

Empty Stomachs, Emboldened Hearts

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By: Joharah Baker for MIFTAH

The tremors of the Arab Spring have spread far and wide, to places as far as Wall Street and as close as Palestine. It is nothing short of amazing to see how people everywhere have taken cue from the hundreds of thousands of Arabs in various countries demanding their rights and freedoms. Today in Palestine, while not an immediate result of the Arab protests but certainly a byproduct of them, Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have entered their second week of a hunger strike demanding better conditions.

This is hardly the first time Palestinian prisoners have protested their conditions or have gone on hunger strike. In 1970 Abdel Qader Abul Fahem died after 15 days without food, the first Palestinian prisoner to perish in this way.

A decade later, 74 prisoners in the infamous Nafha prison in the Negev desert went on hunger strike and were subsequently force fed by Israeli prison authorities. "A long tube was pushed down their throats into their stomachs while they sat on chairs.

In three cases, the vitamin-and sugar-reinforced milk drink accidentally entered the lungs. As a result, two prisoners died of pneumonia, and a third became critically ill," reported TIME magazine. As a result, prisoners Rasim Halaweh, Alial-Ja'fari and Ishaq Maragheh died after 32 days of hunger strike.

Today's prisoners have reached their 18th day with thousands of Palestinians pledging solidarity with them throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Solidarity tents have been set up in different Palestinian cities and even non-Palestinians have joined the movement. The prisoners' demands are more of the same – protesting solitary confinement, lack of sufficient medical care and sparse family visits, all of which were trimmed down by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as punishment for the continued captivity of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

As mentioned, this is not the first time the prisoners go on strike but today, the atmosphere is palpably different. Perhaps it is because the Palestinians feel emboldened by the determined stance of their leadership to lead them to a state.

Perhaps it is the courage of the Yemenis, the Syrians, the Libyans and the Egyptians and Tunisians before them that has breathed new life into the Palestinian struggle. Or perhaps it is the feeling that enough is enough and it is time that Palestinians simply need to take matters into their own hands if their reality is ever going to change for the better.

In any case, it is an empowered atmosphere where we Palestinians are creating our own agenda regardless of external pressures. Israel is as vicious as ever, probably because for once, it feels threatened.

Settlement construction is being approved on an almost regular basis and hate crimes throughout the West Bank and inside Israel are so frequent it has even the most conservative Israeli politician worried. "Price tag" attacks on mosques, on graveyards and on olive groves and despicable slogans and graffiti reading "Death to the Arabs" are signs that something is about to give, one way or the other.

It is a well known fact that Israel's settlers and by association, its right wing government, thrive on violence from the Palestinians. This has always been the excuse for sparking confrontation between the two sides, maintaining the status quo of its military occupation and gradually implementing its long term plan of usurping more and more Palestinian land.

This kind of violence is what Israel was waiting for after the September vote. Propaganda swirled around the prospect of violent confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli forces and Israel's preparations for them. When no violence occurred, Israel's right wingers were dissatisfied and thus initiated violent attacks on their own.

In return, Palestinians have given Israel what it fears the most: a strong coherent stance on strong and coherent goals. Prisoners will strike until their demands are met, the leadership will continue to push countries to recognize Palestine and Palestinians will continue to resist an occupation that is illegitimate and immoral in ways that rise far above those of their foes. The empty stomachs of our prisoners speak volumes above any destructive settlers who have lost their own moral compass along their path of vengeance.

Joharah Baker is Director of the Media and Information Department at the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH). She can be contacted at [mid@miftah.org](mailto:mid@miftah.org).