



Recent Hamas-led campaign for mass popular marches to the Israeli border. The objective is to create Arab and international pressure to resolve the Gaza Strip's economic hardship and to challenge Israel.

February 11, 2018

An idea has recently been examined in the Gaza Strip to organize **mass "non-violent" protest marches to Israel's border, whose participants will attempt to break into Israeli territory**. An idea was also proposed to **set up a "return camp"** near the border which will have a permanent presence of Palestinian marchers. In ITIC assessment the campaign is led by Hamas but has been adopted by others, including the **Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)**, social activists and local journalists. To promote the idea, at the end of January 2018 a Facebook page was created called **"the great march of the return"** (see **Appendix A**).

► In ITIC assessment **the idea was motivated by Hamas' strategic hardship, at the center of which is the economic deterioration of the Gaza Strip, for which Hamas cannot provide a solution**. Other motivations are **the stalled internal Palestinian reconciliation; Israel's success in striking the tunnels entering Israeli territory** (Hamas' main asset for the "next round"); **Hamas' difficulties with Egypt** (the Rafah crossing is still closed most of the time) **and with other Arab countries**. The recent measures taken by the **United States** (Jerusalem, UNRWA) are also a challenge for Hamas, as well as for the Palestinians in general.

► In view of the above, the idea of mass marches to Israel's border and even attempts to break through the border **may be perceived as an attractive response and a way of channeling the desperation of the Gazan population towards Israel**. The Palestinians will be activated in a "non-violent" way **making it difficult for Israel to respond**. The main objective may be to exert international, pan-Arabic and internal Palestinian pressure **to find a solution for the economic hardship of the Gaza Strip**. Hamas will also be able **to introduce a national-Palestinian theme into the marches by representing them as a response to Trump's declarations about Jerusalem and the cuts to UNRWA's budget, and at the same time to bring to the fore the Palestinians' so-called "right of return"** (a central motif in the national Palestinian narrative). **The idea of marching to Israel's borders is not new**. Between 2011 and 2013 several attempts were made, with limited results which did not meet the expectations of their organizers (see **Appendix B**).

Apparently at this stage the idea of marches is still being discussed and the stage of practical preparations, including dates, has not been reached. However, the idea may be seen as **attractive and realized**, even with an accelerated time table, as the economic hardships of the Gaza Strip increase and **Hamas feels it is facing a strategic dead end, forcing it to try new methods.**

Appendix A

Campaign for mass marches to the Israeli border

Overview

Since the end of January 2018 **Hamas and the PIJ in the Gaza Strip have been promoting the idea of holding mass civilian marches to the Israeli-Gazan border, and even breaking into Israeli territory.** There is also a campaign on the social networks, including a Facebook page entitled "the great march of the return."



Cartoonist by Gazan Isma'il al-Bazam calling on Palestinians to break through the border security fence (Facebook page of Isma'il al-Bazam, January 29, 2018). The figure seen from behind is Handala, a symbol of the Palestinian refugees.¹

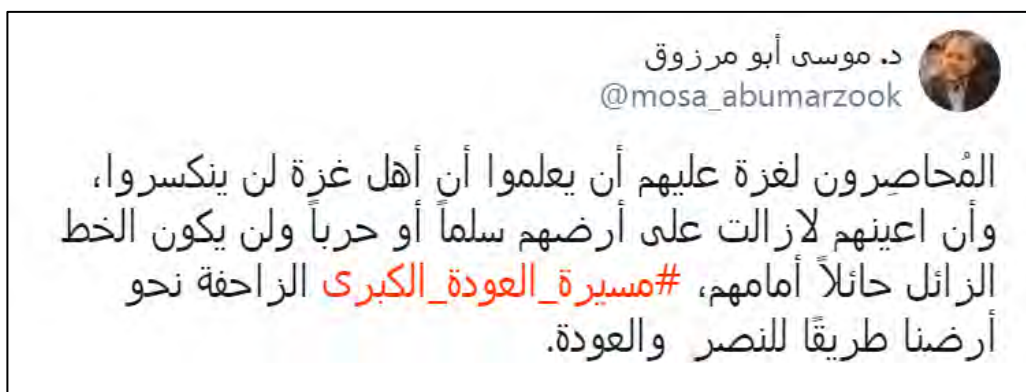
Statements from Hamas activists and figures affiliated with Hamas

