

Time Is Running Out for Mideast Peace: Marwan Barghouti Must Be Freed

by Michele Steinberg

Feb. 20—In the wake of Israel’s brutal assault on Gaza and the generally disastrous results of the Israeli elections, the Obama Administration faces huge challenges in the arena of Palestinian-Israeli relations. On Feb. 16, Lyndon LaRouche put forward his view that the biggest question about the negotiations with the Palestinians and Israelis after Gaza, “is whether Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti has been freed from prison, and whether he will stay alive once he is freed. That’s what I want to know.”

LaRouche’s longstanding opinion is that if Barghouti, who has been in Israeli jails since 2002, “were released from prison and given honorable treatment as a negotiating partner, we would be a step closer toward achieving a negotiated solution to some of the problems in the Middle East. The only hope for Israel depends on Israel consenting to negotiate with Arab interests that are typified by Barghouti.

“If the Israelis are willing to negotiate with Barghouti, treat him with respect, and accept him as a negotiating force, he can play a crucial part,” in putting an end to the war and bloodshed.

Freedom for Barghouti, the leader of al-Fatah on the West Bank who negotiated the PLO/Hamas unity agreement with fellow prisoners in 2007, and for some 1,500 other Palestinians in Israeli jails, including more than 40 duly elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Assembly, has been the subject of negotiations in talks taking place in Egypt for many months, especially since the Gaza ceasefire of Jan. 18-19. But, the Israeli government continues to block an agreement, the latest measure being the Feb. 15 cabinet decision that the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, is a prerequisite for any agreement to open the border crossings to Gaza, or before any Palestinians are released.

At a Jan. 14 forum sponsored by the Middle East Policy Council, Ali Abunimah, co-founder of the Chicago-based Electronic Intifada website and activist net-

work, presented a grim assessment of the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Other panelists firmly disagreed with Abunimah that the “two-state solution” at the heart of the Oslo Accords, and U.S. policy, was no longer viable. But Abunimah’s presentation of the strategic situation in the region after the Gaza disaster, represents a point of view that cannot, and should not, be ignored by the Obama Administration.

EIR, which attended the event, believes that Abunimah’s assessment, especially in reply to *EIR*’s question, is the most comprehensive and accurate yet to be given to a Washington, D.C. audience, of the damage done by the Israeli attacks in Gaza, and of the Israeli breaking of the ceasefire before the attack began. While his views, especially on the potential of the new Obama Administration, are not our own, they are most reading.

The following are excerpts from his remarks (sub-heads have been added).

‘Masacres and Atrocities’

“As we’re speaking here, war that’s going on in Gaza has to be mentioned. Massacres and atrocities on a scale that the world has not witnessed so openly and brazenly in many years. What is happening will be remembered in an infamous list including Deir Yassin, Qibya, Kafr Qasim, Jenin, Sabra and Shatila. To these infamous names, others will be added: Tel al-Hawa [phonetic], al-Zeitun, Jabalia and many, many other places in Gaza.

“I hope and pray that Israel is made to stop the bombardment. This is not a war; this was an unprovoked attack based on fabrications about rockets. As we all know, despite the Israeli Lobby propaganda that is being asserted with such force in Washington, Hamas had kept to a ceasefire meticulously until Israel violated it on Nov. 4. And Israel had been waging a silent war of siege against a million and a half people imprisoned in

Gaza, denying them food, medicine, electricity, water, and other basic necessities.

“The purpose of this war on Gaza was never about terrorism or rockets; it was about breaking Palestinian resistance and opening the way for Palestinian surrender: agreement to Palestinian Bantustans, which would then be given the name of a Palestinian state. But despite the massive destruction and massacres in Gaza, paradoxically, what the events of the past few weeks reveal, is that it is not the Palestinians who can’t survive in this region, but Israel. Furthermore, it has exposed the so-called moderate Palestinian leadership for what they are: collaborators with a ruthless and relentless occupation.

“Now, Israel’s problem, as I mentioned, is not—as its ceaseless propaganda insists—terrorism; its problem is legitimacy, or rather, a lack of it. Israel was founded and maintained through ethnic cleansing. The goal of the so-called peace process was to normalize this and gain the Palestinians’ blessing for their own dispossession. So, some of the axioms of the so-called peace process are that it is pragmatic for hundreds of thousands of colonial settlers, many of them from Brooklyn and New Jersey, to go and occupy Palestinian land and live on it in perpetuity. We’re told that it’s part of the peace-process consensus that these settlers will remain where they are in the context of a Palestinian state, and we’re told that it’s not pragmatic for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees caged into the Gaza Strip to return to their lands, which are mostly empty, North and East of the Gaza Strip where very few Israeli settlers now live.

