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The Palestinian Prisoners' Hunger Strike: Arab Discourse on the Social Networks, May 2012

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The Palestinian prisoners' hunger strike, which made headlines in recent weeks, seems to have ended with the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Israel and the prisoners, achieved through the mediation of the Egyptian intelligence services.

According to the "[Middle East Monitor Fact Sheet](#)," there are some 6,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and prisons. Of these, 320 are held on the basis of administrative detention, a means viewed by them – and the international community – as illegitimate. Derived from international laws of warfare, administrative detention is a measure meant to foil future acts of terrorism liable to represent a threat to public security. It relies on classified evidence, unlike familiar criminal procedures in which all evidence is presented to the accused, who is ultimately acquitted or pronounced guilty and sentenced. The full criminal procedure is viewed as legitimate; administrative detention is not.

The hunger strike, in effect another Palestinian tool in the struggle with Israel, departs from terrorism and violence (barring that the situation does not spiral out of control should a striking prisoner die) and focuses on applying public opinion pressure on Israel. With this recourse to hunger strikes, the Palestinians have adopted methods commonly used in the Arab world since the start of the "Arab Spring." The main purpose of the nonviolent struggle is to change Israeli policy by using new tools, and the decision to employ nonviolent means signals an awareness that they are likely to be more effective, especially with regard to human rights issues.

There is a direct influence by people active in social networks in Arab states (Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia) on public opinion leaders in the social networks active in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. In light of the success of hunger strikers in Arab nations, two Palestinian prisoners held in

administrative detention – Hayder Adnana and Hana Shalbi – decided in December 2011 to begin a hunger strike to protest their incarceration, an act that aroused much sympathy on the Arab street. The concern that their deaths would spark outbreaks of violence in prisons and in the West Bank apparently led to the Israeli decision to release them.

In light of their success, five other Palestinian administrative detainees started a hunger strike about two and a half months ago; on April 17, they were joined by some 1,500 other prisoners, most of whom are security or criminal prisoners, with only a few administrative detainees. The purpose of the mass hunger strike – so far the largest in the Arab world – is to end administrative detention and/or improve the detainees' conditions, which deteriorated after Gilad Shalit was kidnapped.

The demands published by the detainees through the social networks include: ending administrative detentions; ending the policy of holding detainees in solitary confinement; ending surprise security checks of prison cells; providing appropriate medical attention; allowing prisoners family visits (this demand relates primarily to Gaza Strip prisoners, whose families cannot visit them in jail); and ending delays and humiliations of prisoners' relatives on their way to and from the prisons.

On the local social networks and in Arab states as well, widespread support was sounded for the administrative detainees and less for the security and criminal prisoners who joined the strike. Significantly, this widespread support has at no point called for violence. For those involved in this struggle, its effect and utility will be much greater as long as it remains nonviolent.

Clearly the Palestinian Authority did not have the appropriate tools to confront this new phenomenon. PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas raised the concern that the PA would lose control over events should any ill befall the strikers, apparently an attempt to pressure Israel into demonstrating some flexibility on the issue. For their part, the PA and its security apparatus are facing a complex challenge. On the one hand, there have been demonstrations in major cities, including Nablus and Hebron, where Hamas, together with Islamic Jihad, has used the opportunity to protest the arrests by the PA of Hamas and Jihad operatives without due process. On the other hand, within the PA and its security services there is fundamental sympathy for the prisoners. PA personnel have engaged in covert activity so as not to become a target of the protests and have avoided operating effectively against the demonstrations and identification with the prisoners. At the same time, they have maintained secret contacts with the prisoners to discourage them from stepping up the strike and their demands.

The negotiations to end the strike were headed by the Israeli General Security Services and conducted, via Egyptian mediation, with senior Hamas and Fatah detainees. The announcement put out by the GSS said that the prisoner leaders "have signed a commitment to put a total stop on directing terrorism from within the jails" and that the

agreement was signed “after the detainees were given the green light by organization commanders on the outside.”

As soon as the memorandum of understanding was signed, the social networks claimed Israel had agreed to the following:

- An end to prolonged isolation on the pretext of security; 19 detainees would be released from solitary confinement within 72 hours.
- Authorization of visits by first-tier relatives to Gaza Strip prisoners, which ended in 2007 after Hamas seized control of Gaza and in response to the abduction of Gilad Shalit.
- Authorization of visits to West Bank prisoners by relatives whose requests were denied on the basis of vague security concerns.
- A joint Israel Prisons Service and prisoner committee, to be established to improve custody conditions.
- The administrative detention orders for 308 of the Palestinian prisoners will not be renewed unless clear security information is brought against them.

The development of a new, nonviolent effort designed to bring about changes in Israel's policy presents a different kind of challenge. At present, governments do not have the tools to confront the scale of this nonviolent struggle, making it necessary to formulate a new strategy for confronting the phenomenon.

In addition, the incident is indicative of the mutual influence between the Egyptian street and the Palestinian street via social networks. On the one hand, the Palestinians copied the model and tools of the hunger strike from Egypt and picked up a tailwind from the social networks. On the other hand, the events as they developed in the Gaza Strip and West Bank are liable to generate an escalation in the Egyptian street's anti-Israel stance and rhetoric. This concern, shared by the political leaders in Israel, Egypt, and the PA, seems to have led to the involvement of the security services in Israel, the PA, the Gaza Strip, and Egypt to resolve the crisis.