► Following are statements from Hamas activists and figures affiliated with Hamas about the marches to Israel:

◆ **Senior Hamas figure Isma'il Radwan** said the "national and Islamic forces" were seriously considering **activities that might force Israel and the international community to end the suffering of the Gazans, lift the "siege" and open the crossings.** He said the idea was to hold marches to Israel's borders with **hundreds of thousands of participants.** He added the marching to the border and remaining near it would be done **quietly, without clashes, and that would exert pressure causing the world to take action for the sake of the Gaza Strip** (Palinfo, February 5, 2018).

¹Handala is the cartoon figure of a Palestinian refugee child, first drawn by Naji al-Ali. In 1987 Naji al-Ali was murdered in London. The figure of Handala became a symbol of the Palestinian refugees.

◆ **Senior Hamas figure Musa Abu Marzouq** said in a Tweet that "Those who impose a siege on the Gaza Strip have to know that the Gazans will not be broken, and that their eyes are still [lifted] towards their land [either in] peace or war. The fence is not an obstacle for them. **#great_march_return, that comes closer to their land [i.e., Israeli territory] is the path to victory and return**" (Twitter account of Musa Abu Marzouq February 7, 2018)



Twitter account of Musa Abu Marzouq.

◆ **Hamas-affiliated Ibrahim al-Madhoun** wrote an article about the obstacle Israel built on the Gaza Strip border. He claimed that Israel was liable to suddenly discover that **the fence would not protect its soldiers, when hundreds of thousands of Gazans streamed forward impulsively and spontaneously and crossed its borders, its fences and obstacles on their way back to their homes. It would be a giant campaign, he said, that was already being considered. There were more and more calls for it** in light of the "siege" [of the Gaza Strip] (alresala.net, February 1, 2018).

◆ **Ayman al-Daloul, an important journalist for Hamas-affiliated al-Aqsa radio,** supported the idea, which, he claimed, would **create "the greatest public activity in history."** He claimed that "as long as we are going to our deaths it is preferable to hurt the enemy. There is no point in waiting quietly for death" (alresala.net, February 1, 2018).

◆ **Muhammad Saleh al-Bardawil, a broadcaster on Hamas-affiliated al-Aqsa radio,** wrote on his Facebook page that the Gaza Strip did not have many options. Therefore **the call for return marches had to begin right now.** He claimed there was an initiative **to erect a protest tent one kilometer from the border security fence** on February 9, 2018, **during a "peaceful" demonstration** (Facebook page of Muhammad Saleh al-Bardawil, February 4, 2018)

Statements from Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) spokesman Da'ud Shehab

► **PIJ spokesman Da'ud Shehab** said his organization was committed to the idea of mass marches to the border and that the PIJ was now giving priority to "popular activities." He claimed "national" and Islamic organizations were currently discussing **organizing marches towards the Gaza Strip border with thousands of participants**. He claimed the marches were meant to exert pressure on Israel and the international community to lift the "siege" and open the crossings. He said the PIJ greatly supported the idea, because Israel could not be allowed to feel stable and secure as long as the Palestinians did not feel secure. He said his organization had presented a similar program a week after the Trump declaration, and **had even appointed popular committees throughout the Gaza Strip to manage the clashes near the border** (Palinfo, February 5, 2018).

► On another occasion **Da'ud Shehab** said in an interview that the Palestinian organizations were discussing the idea of **going to the border to exert pressure on Israel**, and warned Israel of continuing the current situation in the Gaza Strip. He said that **after all the options had been examined there was a consensus for the idea**. He also claimed that **in the near future they were planning to construct a "return camp" close to the border as a sign of protest** (al-Quds al-Arabi, February 7, 2018).