“We’re told that that’s not pragmatic. The reason for that, of course, is that those Palestinian refugees are the wrong religion, they’re the wrong ethnicity. If they had the wrong skin color, everyone would understand what this is at its root: racism and apartheid. Racism is never pragmatic, it’s always wrong; and we have to introduce an element of morality into this discussion—not just pragmatism, and not just the art of the possible, but some things are right and some are wrong. Today, 50%



www.freebarghouti.org

The central question in the negotiations after the Gaza war, is whether Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti will be freed from his Israeli prison, where he has been held since 2002.

of the people living under Israeli rule are not Jews. Like nationalists in Northern Ireland or non-whites in South Africa, they will never recognize the right of a settler-colonial elite to establish and maintain an ethnocratic state by force, repression, and racism, and to keep that state in existence in perpetuity.

“But haven’t the events in Gaza demonstrated that there is no way around this? That Israel is simply too strong? I don’t think so. In terms of destructive capacity, Israel is unmatched; it can bomb schools, hospitals, UN stores, mosques, private homes; it can assassinate people by all means of technology like no one else in the world. These are the things Israel has perfected and brought to the region. But a state

that loses legitimacy cannot bomb its way to legitimacy and normality. And I think in hindsight, when the history of this period is written, Gaza will be seen as the moment after which it became impossible for Israel to be integrated into the region as a so-called Jewish-Zionist state.”

The Lessons of South Africa

“There is another moment in recent history that can instruct us on the choices Israel faces: When F.W. de Klerk became President of South Africa in 1989, he gathered his military chiefs around him and said, give me your assessment. They said, look, nobody can defeat us militarily: We have the warplanes, the tanks, we have nuclear weapons—no one can take us on; we can go on indefinitely. But the cost of that will be increasing international isolation, and we will have to kill thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. Israel has reached that moment, where the only thing maintaining it in existence is brutal force and the desire—the ability to try to bomb the indigenous peoples of Palestine and its neighbors into submission.

“Will Israel make the wise choice that de Klerk made, and the apartheid leaders in South Africa, to agree voluntarily to dismantle this system, to de-Zionize the state of Israel and decolonize Palestine and seek

a peaceful solution? They will if they are forced to, and they must be forced to. There is a mounting realization—Washington exists in a bubble, but the rest of the world is recognizing that Israel cannot be allowed to go on the way it is. In Europe, governments are beginning to talk, quite correctly, about war-crimes tribunals for Israeli leaders—a very appropriate, reasonable, and moderate, minimalist measure that must be taken in the wake of what has been going on in Gaza and before—and sanctions. Sanctions are being talked about, first of all, at the level of civil society, but we saw recently, the president of the UN General Assembly talking about adopting these at a governmental level. We've seen the EU slowing down and suspending its upgrades of relations with Israel. And more will follow.

“What will not happen is a return to the business as usual of the so-called peace process. I can say that I think that this will be tried—we have to expect that the official apparatus of the peace-process industry—the Hillary Clintons, the Quartets, the Tony Blairs, the Javier Solanas, Ban Ki-moons, the whole canopy of official and semi-official Washington think tanks—will carry on with business as usual, trying to make believe that through their administrations a Palestinian state will come into being. It won't happen. They're even more nakedly exposed today that their so-called Palestinian partner, Mahmoud Abbas, whose term has expired—it expired on Jan. 9—and who has no authority, no respect, no legitimacy among Palestinians whatsoever.

“I think that the moment has come where we have to speak very frankly about these things.... We have to recognize that silence about these things is no longer an option. Peace for the 11 million souls who inhabit Israel-Palestine is possible. Remember, that in 1985, '86, during the state of emergency in South Africa, when, like Israel, South Africa banned journalists from entering the townships to see what was going on, to see the repression. Most people thought that this could only end in disaster, in civil war, in millions of people being killed. We have to impress on Israelis collectively that the choice is theirs, whether to face international isolation or to choose a different path. I think that is what lies before us....”

EIR Asks About the Ceasefire

Michele Steinberg from *EIR* asked Abunimah: “I've been told by some of my Arab friends that there are 153 Israeli violations of the ceasefire from June 19 [2008]. I tried to find them on every news service and I

could not find them there, as I could find many, many, many if not all of the bombs—the rockets—that have gone to Sderot in the Israeli press.... In the United States generally, the facts aren't really known. And I heard, also, that a Mr. Hamdan al-Malik [ph] from Hamas spoke this past week and said, ‘Yes, we have a charter that is against Israel, but it's only a charter; it's not a holy book, it's not the Koran.’ Maybe that's apocryphal, but I looked at the charter of Likud on the Knesset site from 1996. The Likud charter says that the eastern border of Israel is the Jordan River, and that while Palestinians have autonomy, they will never have an independent state. Does our [U.S.] Congress know this? So when we talk about charters, please, let us be equal. Can you talk about what Hamas has said, and about the ceasefire violations?”

