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Barghouti: Terror In West Bank 'Self-Defense'

An *EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW* with one of the reputed leaders of the new intifada.

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SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH WEEK

Marwan Barghouti, the general secretary of Fatah in the West Bank and reportedly the leader of the Tanzim militia, has emerged as a major figure in the 10-month-old Palestinian intifada. He is depicted in the Israeli press as a leader of the uprising, and he is widely seen as a possible successor to Yasir Arafat, head of the Fatah party and leader of the Palestinian Authority.



Marwan Barghouti:
Claims PA "stopped"

In the course of a three-hour exclusive interview with *The Jewish Week*, Barghouti, 41, said Palestinian attacks on Israelis driving in the West Bank are acts of "self-defense." He denied the Tanzim exists; denied responsibility for terror attacks against Israelis; denied reports in the Israeli press that he gave orders to a terrorist cell recently caught by the Israelis; and denied that the Palestinian Authority has violated the Oslo Accords in any significant way.

The interview with Barghouti took place July 8. The reporter took an Arab taxi from the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem to the municipal

building in El Bira, then was instructed via telephone to travel to a hotel in Ramallah. There he was picked up by Barghouti and his bodyguards.

The interview with Barghouti, a small, amiable and good-spirited man, was conducted in the heart of Ramallah in an out-of-the-way restaurant hidden behind a school. Although it was dinnertime, there were no customers other than Barghouti, his security guards and the reporter.

The Jewish Week: *Tell me a little about your past.*

Barghouti: In the 1980s I was chosen as head of the student body of Beir Zet University three times in a row, something that had never hap-

pened before. I was arrested a number of times and put under administrative detention for periods of six months at a time. Eventually I was tried for belonging to a terrorist cell

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Terror In West Bank

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and I spent seven years in an Israeli prison, where I learned Hebrew.

In 1987, when Ehud Barak was general of the Northern Command and Yitzhak Rabin was minister of defense, I was expelled to Jordan. I made my way to Fatah headquarters in Tunisia, where I was in charge of Fatah activities in the West Bank. I was with Abu Jihad in Tunisia a few days before Israeli sea commandos assassinated him.

Is the Palestinian Authority a democracy?

There is no such thing as a perfect democracy anywhere in the world. We have our problems and all but the PA is unique in that it is the first time among all the Arab countries that there were direct democratic elections for president and parliament.

When we signed Oslo, we began a process of democratization, and I succeeded in establishing 170 local election committees in refugee camps and villages in the West Bank. This was a new period in our history. For us, the Palestinian Authority is a stepping-stone to our statehood. We had to start from scratch ... don't forget we were used to occupation, prison, etc.

As a result of those elections I was appointed general secretary of Fatah in the West Bank and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

What is the difference between Fatah and Tanzim?

There is no difference; they are the same thing. It is Israeli [government] propaganda. ... The Israelis want to make a distinction between Fatah and Tanzim, so they won't have to blame Fatah [for terrorist attacks] because Fatah is Arafat. Arafat, the PA and Jibril Rajoub are responsible for ensuring Israeli security, so when things go wrong the Israelis made up the Tanzim.

And are you trying to ensure Israel's security?

We have not, until today, participated in actions such as those that [Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon refers to. You're talking about individual acts of violence but not by my party or me.

Yesterday it was reported in the Israeli newspaper Maariv that the head of a terrorist cell, Machmoud Fargalla, told his investigators that he told you personally his desire to commit terrorist acts and that you connected him with Fatah leaders in Hebron and Ramallah.

It is not true. I do not know him.

It is a total fabrication?

Look, I am the head Fatah leader in the West Bank. All the other Fatah heads come to meet me one time or another for this thing or that. Machmoud is a Fatah leader himself and he probably came to talk to me at some time.

You did not discuss terrorist attacks?

No, never. I told you I am a political leader, not a military

used these weapons to attack Israelis.

All the terrorist acts committed over the last 10 months have not been carried out with those weapons?

What acts of terrorism are you talking about? Who has killed 600 Palestinians in the last 10 months? Who has injured 3,000?

When there is shooting on the tunnel road to Efrat, by Palestinian gunmen, they're not using those weapons given to them by Israel?

I don't know exactly where those weapons come from but in any case it's self-defense.

It's self-defense to shoot people traveling on a road?

Of course.

How is killing women and children in a car self-defense?

What women and children? They just recently killed a Shabak officer there.

Were you connected to that?

[Laughter] No, I don't know those people. What are you trying to accuse me of. ... I'm a parliamentarian, like a member of Knesset. I don't care what's happening [on the street].

Yesterday it was reported in another Israeli newspaper that a terrorist cell, from Beit Sira, was caught and admitted "to perpetrating attacks in the Jerusalem and Modiin area, and admitted to receiving instructions from Barghouti's people in Ramallah." Their attacks also included one on a Canadian diplomatic vehicle. Are you telling me they, too, are lying?

This is first time I'm hearing of it. Really. I didn't read about it. You think I care about what the Israeli press says. ... Look, I took a brave step in supporting Oslo. I saw this was the start of a new era and it will hopefully put an end to the conflict. But the Israelis have not kept their agreements.

Such as?

According to the agreements, during the interim stage of the peace process Israel was supposed to retreat from all of the territories except for Jerusalem, settlements and military outposts, more than 90 percent of the land. Rabin was brave enough to make such brave decisions, but since his assassination Israelis have violated all the agreements since then.

How?

Since the 1967 war, up until 1993, the Israelis built 25,000 new housing units (in the territories). Since the signing of Oslo in 1993, until the current intifada 2000, the Israeli government has built 23,400 new housing units.

What agreements has the PA broken?

What have we broken? We have stopped extremists. We have arrested them. For the three years prior to this intifada there was not one terror attack inside of Israel.

