

The Massive Palestinian Hunger Strike: Traveling below the Western Radar

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Global Research, May 06, 2012

richardfalk.wordpress.com/ 6 May 2012

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Can anyone doubt that if there were more than 1300 hunger strikers in any country in the world other than Palestine, the media in the West would be obsessed with the story?

It would be featured day after day, and reported on from all angles, including the severe medical risks associated with such a lengthy refusal to take food. At this time two [Palestinians](#) who were the first to start this current wave of resistance, Thaer Halaheh and Bilal Diab, entering their 64th day without food, are reported by the prisoner protection association, Addameer, and the NGO, Physician for Human Rights-[Israel](#), to be in critical condition with their lives hanging in the balance. Despite this dramatic state of affairs there is scant attention in Europe, and literally none in North America. It is the case that prison protests, even large-scale ones such as occurred in California a year ago often attract little national and international notice unless deaths occur, as happened in the famous Maze Prison IRA hunger strikes back in 1981, but to ignore this expression of Palestinian resistance in the overall context of the conflict with Israel is lamentable. After all, as an occupying power of Palestinian territories Israel has a particular responsibility to the international community.

In contrast, consider the attention that the Western media has devoted to a lone blind [Chinese human rights](#) lawyer, [Chen Guangcheng](#), who managed to escape from house arrest in Beijing a few days ago and find a safe haven at the U.S. Embassy. This is an important international incident, to be sure, but is it truly so much more significant than the Palestinian story as to explain the total neglect of the extraordinary exploits of these thousands of Palestinians who are sacrificing their bodies, quite possibly their lives, to nonviolently protest severe mistreatment in the Israeli prison system.? Except among their countrymen, and to some extent the region, these many thousand [Palestinian prisoners](#) have been languishing within an opaque black box ever ever since 1967, are denied protection, exist without rights, and cope as best they can without even the acknowledgement of their plight.

There is another comparison to be made. Recall the outpouring of concern and sympathy throughout the West for [Gilad Shalit](#), the [Israeli soldier](#) who was captured on the Gaza border and held captive by Palestinians for five years. A powerful global campaign for his release on humanitarian ground was organized, and received constant reinforcement in the media. World leaders pleaded for his release, and Israeli commanding officers even told IDF fighting forces during the massive attacks on Gaza at the end of 2008 that killed more than 1450 Palestinians that their real mission was to free Shalit or at least hold accountable the entire civilian population of Gaza. When Shalit finally released in a prisoner exchange a few months ago there was a brief celebration that abruptly ended when, much to the

disappointment of the Israeli establishment, Shalit reported good treatment during captivity. Shalit's father went further, saying if he was a Palestinian he would have tried to capture Israeli soldiers. Not surprisingly, Shalit, instead of being revered as an Israeli hero, has quietly disappeared from public view.

This current wave of hunger strikes started on April 17th, Palestinian Prisoners' Day, and was directly inspired by the recently completed long and heroic hunger strikes of Khader Adnan (66 days) and Hana Shalabi (43 days) both of whom protested against the combination of administrative detention and abusive arrest and interrogation procedures. It should be understood that administrative detention is validated by secret evidence and allows Israel to imprison Palestinians for six months at a time without bringing any criminal charges, with terms renewable as they expire. Hana Shalabi was among those released in the prisoner exchange, but then barely recovering from her prior detention period, was rearrested in a night arrest raid, and sentenced once again to a term of confinement for four months. Or consider the experience of Thaer Halahla, eight times subject to administrative detention for a total of six and a half years.

Both Mr. Adnan and Ms. Shalabi were released by deals negotiated at a time when their physical survival seemed in doubt, making death seem imminent. Israel apparently did not want to risk a third intifada resulting as a reaction to such martyrdom. At the same time Israel, as usual, did not want to seem to be retreating, or draw into question its reliance on administrative detention and imprisonment. Israel has refused, until the present, to examine the grievances that gave rise to these hunger strikes. In Hana Shalabi's case her release was coupled with a punitive deportation order, which cruelly confines her to Gaza for the next three years, away from her family and the familiar surroundings of her home village of Burqin near Jenin in the [West Bank](#). There are some indications that Ms. Shalabi was not fully informed about the deportation feature of her release, and was manipulated by prison authorities and the lawyer representing her interests. The current hunger strikers have been offered similar conditional releases, but have so far steadfastly refused to resume eating if it led to deportation or exile. At this time it is unclear how Israel will respond. There is a fierce struggle of wills between the strikers and the prison authorities, between those with hard power of domination and those with the soft power of moral and spiritual courage. The torment of these striking prisoners is not only a consequence of their refusal to accept food until certain conditions are met. Israeli prison guards and authorities are intensifying the torments of hunger. There are numerous reports that the strikers are being subjected to belittling harassment and a variety of punishments, including solitary confinement, confiscation of personal belongings, denial of family visits, denial of examination by humanitarian [NGOs](#), and a hardhearted refusals to transfer to medically threatened strikers to civilian hospitals where they could receive the kinds of medical treatment their critical conditions require.