Abunimah replied:

“Yes.... I want to talk briefly, as quickly as I can, about the immediate ceasefire, and then expand on the point about what Hamas has offered politically in recent years, because I think those are both connected and relevant. The ceasefire lasted from June 19 [2008] until Nov. 4. During that time, according to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 26 rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel—26, compared to hundreds in the previous months. Not one of those rockets was attributed to Hamas—not one. They were all fired either by smaller factions or by unknown parties. And Israelis have acknowledged themselves, on several occasions, that Hamas moved to stop rocket fire whenever rockets were fired. No injuries were reported at all by those 26 rockets.

“After Israel carried out an unprovoked attack on Gaza on Nov. 4, which killed six Palestinians, Hamas began to retaliate with rocket fire. During the period of the ceasefire, more than 30 Palestinians were killed by Israeli attacks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. No Israelis were killed by Palestinian attacks. Never in history, never in history, has a single rocket been fired from the West Bank into Israel. And yet during the period of the ceasefire, Israel continued to carry out house demolitions, extrajudicial executions—we saw settlement pogroms, we saw all the full panoply of occupation violence continuing unabated in the West Bank.

“Now, the Israeli talking points that are always ready on some lips assert constantly that thousands of rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel, and why does nobody ever talk about that? Let's talk about it. According to Israel, 6,300 rockets and mortars were

fired at Israel from Gaza since 2005. This sounds like a lot.

“Now, let’s assume that these all landed in Israel. The reality is many did not and the vast majority landed in open areas and fields and did no harm to anyone. Just take Wikipedia, look up Qassam rocket. These rockets carry about two pounds of low explosives. So if you do the math and add them up, you get to about 13 tons of low explosives fired at Israel over a period of several years.

“Does anyone ask how much high explosive Israel has dumped into the Gaza Strip during the same period? Well, on the first day of the current attack, Dec. 27, Israel boasted it dropped 100 tons of bombs—we’re not talking about fertilizer bombs that Hamas is firing. We’re talking about military grade high explosive shipped from the United States—100 tons of bombs in the first day—eight times more than Israel claims that Hamas fired at it in three years—on the first day.

“According to Human Rights Watch, from September 2005 until May 2007, the Israeli Army fired 14,617 artillery shells into the Gaza Strip—this is not counting missiles and bombs dropped from the air, and this is only a period of about a year and a half. It doesn’t include the first six months of this year when Israel bombarded the Gaza Strip, and in March, killed 110 Palestinians. Why is nobody counting that? Why is that never ready on the lips of those who keep lecturing us about rockets?

“Now, on the bigger point about Hamas—yes, the same refrain. Remember when the PLO was a banned terrorist organization, and we were lectured constantly, ‘the PLO Covenant, the PLO Covenant, the PLO Covenant.’ Now, it has become the Hamas Charter. Well, the Hamas Charter—the fact about it is that it was written by one man, in 1988, during the height of the First Intifada. It was never ratified by any legislative body. Hamas leaders never refer to it; they never take it as their program. When they ran in elections in 2006, they did not run on the platform of the charter. They had maintained the ceasefire for one year, unilaterally, before the elections took place.

“There have been numerous statements before, during, and after the elections about offering Israel a long-term truce. I encourage you to read an article by Ahmad Yousef from the *New York Times* about a year and a half ago, called ‘Pause for Peace,’ where this strategy has been laid out, a long-term truce modeled on the IRA ceasefire with Britain, leading to a political

process. They have more or less openly accepted the two-state solution—which I think that they are deluded as anyone else, if they think that’s going to happen—but nevertheless, they’ve accepted that.

“But they have the propagandists who want to constantly say to us, ‘Hamas equals al-Qaeda, Hamas equals an extremist group, you can’t talk to these people, you can only bomb them.’ Well, the proof—forget about what I say, forget about what Jimmy Carter says, who very courageously and wisely went and met with Hamas leaders a few months ago. Look at Israel! Israel negotiated with Hamas. Israel reached a ceasefire agreement with Hamas. Israel acknowledges that Hamas kept to the ceasefire agreement until Israel decided to violate it on Nov. 4, and violate it by never lifting the siege, maintaining the silent war against Palestinians in Gaza—the Terror Famine, which Israel has maintained now for almost two years.

“So, the reality is, there are people in Hamas you can talk to. Hamas began a political process. It was never allowed to complete it. It won an election fair and square. Instead of being allowed to take office and to perhaps—if there had been a normal political process in Palestine, who knows what program Hamas would have put forward? Who knows what national consensus they would have achieved with the other Palestinian factions on a peace negotiation program, if we didn’t have Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, and Condoleezza Rice, and all other panoply, training militias, trying to overthrow them in the Gaza Strip?

“If Hamas had been given a chance, we would have seen a different situation. Israel and the United States are the ones who missed enormous opportunities after the election of Hamas and this needs to be stated and that policy needs to be reversed after Jan. 20.”

“Who Is Sparking A Religious War In the Mideast?”

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