

# Palestine Unbound

Published each issue and updated regularly on *Palestine Square* ([palestinesquare.com](http://palestinesquare.com)), this section strives to capture the tenor and content of popular conversations related to the Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Increasingly, these conversations are held on new and dynamic platforms unbound by traditional media. Therefore, items presented in this section are from a variety of sources and have been selected because they either have gone viral or represent a significant cultural moment or trend.

## *This Quarter's Topics*

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Mural of Basel al-Araj in al-'Arub refugee camp south of Bethlehem after his killing. (Painted by Mohamed Alraee/Facebook)

## #RevolutionaryBasel (#al-Tha'ir\_Basel)\*

*After pursuing prominent activist and thinker Basel al-Araj for months following his release from a Palestinian Authority prison, Israeli soldiers shot him to death on 6 March 2017 in a house in al-Bireh. Al-Araj, a rising youth leader and vocal critic of both the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian Authority, had been disappeared by the PA in March 2016 along with two other activists, detained*

\* An earlier version of this story, written by Matt DeMaio, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 16 March 2017. —Ed.

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without trial, and tortured. Only after an eight-day hunger strike were the three released together with three other political prisoners, on 9 September 2016.

The circumstances of his arrest, release, and subsequent extrajudicial killing suggest that the PA was compliant with, if not complicit in, al-Araj's execution. Not formally affiliated with any political faction, the thirty-one-year-old al-Araj was one of an emerging group of young leaders in Palestine calling for revitalizing the stagnant Palestinian national movement. Al-Araj inspired his peers with his deep knowledge of Palestinian and world history, his powerful writing, and educational initiatives directed at Palestinian youth. Rising figures like al-Araj are representative of a vibrant type of political activism and leadership that poses a challenge to the PA, highlighting the profound rift between the authority and the people it purportedly represents. In an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel* on 18 April 2016, PA president Mahmoud Abbas had boasted of al-Araj's arrest as an example of successful security coordination between the PA and Israel. Al-Araj's killing by Israeli Defense Forces soldiers took place in Area A, which is under PA security control.

Al-Araj's assassination was met with dismay across Palestine and in the diaspora, and protests erupted in the days and weeks following his death. When Israeli authorities finally released his body on 17 March, hundreds of Palestinians joined the funeral procession from al-Araj's family home in al-Walaja. In addition to street protests, Palestinians took to social media with the hashtag #al-Tha'ir\_Basel (*RevolutionaryBasel*) to mourn his death and condemn the PA's security coordination with Israel.

Outraged Palestinian activists around the world organized protests at Palestine Liberation Organization offices to demand an end to security coordination and mark Prisoners' Day, April 17. The demonstrations coincided with the end of the forty-day mourning period for al-Araj, and protesters invoked his case as an example of the PA's targeting of dissenters.



Mourners fill the street during al-Araj's funeral procession in al-Walaja. (17 March, Twitter)

## #SaltWaterChallenge

A mass hunger strike also launched on Prisoners Day was soon amplified by the #SaltWaterChallenge, an international solidarity campaign initiated by Aarab Barghouti, son of imprisoned Fatah Central Committee member Marwan Barghouti. Aarab posted a Facebook video on 24 April challenging supporters, including Palestinian pop singer Mohammad Assaf, to join him in drinking salt water in solidarity with the Dignity Strikers. The 1,500 political prisoners involved in the strike, led by the elder Barghouti, subsisted on only salt water for the duration of their forty-day fast.



Arab Barghouti, son of political prisoner and hunger strike leader Marwan Barghouti, explains the Dignity Strike as he launches the #SaltWaterChallenge. (24 April, Facebook)

*Assaf accepted the call, and appealed to “every honorable person, wherever they may be, to take on this challenge in solidarity with our heroic detainees.” #SaltWaterChallenge gained momentum from there, with Arab Idol judges Ali Jaber, a Lebanese TV personality, and Ahmad Helmi, an Egyptian actor, downing glasses of salt water during a live filming of the show. Countless international human rights activists, professional athletes, and Arab celebrities shared videos of themselves undertaking the #SaltWaterChallenge until the Dignity Strike’s suspension.*

*Demands by the Dignity Strikers included family visits, humane medical care, and an end to solitary confinement and administrative detention. Strikers ended their fast on 27 May, after twenty hours of negotiations with the Israel Prison Service led to the reinstatement of two family visits per month. Samidoun, the Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, reported that other demands regarding the conditions of women and children prisoners, prison transfers, and overcrowding were also agreed to by Israel. Israel did not confirm the Samidoun report.*