Report in the Arab media and statements from Arab social activists and political commentators

► On January 30, 2018, a report was posted on the **online Arabic site Arabi 21** that given the worsening situation in the Gaza Strip in the wake of the delay in the internal Palestinian reconciliation and the continuing [so-called] Israeli "siege" – **calls were increasing within the Gaza Strip not to wait passively for "the slow death" of the Gaza Strip but rather to act against Israel, which they regarded as responsible for the hardships**. The site reported calls to organize "non-violent" mass marches towards the eastern border of the Gaza Strip **to confront the "siege" and to tarnish Israel's image in international world opinion. Ahmed Abu Artima, a political activist in the Gaza Strip, said in the article that the hardship in the Gaza Strip demanded holding non-violent demonstrations near the border with Israel**. He said they had nothing left but death and therefore there was no reason not to "accept death and at the same time to harass the enemy".



Facebook page of Ahmed Abu Artima, political activist from the Gaza Strip and one of those calling for marches to Israel's border (February 7, 2018).

- ▶ **Rami al-Zaieg, a social activist in the Gaza Strip**, said the push of the Gazans to the "occupied lands" [i.e., the territory of Israel] was a step towards life and had to be advanced with every ounce of strength. He said it was a step that **would shuffle the cards and lead to chaos and instability**, which the enemy feared (alresala.net, February 1, 2018).
- ▶ **Dr. Adnan Abu 'Amar, academic and political commentator from the Gaza Strip**, called on the Gazan public to **hold peaceful popular marches to the border with Israel**. He said the marches should be organized and not sporadic, and would lead them to "political power" (Facebook page of "the great march of the return," February 5, 2018).
- ▶ **A notice posted by a group calling itself the "young people's movement," which on February 4, 2018 organized a demonstration in the Jabalia refugee camp to protest the economic situations, called for determining a specific day and time to realize the right of return to the occupied territories**. According to the notice, the "return" would be carried out "with civility and without violence," and the **march would be led by women, children and old people**. The post also called for all the media to cover the event. **If Israel opened fire on the masses, that would expose its ugly face and they there would be "an armed reaction from the resistance," which would determine "the rules of the game" for a confrontation that would change the situation on the ground.**



Right: Demonstration organized by the so-called "young people's movement" in Jabalia (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine website, February 2, 2018). Left: Old Palestinian cartoon calling on the masses to realize the so-called "right of return." The Arabic reads, "Bells of the return..." (Facebook page of "the great march of the return," February 5, 2018). The Palestinian refugee is holding a key, the symbol of the return of the Palestinian refugees to their homes.

Promoting the marches on the social networks

► The social networks posted calls to resolve the situation in the Gaza Strip by "return marches" or a permanent, intensive presence near the Gaza Strip border with Israel.

On January 29, 2018, a Facebook page was created called the "the great march of the return." As of February 11, 2018, it had 2,145 Likes and 2,183 followers. According to the page, the march of the return will be a "quiet, popular march" of millions of Palestinians. It will be leave simultaneously from the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Egypt and march towards the territories the Palestinians "were expelled from in 1948" to realize the [so-called] "right of return" (Facebook page of "the great march of the return," February 5, 2018).



Right: Facebook profile picture of the page of "the great march of the return," launched recently to encourage mass marches to Israel's border to break through the border security fence (Facebook page of "the great march of the return," January 29, 2018). Left: Notice on the Facebook page of "the great march of the return" calling for realizing the return of the Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 194 (Facebook page of "the great march of the return," February 7, 2018).

► The Facebook page of "the great march of the return" posted an appeal to the residents of the Gaza Strip, asking for their support. It said, **"In the very near future we will establish the return camp near the fence that separates us from the lands occupied since 1948. We ask anyone who wants to join the camp permanently, or anyone who has a tent he is will to contribute to the camp, to contact this page"** (Facebook page of "the great march of the return," February 1, 2018).



