered in a period of transition.

Elsewhere, similar conditions led people to rise up and demand change, but in those cases, there were intense efforts on the part of the United States and its regional proxies to weigh in and intervene

in furtherance of the United States' "New Middle East Project."^{**} Therefore, assessing the uprisings and drawing conclusions requires some precision. A careful distinction needs to be drawn between those agendas and demands for democratic change and social justice that represent the legitimate will of Arab populations to reclaim their dignity, rights, and freedoms, on one hand; and on the other, the international and regional forces that are exploiting the power unleashed by these popular movements for their own purposes, effectively fomenting counter-revolution—as has occurred in Libya and Syria.

Generally speaking, however, the Arab uprisings have widened the prospects for a transition with long-term potential. They have stirred up what was once stagnant, opening the way for several possible scenarios, none of which includes going backwards, something that I believe is now impossible. In my view, any popular movement that brings the Arab peoples closer to achieving their freedoms and their democratic rights lays the foundations for a struggle founded in truly democratic and constitutional principles, which are the prerequisites for a democratic and civil society; these are all strategic gains whether for the Palestinian national cause or the vision of an Arab renewal.

^{**} A coinage used by then U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at a press conference in Washington D.C. on 21 July 2006. "What we're seeing here, in a sense, is the growing—the birth pangs of a new Middle East and whatever we do, we have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the new Middle East not going back to the old one." See: Condoleezza Rice, "Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe," 21 July 2006, transcript, U.S. Department of State Archive, <http://2001-2009.state.gov>.