

Marwan Barghouti: Israel's High Asset Prisoner

Jo-Ann Mort, freelance journalist | MAY 14, 2026

Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti has been in Israeli prison for 24 years, serving five consecutive life terms plus 40 years. The Netanyahu government is endangering his life and breaking Israeli and international law regarding his imprisonment. This issue brief examines Barghouti's background, his incarceration, potential leadership of the Palestinians, and the campaign and rationale for his release.

Who is Marwan Barghouti?

Arrested by the IDF in 2002 and [convicted](#) in 2004, the 66-year-old Barghouti was the leader of the Tanzim, the militia set up by Fatah (Palestinian National Liberation Movement) that participated in the Second Intifada against both Israeli soldiers and civilians in the early 2000s.

While a student at Birzeit University in the West Bank, Barghouti was involved in organizing protests against the Israeli occupation and built a following among Fatah-aligned young Palestinians. In 1987, Israel deported him to Jordan – he was only allowed to return in 1993 as part of the Oslo Accords. In 1994, he was elected secretary-general of Fatah in the West Bank, and the following year, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat chose him to head the Tanzim, an armed wing of Fatah. He quickly became popular, given his perceived incorruptibility, especially in contrast to Arafat.

Under the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel arrested Barghouti for his role as Tanzim leader. He was [tried](#) in Tel Aviv District Court for having “led, operated, aided, encouraged and participated in terror actions carried out by the field commanders, and thus intentionally caused the deaths of hundreds of Israelis,” according to the government indictment against him.

While the court [exonerated](#) him on most charges, he was still found guilty on five counts of murder. For the attacks for which he was exonerated, the court concluded that although Barghouti led Tanzim at the time, the attacks had been carried out at the direction of local Tanzim commanders, with no evidence linking Barghouti himself to the decisions. During a time of extraordinary anger and fear inside Israel due to the attacks against civilians, the Israeli government took ample opportunity to promote the Barghouti trial, which received massive attention inside Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and around the world. The [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) concluded that his arrest and trial consisted of numerous breaches of international law and that his trial was not fair. Barghouti and his family – who continue to deny charges that he personally instigated attacks – did not

recognize the court proceedings. In prison, he received a PhD in political science and became a leading force inside the prison system to unify various Palestinian factions – initiating the [2006 National Conciliation Document of the Prisoners](#), which he co-signed with leaders from Hamas, PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine), DFLP (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine), and PIJ (Palestinian Islamic Jihad) factions. In 2017, Barghouti [led a large-scale hunger strike](#) in prison to demand improved rights and conditions for prisoners.

The Potential for Barghouti’s Leadership

Barghouti continually [polls](#) as the leading Palestinian political figure across factions, outperforming both Fatah and Hamas leadership in hypothetical matchups. Barghouti has been consistent to the present day in his support for a two-state solution. Before his incarceration, Barghouti, who is fluent in Hebrew, used to meet with leaders from the Israeli peace movement. Speaking on behalf of his father, his son Arab recently [said](#): “He believes in coexistence. He has a track record of meeting with Israelis, of being a moderate. He still makes it public that he believes in the two-state solution, and he doesn’t lose his popularity.” Marwan Barghouti has expressed support for the 2002 [Saudi Peace Initiative](#) and the 2003 [Geneva Initiative](#).

No other Fatah leader comes close to Barghouti's level of popularity – and more significantly, no other Fatah leader comes close to defeating Hamas leaders in election polls. For [many](#) proponents of peace, this makes Barghouti the most realistic, moderate Palestinian alternative to Hamas.

Barghouti’s Imprisonment

Since October 7, 2023, Barghouti has been moved every eight months and kept in solitary confinement under conditions that the Association for Civil Rights in Israel has [argued](#) violate international law, as have other Palestinian security prisoners. This includes near-starvation conditions that the Israeli Supreme Court has found violate Israeli laws – a ruling with which far-right Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir (in charge of Israel’s prison system) has refused to comply. Last summer, Ben-Gvir himself [confronted](#) Barghouti in prison, making sure to tape the provocation and post it on social media.

Marwan Barghouti’s legal team recently [documented](#) approximately ten physical assaults of Barghouti, resulting in fractures, wounds, bleeding, and severe pain. Most recently, Israeli prison guards [brought a dog](#) into Barghouti’s cell against all protocol.

All legal appeals submitted to the Israel Prison Service and Israeli courts have failed to halt these abuses. Barghouti has not received adequate medical care, and food deprivation has [reportedly](#) led him to lose 22 pounds since October 2023. He continues to be denied family visits and visits by Knesset members, in violation of Israeli law. Aside from Ben-Gvir, no Israeli leader [has met](#) with Barghouti in decades. The Israeli prison authority routinely refuses to respond to press inquiries

regarding Barghouti's condition. Barghouti's wife, Fadwa, and his four children have not seen their husband and father for years, and his six grandchildren have never met him.

The Campaign to Release Barghouti

Marwan Barghouti's name has been at the top of numerous lists for prisoner exchanges for decades, [including](#) Hamas's list during the recent war, only to be turned down by successive Israeli governments. Yet, Israel has released hundreds of convicted terrorists over the years in exchange for Israelis held by Hamas. Israel even negotiated with Yasser Arafat himself. It is difficult to imagine that the ongoing incarceration of Barghouti is motivated by anything other than political intentions.

Ami Ayalon, the former leader of Israel's Shin Bet and former head of the Navy, [puts](#) it this way: "Marwan himself did not kill anybody personally. But he was a commander of the Al-Aqsa Brigades, second to Arafat. We know that Marwan gave orders to lead terror." But, he adds: "If you ask me today, why is he in prison? Because in the eyes of the Palestinians, he is the only alternative. He became a symbol. No Israeli government will release him unless [it wants] something to happen toward negotiations."

Barghouti's youngest son, 35-year-old Arab, educated at a US college, has taken on the role of spokesperson for the family. Barghouti's wife and Arab travel the world to garner support for him and are in touch with key leaders, especially in Europe and the Arab world. Neither of them, however, can obtain a US visa due to the Trump Administration's cancellation of visa applications administered by the Palestinian Authority.

Numerous global leaders who have requested meetings with Barghouti in prison have been denied. The family recently started an [international campaign](#) for his release that includes [The Elders](#), Bono, and others.

Barghouti's Role in Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse

Marwan Barghouti is a Palestinian leader who could unite all the various Palestinian factions while also leading substantive negotiations with Israel. He has the determination and the credibility to do so. When Palestinian elections are held, he is expected to run for the position of president – whether he is freed from prison or still behind bars. If there is a willing Israeli partner, Barghouti's leadership on the Palestinian side would be indispensable to negotiating a solution.

During his lifetime, Nelson Mandela proclaimed Barghouti to be a leader for peace and supported efforts to free him. The Barghouti family and his legal team have requested international intervention to assist in obtaining his freedom. They are now also requesting the help of the US president and Congress to ensure his safety and well-being in prison, to enable prison visits, and to obtain US visas for the family members to promote awareness and increase solidarity.