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Palestinian prisoners' protest in Israel is a rallying call to the international community

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Monday saw the launch of a mass hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners held by Israel, one of the largest in recent years. Israeli authorities are on edge, not just because of the sheer scale of the strike – which began with some 1,500 prisoners and is expected to rise considerably – but because its ramifications go well beyond prison walls.

Solidarity protests have been held throughout the occupied territories, and there have been clashes with Israeli forces trying to quell the demonstrations. The strike, launched to coincide with the annual Palestinian Prisoners Day, has been galvanised by three factors.

Firstly, it is being led by Marwan Barghouti, the elected MP and hugely popular figure who is serving five life sentences. Secondly, despite a woefully divided Palestinian polity, it has received support from across the political spectrum, which is itself represented by the hunger-strikers.

The third factor is its timing, taking place in the run up to the 50th anniversary of Israel's occupation, the 10th anniversary of the Gaza blockade and the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, in which Britain pledged to facilitate "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."

These factors will add considerably to Palestinian passions over a national issue that strikes a unifying chord. Since Israel's occupation began in 1967, more than 750,000 Palestinians – men, women and even children – have been imprisoned. Every Palestinian family under occupation has been affected.

Approximately 20 per cent of the Palestinian population in the occupied territories "has, at one point, been arbitrarily detained or imprisoned by Israel", according to the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. This represents "the highest rate of incarceration in the world".

Israeli security minister Gilad Erdan has held meetings with security officials from the prison service, the military and the Shin Bet internal security service. This indicates the level of Israeli concern over the hunger strike.

But on its own, it is unlikely to have significant implications for the Palestinian liberation struggle because the prisoners' demands are not national. They are focused on the conditions of their imprisonment, with demands including access to phones, extended visiting rights, better medical service and an end to the policies of administrative detention and solitary confinement.

Even though the demands are issue-specific, Israel has already reacted with characteristic intransigence, refusing to negotiate, putting Barghouti and other hunger-strikers in solitary confinement, separating prisoners, and confiscating clothes and personal belongings. Mr Erdan has described the demands as "unreasonable", adding: "I have instructed the prison service to act in any way to contain the strike within the walls of the prisons and the Israel police to prepare and provide any help needed to the prison service for any scenario that is likely to develop." Intervention units have reportedly been put on standby.

Israeli authorities at times agreed to certain demands during past hunger strikes when a prisoner was close to death – not out of compassion, but to avoid a popular backlash among Palestinians and international condemnation.

This would result in the prisoner in question being hailed a hero and victor. That led to Israel's Knesset (parliament) passing a law in July 2015 that formally legalises the force-feeding of Palestinian prisoners on hunger strike.

The law is a message to prisoners that "hunger-striking is not a way out of prison or a way to fulfil any goals", said Yoel Hadar, legal adviser for the public security ministry. This despite two UN special rapporteurs stating days before the law was passed that force-feeding a hunger-striker is "tantamount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment", and that "under no circumstance" does it "comply with human rights standards".

As such, Israeli authorities will feel less encumbered this time to make concessions to hunger-strikers because force-feeding will be used if necessary to avert possible death.

Furthermore, sick prisoners will not be taken to civilian hospitals, meaning that Israeli authorities can limit media access to the hunger-strikers and avoid shocking photos of their poor health or treatment, which would no doubt go viral online.

To maximise the effectiveness of the current hunger strike, and to give it national and even international resonance, there must be a concerted domestic and global campaign to highlight the fact that all Palestinians in the occupied territories are in effect prisoners.

This is due to the myriad ways in which their movement is curtailed within and beyond their own homeland, in violation of international law. A UN report in December said such restrictions on Palestinian movement had increased in 2016.

The starkest example I personally experienced was meeting a man in his mid-20s in Ramallah who, owing to his father's political activities and incarceration, had never been allowed to leave the West Bank city. His primary reason for wanting to do so? He had never seen the sea, despite being within driving distance of four of them.

As of January this year, Israel's military operated 81 checkpoints and has placed "hundreds of physical obstacles in the West Bank in the form of concrete blocks, piles of dirt or trenches, which prevent access to and from towns and villages", according to B'Tselem.

"Palestinian travel is restricted or entirely prohibited on 41 roads and sections of roads throughout the West Bank, including many of the main traffic arteries, covering a total of over 700 kilometres of roadway," the Israeli human rights group adds.

The Israeli barrier snaking its way through the West Bank "gravely violates the rights of Palestinians in the areas affected, restricting their access to their lands, crucial services and relatives on the other side of the barrier", says B'Tselem.

In addition, Jewish-only settlements and their related infrastructure control almost half of the entire West Bank. Besides border closures (common during Jewish holidays), Palestinians' ability to leave the occupied territories, and for people to enter, is limited and arbitrary.

The starkest example is the Gaza Strip, whose 2 million Palestinians have been under a tight blockade by air, sea and land for a decade.

Even some of Israel's allies, such as former British prime minister David Cameron, have described Gaza as an "open-air prison".

If the occupied territories are a large open-air prison, the Knesset's passing of a law in March denying entry to foreign nationals who have publicly called for a boycott of Israel and/or settlements, or who belong to an organisation that has called for a boycott, is a means of denying visitation rights.

Activists have already been barred under this law, as are diaspora Palestinians such as myself.

Launching a national and international campaign of this kind this year will be particularly effective given the three aforementioned anniversaries. It would also go against the unfortunate, dangerous and increasingly common tendency to split the Palestinian cause into issues to be dealt with piecemeal, rather than seeing and treating it as a singular struggle.

In a year of such huge significance to the Palestinian people, the international community must be made aware that they are all prisoners, captives to the longest military occupation in modern history. The world must realise that whether they are behind bars, checkpoints or barriers, their fundamental right to live in freedom and dignity has been denied for far too long.