*The hunger strike first gained international attention when spokesperson Marwan Barghouti published an op-ed in the New York Times on 16 April in which he decried the abysmal conditions in Israeli prisons and exposed Israel’s long history of targeting Palestinian activists.*



Palestinian activist and former political prisoner Rasma Odeh in her own #SaltWaterChallenge video, demonstrating solidarity with the Dignity Strikers. (10 May, Facebook)

## #BoycottPizzaHut<sup>†</sup>

While Palestinians were staging solidarity demonstrations, protest camps, and general strikes in the West Bank in support of the Dignity Strike, some Israelis mocked the action with vulgar events, social media posts, and advertisements. First, Israeli settlers and soldiers hosted a barbeque outside Israel's Ofer Prison in the occupied West Bank to taunt hunger strikers; then, in an effort to destroy the credibility of Marwan Barghouti, Dignity Strike spokesperson, the Israeli government released what it claimed was security video footage of him secretly eating cookies in his cell. The authenticity of the video was never established.

Following the video's release, the Israeli franchise of the U.S. restaurant chain Pizza Hut ridiculed Barghouti further. It ran a Facebook ad featuring a pizza box photoshopped into a screenshot from the purported surveillance footage. "Barghouti, if you're going to break a strike, why not pizza?" jeered the Hebrew caption.

Twitter and Facebook users decried the callous and offensive parody under the hashtag #BoycottPizzaHut, broadcasting their call around the Arab world.

In response to the controversy, Pizza Hut Israel fired the ad agency responsible; predictably, the firm declared that it had not intended to offend anyone. In Arabic and English, parent corporation Pizza Hut posted on Facebook: "Pizza Hut International apologises for any offence caused by a recent post on Pizza Hut Israel's Facebook page. It was completely inappropriate and does not reflect the values of our brand. The local franchisee in the country removed it immediately and the relationship with the agency that posted it was terminated, and we truly regret any hurt this may have caused."



Pizza Hut Israel's ad deriding hunger-striking prisoner Marwan Barghouti by depicting him sneaking pizza in a corner of his cell. (9 May, Facebook)



Social media users circulated this Pizza Hut logo, enhanced with barbed wire, prison bars, and a watchtower, during their call to boycott the company because of the Barghouti ad.

<sup>†</sup> An earlier version of this story, written by Khelil Bouarrouj, appeared on *Palestine Square*, the blog of the Institute for Palestine Studies, on 17 May 2017. —Ed.





Banksy's Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem sits feet from Israel's separation wall. (15 March, Thomas Coex/AFP/Getty Images)

## The Walled Off Hotel

*Elusive British street artist Banksy unveiled his newest project, the Walled Off Hotel in Bethlehem, in March. Touting the “worst view in the world,” the hotel overlooks the Israeli separation wall. Its décor satirizes supremacist narratives and fetishes through a combination of original Banksy artwork mingled with colonial artifacts; some rooms are adorned with exotic birds and camels, while others showcase surplus items from Israeli military barracks.*

*The hotel opened its doors to guests on 20 March, and is set to remain open until at least September 2017. In addition to serving as an installation, the Walled Off Hotel features a museum dedicated to the history of the separation barrier, a gallery promoting local artists, a bookstore, and a piano bar. In a setting reminiscent of a colonial gentlemen’s club, the bar features a bust of Michelangelo’s David shrouded in a cloud of tear gas and old CCTV cameras mounted like hunting trophies.*

*Banksy’s project deliberately commemorates the centennial of the Balfour Declaration, and even includes a life-size figure of British foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour penning a letter to Lord Walter Rothschild approving the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine on 2 November 1917. As Banksy explained in a statement: “It’s exactly one hundred years since Britain took control of Palestine and started re-arranging the furniture—with chaotic results. I don’t know why but it felt like a good time to reflect on what happens when the United Kingdom makes a huge political decision without fully comprehending the consequences.”*

*Although the hotel employs local Palestinians, some observers have criticized it as a self-promotion by Banksy that exploits Palestinian suffering and normalizes the occupation. While many applauded Banksy for starting a conversation about the wall and colonialism, others have accused him of portraying the occupied and occupier on equal footing, and of inviting the creation of ill-informed graffiti on the wall by international visitors equipped with spray paint and stencils purchased at the hotel's "Wall-mart."*