Protest tent erected by journalist Muthana al-Najar east of Khan Yunis as part of the campaign to hold "the great march of the return" (Facebook page of "the great march of the return, February 7, 2018).

► According to another notice posted on the page, the march of the return has already begun because massive enlistment is the most important component of its success. **All the practical activities during the next stage near the border security fence as part of enlistment and preparing the atmosphere before the final hour will be determined ad hoc on the ground.** All the organizations and all the people planning to carry out activities near the fence are requested to take into account that their activities are not the event itself but rather preparations for "the great march of the return." **They are requested not to clash with IDF forces at this stage because it is still the stage of enlistment.** Later on it will turn into a collective activity **to remove the fence and realize the "right of return"** (Facebook page of "the great march of the return, February 7, 2018).

Appendix B

The "marches of the return" to Israel's borders of 2011-2013

Overview

The idea of mass "marches of return" from the countries bordering on Israel is not new. It was tried a number of times between 2011 and 2013, and created local friction along Israel's borders as well as in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. The marches were organized by Hamas activists in Britain and other anti-Israeli activists around the globe participating in the campaign to delegitimize Israel. In the end, however, the organizers did not manage to pose a significant challenge for Israel or receive significant media coverage, and **the idea faded away after 2013.** The marches that were held were the following:

The "march of the return," May 2011

- ▶ In May 2011 **a series of mass-participation events were held in preparation for Nakba Day.** Their objective was to **bring the idea of the "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees to their homes in Israel to the attention of world public opinion.** That would be done by means of marches and demonstrations which would be held simultaneously along Israel's borders with Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. **At the same time demonstrations were held in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip and other Arab-Muslim countries.**
- ▶ **The main arena for Nakba Day events in 2011 was the region of Majdal Shams in the northern Golan Heights. On the Syrian side of the border about 3,000 demonstrators gathered, most of them Palestinians,** who came in transportation organized from Damascus and other locations in Syria. One hundred and thirty-seven demonstrators **crossed the border and entered the village, rioted, threw stones and clashed with IDF soldiers. Four demonstrators were killed and about 40 were wounded. Thirteen Israelis, civilians and soldiers, were wounded.** With coordination and help from a UN force, the demonstrators who had entered Israeli territory were returned to Syria, with the exception of four who managed to enter Israel (one of whom was captured in Tel Aviv the next day).
- ▶ **The main event in Lebanon was near the village of Maroun al-Ras** in the central sector of south Lebanon. Many demonstrators gathered and held a ceremony. **Towards the end of**

the ceremony dozens of demonstrators marched to the Israeli border, where they threw stones at the Israeli security forces. The Israeli forces responded with gunfire. The Lebanese army intervened and shot at the demonstrators to prevent them from entering Israel. **About ten demonstrators were killed and several dozen were wounded**, some of them apparently by Lebanese army fire.

► In **Jordan** events were organized to mark Nakba Day by a group calling itself "the young people of May 15." **On May 14 a march was organized which was supposed to reach the Allenby Bridge, but the marchers were halted by the Jordanian security forces.** On May 15 **hundreds of the group's activists returned and marched towards the village of Karameh, about 10 kilometers (about 6 miles) north of the Allenby Bridge.** They shouted slogans, including "a million shaheeds are marching to Jerusalem," and slogans in support of the "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees. The marchers clashed with the Jordanian security forces, broke through the police barriers and attacked policemen. **During the clash one demonstrator was killed and several dozen were injured.** The following day, May 16, the group organized a demonstration of about a hundred people in front of the Israeli embassy in Amman.

► In the **Gaza Strip** the focal point of friction was **at the Erez crossing.** Dozens of Palestinians rioted and clashed with IDF soldiers on the Gazan side of the crossing. **One rioter was killed and dozens were injured.** There were also marches and small demonstrations in the Gaza Strip.



Right: Palestinians hold a demonstration on the Gaza Strip side of the Rafah crossing. Left: Palestinian demonstrators in Beit Hanoun burn the Israeli flag (Paldf, may 15, 2011).