According to you, the PA has not violated any agreements?

Ask the Israelis.



Five-month-old Yehuda Shoham was killed by a Palestinian attack on the roads of the West Bank in June. Barghouti sees such attacks on innocent civilians as "self-defense."

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You did not discuss terrorist attacks?

No, never. I told you I am a political leader, not a military leader.

Who is the military leader of Fatah, Jibril Rajoub?

No, he is the head of the Preventative Security Apparatus. It's only internal, like the Shabak.

Who, then, is the military head of Fatah?

I don't know?

You don't know?

Really! We are a civil, not a military organization.

How many illegal weapons are there in the West Bank?

We're talking dozens, not more. Believe me they have more illegal weapons in [the Israeli settlement of] Psagot than we do.

How many weapons were given to you by Oslo, 40,000 rifles?

I don't know. Really, I don't. But in any case, the Israelis gave them to us under the Oslo agreement and we have never

have arrested them. For the three years prior to this intifada there was not one terror attack inside of Israel.

According to you, the PA has not violated any agreements?

Ask the Israelis.

I'm asking you.

If anything was violated it was minimal and marginal because as you know, we made the utmost efforts to stop terrorist attacks. That is our main obligation in the agreements and we fulfilled them. Both Israel and the Palestinians have to abide by what was agreed upon, but if Israel has violated them why should we continue to abide by them? We have signed all in all six agreements that state that in five years time, in 1999, we were to have finished negotiations and reached agreements on final-status issues such as security, borders, water, Jerusalem, settlements and refugees. None of this was done.

Why did Arafat reject Barak's last offer?

Because it was against UN resolutions.

What was?

Barak's suggestions. The UN resolutions 242 and 338, and



ISRAEL



Masked Tanzim gunmen brandish weapons during a Palestinian funeral in Ramallah. NEWSMAKERS

Land for Peace, the basis of the peace process, states that Israel has to return to its 1967 borders. They did that with Egypt, they did that with Lebanon, they admit they are willing to do that with Syria. Why not with us? It's the same resolutions from 1967. The settlers need to be evacuated.

But Israel could have handed everything over in 1993?

The five years [of confidence-building measures] was to give the Israelis time to get used to the idea that they are handing everything over to us (laughter). To be honest, the Palestinians feel we have a right to Haifa and Jaffa, but we have become more realistic and we have accepted that there will be two states for two people.

So why the violence? That is what Israel is negotiating?

If there is occupation in your homeland and you have done everything possible to obtain peace and in return you have received 600 dead, 3,000 wounded, 3,000 prisoners and a closure for 10 months, what do you expect? It is self-defense.

But the whole point of Oslo and negotiations was to go forward and end the occupation. Why are you going backwards to violence?

We waited [for the end of the occupation]... we waited. ... Believe me I was the one of the first delegations of Fatah to meet with Israelis to bring about the peace process.

But now you are killing women and children.

We are doing the killing? Who was Mohamad Dahlan and his father [the 12-year-old boy killed in a firefight in Gaza]. Do you want to tell me they didn't shoot him on purpose? Please, they shot more than 60 bullets in him. Don't tell me.

Those are rare incidents, but your people are shooting civilians daily that are traveling on roads.

No, a closure is a closure and that is not what is meant when both sides talk about a cease-fire.

It is fire. A closure is fire.

If you were Sharon, what would you do now?

I would take a brave decision and implement a full withdrawal from West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem according to the UN resolutions. One week ago I heard for the first time in my life Ariel Sharon talking about how Lebanon should respect UN Resolution 425. This is the first time in my life I heard an Israeli prime minister invoking a UN resolution. Why did he? Because Israel was defeated in South Lebanon. They fled like rabbits from Lebanon in one night. I'll be generous and give them three days to retreat from Ramallah to Tel Aviv.

What compromises have the Palestinians made to Israel?

We recognized Israel and gave up 78 percent of historical Palestine.

Are you at all flexible on the refugee issue?

All refugees should have a right to come back to their homes in Israel, but practically speaking all the Palestinian refugees abroad will not come back. Truthfully I think we should have one country for two nations. Equal rights for everyone. But then in the very near future demographics will favor the Arabs. Whatever happens will happen.

What do you have to say to the 3 million Jews living in New York?

You mean besides the fact that I was born here and that I speak Hebrew better than them? If they want a bright future for the Jews in the region, they should encourage the peace process and encourage the Israeli government to recognize

his father [the 12-year-old boy killed in a fire in Gaza]. Do you want to tell me they didn't shoot him on purpose? Please, they shot more than 60 bullets in him. Don't tell me.

Those are rare incidents, but your people are shooting civilians daily that are traveling on roads.

I don't want to attack or kill anyone. We have entered a new era but if you kill 600 of us and wound 3,000 and every day, every day, I go to funerals, what should I tell the people? I prefer a peace agreement and for 10 years we went in that direction. But it seems as if the Israelis were toying with us.

Are you committed to the Tenet Agreement?

I am committed to the rights of the Palestinian people.

Are you committed to a cease-fire?

Cease-fire is a mutual concept. Closure for 10 months is not observing a cease-fire.

York?

You mean besides the fact that I was born here and that I speak Hebrew better than them? If they want a bright future for the Jews in the region, they should encourage the peace process and encourage the Israeli government to recognize Palestinian personal and national rights.

What do you predict will happen in the next few months?

Short term it doesn't look good, but I'm optimistic about the future.

[After three hours the interview came to an abrupt end when one of the bodyguards jumped up when he heard faint sounds of an approaching helicopter. We scattered and the guard that drove me toward the city limits drove me past a caravan that was destroyed by an Israeli helicopter gunship and a building bombed out by an F-16.] □