



Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continue preparing a mass march to the Israeli border ("the great return march"), planned for Land Day, March 30, 2018

March 7, 2018

Overview

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip continue **preparing for "the great return march,"**¹ during which Gazans are expected to **hold a mass march to the Israeli border** to make the world aware of the so-called right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their houses. Calls were recently heard to hold the march **on or around March 30, 2018, Land Day**. The organizers of the march reported that **they intended to recruit about a hundred thousand participants and the event would not be violent**. However, in ITIC assessment, **such events may spin out of control and turn into riots** when crowds gather near the border security fence. **Hamas and the other organizations in the Gaza Strip announced their support for the march and called on their followers to participate**. The organizations apparently will ensure broad media coverage to spread the march's messages, the central one of which is the so-called "right of return."

► On February 22, 2018, the Facebook page of "the great return march" changed its profile picture. The new logo shows the UN logo and the number 194, which relates to UN General Assembly Resolution 194 passed on December 11, 1948, in which Paragraph 11 deals with the Palestinian refugees; a map of "Palestine" in the colors of the Palestinian flag, with no reference to the existence of the State of Israel; a hand holding a key, the symbol of the so-called right of the Palestinian refugees to return to the places they lived in 70 years ago. As of this writing, the Facebook page has about 4,000 followers and about 4,000 likes.

¹For further information, see the February 11, 2018 bulletin, "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."



The new profile picture of the Facebook page of "the great return march"
(Facebook page of "the great return march," February 22, 2018).

► Additional information about the march was recently made public after **Ahmed Abu Artima**, an Gazan political activist and one of the march's organizers. He was interviewed and details about preparations for the march were posted to his Facebook page (Facebook page of Ahmed Abu Artima, March 3, 2018). The details included the following:



Ahmed Abu Artima in a video from his Facebook page, in
which he gives details about the march
(Facebook page of Ahmed Abu Artima, March 3, 2018).

Objective and preparations

► According to the march organizers, the objective is to **send a message to the world about the Palestinians' "right of return."** Palestinian sources told the Hamas-affiliated Safa news agency that a meeting would be held **to establish a supreme national authority for "the great return march."** That came after a meeting held on March 6, 2018, where the **Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip expressed support for the march.** Members of the planned so-called "national authority" will be independent public figures from the Gaza Strip and non-politically affiliated civilians.

► According to information on the Facebook page of "the great march of the return," in preparation for the event the organizers need clothing like **the striped suits worn by the inmates of the Nazi concentration camps**. Anyone who could provide such suits, or sew them, was asked to contact the march's coordinating committee (Facebook page of "the great return march," February 25, 2018). **The organizers are apparently going to present a display comparing the Palestinians to the victims of the Nazis.**



Pictures included in an appeal for Nazi concentration camp suits (Facebook page of "the great return march," February 25, 2018).

Timing

► Originally the proposed date for the march was May 15 (Nakba Day). However, **calls have recently been heard to hold the main event on Land Day, March 30**, the day Israelis Arabs have demonstrated their adherence to their lands since 1976. The organizers of the march said it **would not be a single event but rather a series of activities** which would continue over time. **Issam Adwan, head of Hamas' department of refugee affairs**, said the **organizing committee had agreed to hold the march on Land Day (March 30, 2018)**. He said all the national and Islamic organizations, including Fatah, had agreed. He said the march would be only **a part of the comprehensive initiative** of "the great return march" (Palinfo, February 13, 2018).

Number of participants

► **The organizers said they intended to recruit about a hundred thousand participants**, most of them from the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. The "great return march" coordinating committee appealed to Gazans to take an active role. The committee also reported it was continuing its efforts to **establish national committees in other countries**

that would organize their own marches, simultaneous to the one in the Gaza Strip (Safa, March 6, 2018).

- ▶ In all probability the number of marchers the committee is planning to recruit is **exaggerated. However, in ITIC assessment, the number of participants may be larger than those at the routine weekly demonstrations at the security fence.**

Nature of the event

- ▶ The organizers, led by **Abu Artima**, continue to emphasize **the march will be non-violent and there is no intention to confront IDF forces.** Interviewed by Hamas' Palinfo website, he called "the great return march" a "**popular strategic tool**" to use peaceful measures to realize the "right of return." He said the march would be different from the [routine] clashes at the border security fence. That was because **the participants would not throw stones, but rather hold a rally that the whole world and media outlets would watch.** He also said the **rally would be held at a distance of 700 meters** (a little less than half a mile) from the fence and **at this time there was no intention of approaching closer.** However, **in his opinion the march is a source of worry for Israel because Israel, which has experience with military confrontations, will have to deal with large crowds that would march "peacefully" to realize their right in accordance with international law** (Facebook page of "the great return march," February 21, 2018).
- ▶ **Ahmed Abu Artima** posted a video to his Facebook page in which he also said the march **would be an example of "peaceful resistance."** He said there was no intention to break through the fence, throw stones, burn tires or clash with IDF forces, as occurs at the Friday demonstrations (Facebook page of Ahmed Abu Artima, March 3, 2018).

Past experience has shown that so-called "popular activity" which is theoretically supposed to be carried out "peacefully" has, on occasion, turned into violent activity. In addition, there are Palestinians who will try to **exploit the event to provoke Israel.** Thus despite the organizers' declarations, the march and associated events are **liable to slip out of control and turn into clashes with IDF forces near the security fence.** Following are several postings to Facebook pages that are **inconsistent with the declarations** that the march will be "peaceful."



Right: Old picture of riots, as opposed to the "peaceful resistance" (Facebook page of "the great return march," February 18, 2018). Left: Cartoon originally posted to the Facebook page of Gazan cartoonist 'Alaa' al-Laqa encouraging Palestinians to cross the [border] guard fence (Facebook page of "the great return march," February 12, 2018).



Posting to the Facebook page of "the great return march." The Arabic reads, "We will strike the [border] guard fence" (Facebook page of "the great return march," February 28, 2018).

Participation of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and other Gaza Strip terrorist organizations

- ▶ The organizers got a green light from Hamas and the PIJ for the march. "The great return march" Facebook page posted a statement from **Issam Adwan, head of Hamas' department of refugee affairs**, who emphasized the necessity and importance of the event. He said **it was part of the "resistance"** and that it was no less important than the "armed struggle." He also said that the Land Day march would be only **the opening move of a comprehensive global operation** (Facebook page of "the great return march," March 6, 2018).
- ▶ **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, held a meeting with the heads of the Palestinian organizations in the Gaza Strip where he called on the Palestinians in the

territories and beyond to prepare themselves for "the great return march." The march, he said, would tell the entire world that "Palestine is in our hearts and no one can revoke the right of return" (Palinfo, March 5, 2018). **Khalil al-Haya, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, said **Hamas supported the march** and **its followers would participate**, because it "showed the true desire of the Palestinian people" (al-Aqsa, March 1, 2018).



Isma'il Haniyeh (center) calls on Palestinians to join the march at a meeting of heads of the organizations in the Gaza Strip (Palinfo and Hamas Twitter accounts, March 5, 2018).

► **Talal Abu Zarifa, senior figure in the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)**, said the Palestinian organizations had agreed on activities that would be consistent with the objectives of "the great return march." He said they had agreed on a program that would be implemented gradually. It will begin in activity along the border, and afterwards **"return tents" will be erected near the border security fence**. He also stressed that the activities would be "peaceful." He added that the organizations had agreed to continue mass recruitment, to make Israel responsible [for what happens] and realize the "right of return" (Palinfo, February 13, 2018).