

# [***Could 'Palestine's Nelson Mandela' Help Bring Peace?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTP-BS51-JBR6-9004-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 1414 words

**Byline:** Shannon Power

**Highlight:** There are renewed calls for Israel to release Marwan Baghouti from jail, but he remains a controversial figure.

**Body**

Among his supporters, he is sometimes hailed as "Palestine's Nelson Mandela." To his opponents in Israel, he is a terrorist. Yet Marwan Barghouti [*could help bring a solution to the ongoing conflict in Gaza,*](https://www.newsweek.com/mideast-can-barghouti-end-gaza-impasse-104039?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)or at least hope for the Palestinians living there and in the West Bank, according to a filmmaker who has explored his case.

Sophia Scott made a documentary about Barghouti with her sister, Georgia Scott, called *Tomorrow's Freedom.* It [*tracks the fight to free him from an Israeli jail*](https://www.newsweek.com/fadwa-barghouti-my-husband-starving-palestinian-freedom-and-dignity-615315?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) by documenting the experiences of those closest to him.

"As far as I understand he is absolutely no threat, the only thing he could do would be to bridge peaceful and unifying elements across the Israeli and Palestinian people," Scott told *Newsweek.*

Barghouti is one of the best-known Palestinian leaders and his mural is plastered across walls across the Middle East. He was a key figure in the Palestinian self-determination movement as a contemporary to Yasser Arafat until he was jailed by Israel in 2002. He was sentenced to five cumulative life sentences for murder, attempted murder and terrorist activities. However, his supporters say he is a political prisoner. Barghouti declined to offer a defense at his trial.

"Marwan Barghouti is one of the leaders of the Palestinian people who demand the freedom of Palestine and to live in peace like other people. I believe his release will have a great impact on Palestinian streets because of his influence and popularity among the people," Raed Amar, head of The Palestinian Prisoners Society, told *Newsweek.*

Bargouthi entered political life when he joined Fatah, the political party founded by Arafat and the largest faction of the multi-party Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

He would go on to become one of the most prominent leaders of the movement, and survived multiple assassination attempts by Israel. Barghouti was widely seen as one of the few Palestinian leaders who worked with Israeli counterparts for a solution to the conflict.

His supporters believe that, if he is released from jail, he could help to peacefully negotiate with Israelis and all factions of Palestinian ***politics*** from the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to [*Hamas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hamas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in Gaza for some kind of resolution.

"Marwan was not born to kill... because he is not a violent person, but Israel pushed him and the entire Palestinian people," says Gideon Levy, a journalist for Israeli newspaper *Haaretz,* in the documentary, commenting on Marwan's alleged role in the Second Intifada, an uprising by Palestinians against Israeli occupation which began in 2000.

Scott said "it's hard to know what he's what he actually did" during that Intifada because "he had a trial that was not fair and free and there's been a lot of international legal bodies that say none of it stands up in international law."

"He's always said that he stands firmly by peace... so I think there's there's no threat he can pose physically to Israelis," she added.

"You could build a successful Palestine next door to a successful Israel. The question is, do they want that peaceful partner?"

*Newsweek* contacted the Israeli government by email for comment.

Israeli Prime Minister [*Benjamin Netanyahu*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/benjamin-netanyahu?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) is not a supporter of Barghouti returning to ***politics***.

"Calling Barghouti a leader and parliamentarian is like calling [Syrian President Bashar] Assad a pediatrician," Netanyahu said in 2017 following a Barghouti-penned op-ed in the [*The New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/16/opinion/palestinian-hunger-strik-prisoners-call-for-justice.html?ref=opinion&_r=0)*.*

"The [jailed terrorists] are murderers and terrorists. We will never lose our sense of clarity because we are on the side of justice and they are on the side that is neither just nor moral," Netanyahu added of Palestinian prisoners, per [*The Times of Israel.*](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-rips-new-york-times-for-barghouti-op-ed/)

*Tomorrow's Freedom* was initially released to some film festivals in 2022, but the filmmakers decided it was important to rerelease it after the October 7 Hamas attacks because "there's a lot more interest in it and Marwan being spoken about as a potential leader," Scott said.

The Palestinian militant group Hamas launched an unprecedented surprise attack on Israel six months ago, killing 1,200 people and kidnapping around 240. Some of the captives have been released back to Israel and some have died since then, while "dozens of hostages" currently remain in Gaza, according to German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock.