► In **Egypt** dozens of Egyptians demonstrated **in front of the Rafah crossing** and at other locations along the border with Israel. Egyptian and Palestinian security forces prepared for the demonstrations ahead of time. Several demonstrators were arrested but there were no clashes between them and the security forces.

"Land Day" events, 2012

► On March 31, 2012, international activists tried to organize joint international activities to mark the Israeli Arab Land Day. Hamas activists in Britain played key roles in organizing the events. **The response to the call for participation was relatively limited and the events were held with relative quiet.** Disturbances were limited and **the events did not receive significant media coverage.**

► **In the northern Gaza Strip** (Beit Hanoun, near the Erez crossing) several thousand Palestinians held a demonstration. **They were joined by a delegation of 25 members of the Egyptian parliament and pro-Palestinian activists from Ireland, Indonesia and Turkey.** The de facto Hamas administration announced its support for the demonstration but the Hamas security forces contained the events. The Palestinian media reported clashes between the operatives of Hamas' security forces and young Gazans who tried to approach the Erez crossing (Hamas denied the reports). Marchers who approached the Erez crossing were met with a response from IDF forces who used riot control measures to distance the demonstrators from the fence. **One Palestinian was killed in the clash and about 35 were wounded.**



Rally in Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip (al-Jazeera, June 30, 2012).

► The organizers of the events did not succeed in embarrassing Israel. That disappointed them, **as was seen in the statements made by Hamas activist in Britain who had been among the organizers.**

◆ **Zaher Birawi, a Hamas activist in Britain,** said that the activity had been quite successful but the organizers were "realistic." He said they were aware that had it not been for "weak spots in several Arab-Muslim countries," many more people could have participated. He consoled himself with the fact that it had been the first step towards the next time and that the marches had caused Israel to be on high alert, which had

cost a great deal of money. He called on various peoples to exert pressure on their regimes and said that all the organizations of the march would meet in the near future to formulate a working plan for the future (al-Aqsa TV, March 31, 2012).

◆ **Muhammad Sawalha, a Hamas activist in Britain**, said that the organizers were "fairly well satisfied" but he repeated the claim that "certain countries had exposed the weak spots stemming from their internal situations." He said the marches were "the beginning of a new phase of ongoing activity for the sake of Jerusalem" (al-Quds TV, March 31, 2012).

The "Global March to Jerusalem," June 2013

► In June 2013 the **Global March to Jerusalem (GMJ)** was held to mark Naksa Day (the Arab defeat in 1967). Marches and other events were held in **the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Egypt, Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey and other countries**. In many European capitals and in North American cities demonstrations were held, some of them near local Israeli legations. The slogan of the demonstrations and rallies was "Citizens of the world want to liberate Jerusalem." **Zaher Birawi, a Hamas activist in Britain**, claimed events were held in 40 countries and 120 cities around the globe. **However, in reality political interest and media coverage were small.**



Global March to Jerusalem events around the globe (GMJ website, June 10, 2013). In reality the events received scant media coverage.

► In **Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem** demonstrations were held at the regular Friday locations. During the demonstrations Naksa Day was noted. In Jerusalem a march began at al-Aqsa mosque and ended in a gathering at the Nablus Gate. In clashes between

Palestinians and the Israeli security forces **a number of Palestinians were injured** and several were detained.

► In **the Gaza Strip** the Global March to Jerusalem began after the Friday prayer. It advanced **along the road to Beit Hanoun near the Erez crossing**, where there main rally was held. There were no exceptional events. The rally was attended by several thousand people. During the rally Israeli and American flags were burned. Speakers at the rally accused Israel of "harming" Jerusalem and al-Aqsa mosque, and called for Palestinian unity. The rally was secured by the security forces of the de facto Hamas administration, who were deployed beforehand along the main routes and the site of the rally.



Right: March from the Jabalia refugee camp to Beit Hanoun (Filastin al-A'an, June 7, 2013). Left: Rally in Beit Hanoun (Hamas forum, June 7, 2013).