The Israeli response to the hunger strikes is shocking, but hardly surprising, within the wider setting of the occupation. Instead of heeding the moral appeal implicit in such extreme forms of resistance, there are widespread reliable reports of punitive responses by Israeli prison authorities. Hunger strikers have been placed in solitary confinement, held in shackles despite their weakened conditions, denied family visits, had personal belongings confiscated, were subjected to harassing comments by guards intended to demoralize. Israeli media has generally taken a cynical attitude toward the strikes, suggesting that these hunger strikers are publicity seeking, aiming to receive 'a get out of jail free' card, and deserve no empathy even if their life is in jeopardy because they voluntarily gave up food

by their own free will, and hence Israeli prison authorities have no responsibility for their fate. Some news reports in Israel have speculated about whether if one or more hunger strikers dies in prison it will spark an uprising among the Palestinians, but this is less an expression of concern or a willingness to look at the substantive issues than it is a source of worry about future stability.

Broader issues are also at stake. When in the past Palestinians resorted to violent forms of resistance they were branded by the West as terrorists, their deeds were covered to bring out sensationalist aspects, but when Palestinians resort to nonviolent forms of resistance, whether hunger strikes or BDS or an intifada, their actions fall mainly on deaf ears and blind eyes, or worse, there is a concerted propaganda spin to depict the particular tactic of nonviolent resistance as somehow illegitimate, either as a cheap trick to gain sympathy or as a dirty trick to destroy the state of Israel. All the while, Israel's annexationist plans move ahead, with settlements expanding, and now recently, with settler outposts, formerly illegal even under Israeli law, in the process of being retroactively legalized. Such moves signal once and for all that the Netanyahu leadership exhibits not an iota of good faith when it continues to telling the world that it is dedicated to negotiating a peace treaty with the Palestinians. It is a pity that the Palestinian Authority has not yet had the diplomatic composure to call it quits when it comes to heeding diversionary calls from the Quartet for a resumption of yet another round of meaningless direct talks. It is long past time to crumble bridge to nowhere.

That rock star of liberal pontificators, Thomas Friedman, has for years been preaching nonviolence to the Palestinians, implying that Israel as a democratic country with a strong moral sensitivity that would yield in the face of such a principled challenge. Yet when something as remarkable as this massive expression of a Palestinian commitment to nonviolent resistance in the form of this open-ended hunger strike, dubbed 'the war of empty stomachs', takes place, Friedman along with his liberal brothers is stony silent, and the news sections of the newspaper of the New York Times are unable to find even an inch of space to report on these dramatic protests against Israel's use of administrative detention and abusive treatment during arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment. Shame on you, Mr. Friedman!

(At last, the NY Times on May 3, 2012 reports on the hunger strikers in a front page story, perhaps yielding to the growing shame of its silence up to now!)

Robert Malley, another influential liberal voice who had been a Middle East advisor to Bill Clinton when he was president, while more constrained than Friedman, suggests that any sustained display of Palestinian nonviolence if met with Israeli violence would be an embarrassment for Washington. Malley insists that if the Palestinians were to take to the streets in the spirit of Tahrir Square, and Israelis responded violently, as the Netanyahu government certainly, it "would put the United States in an ..acute dilemma about how to react to Israel's reaction." The dilemma depicted by Malley derives from Obama constant encouragement of the democratic aspirations of a people who he has repeatedly said deserve their own state on the one side and the unconditional alignment with Israel on the other. Only a confirmed liberal would call this a genuine dilemma, as any informed and objective observer would know, that the U.S. Government would readily accept, as it has repeatedly done in the past, an Israeli claim that force was needed to maintain public order. In this manner, Palestinian nonviolence would be disregarded, and the super-alliance of these two partners in crime once more reaffirmed.

Let there be no mistake about the moral and spiritual background of the challenge being mounted by these Palestinians. Undertaking an open ended hunger strike is an inherently brave act that is fraught with risks and uncertainties, and is only undertaken as an expression of extreme frustration or acute deprivation. It is not an act undertaken lightly or as a stunt. For anyone who has attempted to express protest in this manner, and I have for short periods during my decade of opposition to the Vietnam War, it is both scary and physically taxing even for a day or so, but to maintain the discipline and strength of will to sustain such a strike for weeks at a time requires a rare combination of courage and resolve. Only specially dedicated individuals adopt and maintain such a tactic. For a hunger strike to be done on such a scale of collective action underscores the horrible ordeal of the Palestinians that has been all but erased from the political consciousness of the West in the hot aftermath of the Arab Spring, and may also point to a wider willingness of Palestinians to mount their own version of Tahrir Square.

The world has long refused to take notice of Palestinian one-sided efforts over the years to reach a peaceful outcome of their conflict with Israel. It is helpful to recall that in 1988 the PLO officially accepted Israel within its 1967 borders, a huge territorial concession, leaving the Palestinians with only 22% of historical Palestine on which to establish an independent and sovereign state. In recent years, the main tactics of Palestinian opposition to the occupation, including on the part of Hamas, has been largely to turn away from violence, adhering to a diplomacy and practice that looked toward long-term peaceful coexistence between two peoples. Israel has not taken note of either development, and has instead continuously thrown sand in Palestinian eyes. The official Israeli response to Palestinian moves toward political restraint and away from violence have been to embark upon a program of feverish settlement expansion, extensive targeted killing, reliance on excessive retaliatory violence, as well as an intensifying oppressiveness that gave rise to these hunger strikes. One expression of this oppressiveness is the 50% increase in the number of Palestinians held under administrative detention during the last year, along with an officially mandated worsening of conditions throughout its prison system.

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