

{MAY 13 2006}

VOICES FROM PRISON

Prison serves an important function in the annals of every revolutionary movement. It serves as a college for activists, center for the crystallization of ideas, rallying point for leaders, platform for dialogue between the various factions.

For the Palestinian liberation movement, prison plays all these roles and many more. During the 39 years of occupation, hundreds of thousands of young Palestinians have passed through Israeli prisons. At any given time, an average of 10 thousand Palestinians are held in prison. This, the liveliest and most active section of the Palestinian people, is in continuous ferment. People from every class, every town and village, every political and military faction are to be found there.

Prisoners have ample time. They have an opportunity to learn, to think, to organize seminars, to concentrate full-time on the problems of their people, to exchange views, to work out solutions.

In order to prevent an explosion, the Israeli prison authorities allow these prisoners a large measure of communal life and self-government. This is a wise policy. In practice, the prisons resemble camps for prisoners of war. Clashes between the prisoners and the prison authorities are comparatively rare.

One of the results is that, in prison, the inmates learn Hebrew. They watch Israeli TV, listen to Israeli radio, become acquainted with the Israeli way of life. They do not become Zionists, by any means, but come to know Israeli reality and even to appreciate some of its components. Israeli democracy, for example. "What we liked most," an ex-prisoner once told me, "was to see the Knesset debates on TV. When we saw Knesset members shouting at the Prime Minister and cursing members of the government, we really got excited. Where do you have such a thing in the Arab world?"

This found its expression when Yasser Arafat and his people came back to Palestine. The ongoing controversy between the returnees from Tunisia and the "people from within" was not only a result of a generation gap, but also of a difference of outlook. Arafat and his people have never lived in a democratic country. When they thought

about the future Palestinian state, they had before their eyes the systems of Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon. They were surprised when the young people, led by the ex-prisoners, pointed towards the Israeli model.

Not by accident, almost all my Palestinian friends are ex-prisoners, people who have spent a long time in prison, sometimes 10 and even 20 years. I always wonder at the absence of bitterness in their mind. Most of them believe that peace with Israel is possible and necessary. Therefore, while many of them were critical of Arafat's way of governing, they wholeheartedly supported his peace policy.

By the way, the outlook of the ex-prisoners reflects somewhat positively on the prison authorities. Many of the prisoners had undergone torture in the interrogation stage, when they were held by the Shin-Bet, but after they reached prison, their treatment there has not left many mental scars.

All this comes as an introduction to the central event of this week: the agreement achieved in prison between the representatives of all the Palestinian factions.

This is a document of very great importance for the Palestinians, both because of the identity of its authors and its content.

At this time, many leaders of the various Palestinian factions are in prison, from Marwan Barghouti, the leader of Fatah in the West Bank, to Sheik Abd-al-Khaliq al-Natshe, a Hamas leader. With them there are the leaders of Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front and the Democratic Front. They spend their time there in a permanent discussion, while keeping constant contact with the leaders of their organizations outside and the activists inside. God knows how they do it.

When the leaders of the prisoners speak with one voice, what they say carries a greater moral weight than the statements of any Palestinian institution, including the presidency, the parliament and the government.

This is the background, against which this fascinating document should be examined.

In general, it follows the policy of Yasser Arafat: the Two-State solution, a Palestinian state in all the territory occupied in 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital, the release of all Palestinian prisoners. This means, of course, the recognition of Israel in practice.

For the Israeli public, the most problematical part concerns, as usual, the refugee problem. No Palestinian leader can give up the Right of Return, and this document, too, raises this demand. But in practice, the Palestinians acknowledge the fact that this problem can be solved only in agreement with Israel. That means that return to Israel must necessarily be limited in numbers, and the greater part of the solution lies in a return to the Palestinian state and payment of compensation. There is a difference between the recognition of the Right of Return in principle, as a basic human right, and the exercise of this right in the real world.

An important part of the document concerns putting the Palestinian house in order. The body that is supposed to represent the whole Palestinian people, inside and outside the country, is the PLO. That is also the body that has signed all the agreements with Israel. But the PLO is now far from reflecting the domestic Palestinian political reality. Hamas, which came into being at the beginning of the first intifada, is not represented at all. The same goes for Islamic Jihad. The document demands that both be represented in the PLO – a reasonable and wise demand. It also calls for new elections to the all-Palestinian parliament – the Palestinian National Council, and for a National Unity Government.

The prison agreement can help Hamas to cope with the new reality – and that is, probably, one of the main motives of its authors.

The sweeping victory of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections was a surprise not only for Israel and the world, but also for Hamas itself. The movement was completely unprepared for assuming the responsibilities of power. The new situation creates a severe contradiction between the ideology of Hamas and the requirements of a governing party. As Ariel Sharon said: “What you see from here you don’t see from there.”

This contradiction finds its expression in the declarations of different leaders of Hamas. This is not duplicity, but rather an expression of different reactions to a new reality. The point of view of Khaled Mashaal in Damascus is necessarily quite different from the point of view of Ismail Haniyeh, the new Prime Minister in Gaza. Political and military leaders also often see things differently.

That is a natural confusion, and probably more time will pass before a consensus is achieved and a joint position defined. No wonder, therefore, that leaders are voicing opinions that contradict each other. One is seen on Israeli TV declaring with much pathos that “we demand not only Jerusalem, but also Haifa, Besan and Tiberias”, while another asserts that the movement “will not recognize Israel until it returns to the 1967 borders” – a “no” that implies a “yes”.

The prison agreement is designed to help in creating the new consensus, which should enable Hamas to conduct a policy based on a compromise between the ideology and theology of the movement and the requirements of the Palestinian people.

The possible line: the PLO, led by Mahmoud Abbas, will conduct negotiations with Israel and present the agreement (if there be one) for ratification by a Palestinian referendum. Hamas will undertake in advance to accept the result. At the same time, Hamas will declare a Hudna (armistice) for many years, allowing an end to violence from both sides.

That is possible. The question is whether the Israeli government wants it. At the

moment, it does not look like it.

It openly calls for the defining of the “permanent borders” of Israel unilaterally, with the annexation of large areas of territory. Such a policy necessitates a situation of “no partner”. This means that the government will reject anything that might create a credible partner, one who would also be accepted by the world.

During the show trial of Marwan Barghout, we – my colleagues and I – stood outside the hall, carrying posters that said: “Send Barghouti to the negotiation table and not to prison!” But the appearance of this document suggests that sending him to prison was perhaps the biggest favor the Israeli government could have done him and the Palestinian people.