Israel's subsequent military operations have killed around 34,000 people in Gaza, per the latest figures cited by Reuters.

Hamas has said it would [*release the remaining hostages in a prisoner exchange for some of the many Palestinians held in Israeli jails*](https://www.newsweek.com/palestinian-prisoners-released-full-list-israel-1845986?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). One of those is Barghouti, an indication, according to some analysts, that he could be a unifying force amongst the [*fractious Palestinian political groups.*](https://www.newsweek.com/palestinian-leadership-crisis-gaza-war-rages-1885472?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)

Scott wanted to know more about the man many Palestinians told her "could be our Nelson Mandela if given the chance," because "there's obviously a massive need for unity in the Middle East, like Mandela brought to South Africa."

Mandela was jailed at Robben Island Prison for 27 years for his role in trying to end apartheid. In fact, *Tomorrow's Freedom* shows Barghouti's photo on the wall in Mandela's old cell, the only Palestinian among those photos and one of the few images not bearing the South African leader's face.

"We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians," Mandela said in 1997 as then-president of South Africa.

In tribute, Palestinians erected a large statue of Mandela in the West Bank city of Ramallah—and it's not the only link between South Africa and Palestinians.

In 2016, South African archbishop and 1984 Nobel Peace prizewinner Desmond Tutu nominated Barghouti for a Nobel Peace Prize, and South Africa [*raised a case against Israel in the International Court of Justice (ICJ)*](https://www.newsweek.com/israel-ordered-investigate-genocide-claims-1864272?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)for its actions in Gaza after October 7 which it alleged was a systematic killing of Palestinians because of their ethnicity.

Barghouti later split from Fatah but continued his work from jail, including leading the coalition of different Palestinian groups to create the Prisoners' Document in 2006, which called for the creation of a Palestinian state and the right of return for Palestinians living in the diaspora. The following year he led a 41-day hunger strike to protest the conditions of Palestinian prisoners.

Marwan wrote about his stance on a potential solution to the crisis in the Middle East *Washington Post* in 2002.

"While I... strongly oppose attacks and the targeting of civilians inside Israel, our future neighbour, I reserve the right to protect myself, to resist the Israeli occupation of my country and to fight for my freedom," he wrote.

"I still seek peaceful coexistence between the equal and independent countries of Israel and Palestine based on full withdrawal from Palestinian territories occupied in 1967."

But the full withdrawal of Israelis from settlements in the West Bank or a two-state solution is probably unlikely now, according to Israeli-American Jeff Halper, who is the director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. That organization works to end "Israel's policy of demolishing Palestinian homes."

Halper has met Barghouti and has "great admiration" for him but said that because [*"Israel has completely rejected the two-state solution,"*](https://www.newsweek.com/israels-partial-victory-gaza-will-cost-it-long-term-1885533?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) Barghouti's aspirations might never be achieved. He also told *Newsweek* because there are around [*400,000 Israeli settlers scattered throughout the West Bank*](https://www.anera.org/what-are-area-a-area-b-and-area-c-in-the-west-bank/#:~:text=Under%20the%20terms%20of%20the,is%20the%20most%20densely%20populated.) it has "confined Palestinians to the islands" of three areas agreed to the Oslo accords. The presence of the settlers scattered about in such a way, and [*continually expanding their presence*](https://www.newsweek.com/israel-united-nations-settlements-palestinians-574058?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)makes it unlikely or impossible for the entire West Bank to go back to the Palestinians.

"Even if Israel [offered] him a role at the Palestinian Authority, he would make conditions that I don't think Israel could accept," he said*.*

As a result, while Barghouti might have the credibility and popularity to win an election, he may no longer be the best candidate to help resolve the conflict.

"He's been in prison all the years, he would not be willing to sell out," Halper said. "I just think his time has passed on the one hand, and on the other hand, I think Israeli's apartheid structures are much stronger today than they were 20 years ago... he would have to be Israel's collaborator and I don't think he would agree to that."

*Tomorrow's Freedom is available to stream in the U.S on Google, Amazon's Prime Video and Apple TV+. It will premiere in U.K. cinemas on April 26.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2379431/marwan-barghouti-giving-peace-sign.jpg)

**Graphic**

marwan barghouti giving peace sign

Tal Cohen/AFP via Getty Images

Marwan Barghouti flanked by Israeli policemen as he is led to a police vehicle 29 September 2003 on his way back to jail, after appearing before a Tel Aviv court. He has been held in jail by Israel since 2002.

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