



The "Great Return March," Interim Report (Updated to April 9, 2018)

April 10, 2018

Overview

After two months of preparations, on Friday, March 30, 2018, (Land Day), Palestinians in the Gaza Strip began the events of "great return march."¹ **The events include mass demonstrations (on Fridays) accompanied by violent but controlled clashes near the fence. The events included demonstrations, violent clashes, vandalizing the fence, attempts to break through the fence and enter Israeli territory and attempts to carry out terrorist attacks. Such provocations are expected to continue in the coming weeks, at least until Nakba Day on May 15, 2018. On or about Nakba Day the events are expected to climax with a mass march towards Israeli territory and increased military provocations.**

► **Hamas plays a central role in the "great return march."** During the preparations **Hamas was careful to remain in the background** and represent the march as the initiative of Gazan activists who were not affiliated with Hamas. However, **in effect** (although not openly) Hamas has taken control and become the main force driving the "great return march," **providing it with an organizational, logistic, political and media framework.** During the events Hamas has made clear **despite its strategic hardships, it is able to efficiently organize and mobilize the general public in the Gaza Strip, and that the Gazan public heeds Hamas and its obeys its instructions,** even at the cost of lives.

► **So far, there is a pattern of mass demonstrations carried out on Fridays** (close to 40,000 on March 30, 2018, and close to 20,000 on April 6, 2018). **During the week** a few hundred demonstrators have participated (although the number may rise to 1,000). The demonstrations are held at between five and eight focal points along the border. **At the front lines are young men, among them operatives from Hamas and the other terrorist organizations, who use the demonstrators as human shields and instigate violent provocations against the IDF,** such as attempts to infiltrate Israeli territory, activities of

¹ For further information about preparations for the "great return march," see the bulletins issued on February 11, March 7 and March 27, 2018.

armed Palestinians at the border security fence, throwing hand grenades and Molotov cocktails at IDF soldiers, slinging stones and attempts to vandalize the fence. **IDF forces, deployed along the fence, have not allowed the rioters to cross the border into Israeli territory or violate Israeli sovereignty, and have prevented damage to the fence and its security installations.**



Palestinians vandalize the border security fence (Palinfo Twitter account, April 7, 2018).



Right: Bag of Molotov cocktails seized by the IDF from a Palestinian near the border security fence (Facebook page of Shams News, April 3, 2018). Left: Facebook profile picture of an armed Gazan, posted for the "great return march." The Arabic reads, "I am returning" (Facebook page of Abu Usama Ahmed, March 28, 2018).

► **Total number of Palestinians injured so far:** According to reports from the Palestinian ministry of health, **29 Palestinians have been killed.** In addition, **Israel is holding the bodies of two Palestinians. Another Palestinian died on April 10, bringing the total to 32** (updated to April 10, 2018). **An initial examination of the identities of those killed revealed that 20 of them (just over 60%) belonged to the terrorist organizations.** Most of them (13 of 19) were identified as Hamas operatives and the others as operatives of other terrorist organizations. Most of those killed (22) were killed on the first Friday, March 30, 2018, and rest (nine) on the second Friday, April 6, 2018. Two others were killed during the

week. **Most of them died during violent activities near the border security fence and some of them during attempts to carry out terrorist attacks** (an analysis of the identities of the Gazans killed will be issued separately after the ITIC finishes its investigation).



Right: The funeral held in Khan Yunis for Fares al-Raqab, a Palestinian Islamic Jihad operative (Paltoday, April 2, 2018). Left: The funeral held for Abd al-Qadr al-Hawajri, a Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine operative, in the Nuseirat refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip (Dunia al-Watan, March 31, 2018).

Hamas and the other terrorist organizations participating in the march have so far made sure to contain the riots and channel them near the border. Both sides, Hamas and the IDF, have so far avoided taking steps to escalate that might turn the local clashes into an overall confrontation. For instance, Hamas has not launched rockets in response to the killing of dozens of Palestinians, and the IDF has not attacked targets deep inside the Gaza Strip in response to provocations along the border. Moreover, in response to the placing of two IEDs on the border security fence in the northern Gaza Strip and the shooting attack planned by a terrorist squad for March 30, 2018, the Israeli Air Force attacked Hamas and other terrorist targets without exceeding its usual response to those types of attacks. However, as the clashes and provocations from Hamas and the other terrorist organizations continue, especially when the events culminate on May 15, 2018, **the chances increase that there might be a miscalculation that would lead to escalation** (see below).

Interim balance of achievements and failures

► **The current situation on the ground has to be evaluated according to the goals which in ITIC assessment the organizers set for themselves, especially Hamas, which is the dominant factor:**

- ◆ **On the declarative level, the goal is to bring to the fore so-called Palestinian refugees' "right of return" to Israel.** That is done through displays, statements reported by the media and pictures of masses of refugees from the Gaza Strip

streaming towards the border fence and trying to enter Israeli territory. That has been the main theme of the media message accompanying the "great return march" so far. However, the attempt to illustrate the so-called "right of return" by breaking through the fence is in **direct contradiction of the (false) media message that the march would be peaceful and nonviolent** (clearly contradicted by what has happened on the ground).

◆ **On the practical level, for Hamas the march is meant to deflect attention from its strategic hardships and achieve a number of goals, among them the following: allowing the Gazans let off steam**, especially the young Gazans, in response to the harsh conditions of their daily lives, and **turn their frustrations towards a confrontation with Israel**; to **pose a practical challenge for Israel** with continuous provocations along the border security fence, which Israel is not accustomed to (taking into account that there will be loss of lives); **creating difficulties for Mahmoud Abbas** in the hopes that the march will keep him from imposing additional sanctions on the Gaza Strip; **exerting indirect pressure on the Arab states** through the support of the Arab street for the Palestinian cause, especially in **Egypt and Saudi Arabia**, with which Hamas has problematic relations; and **gaining the sympathy of international public opinion**, especially in Europe, as a **response to what are considered the "hostile policies" of Donald Trump** towards the Palestinians.

► Given the above goals, especially regarding Hamas, in ITIC assessment **the interim balance of achievements and failures has been mixed:**

◆ **Achievements so far:**

- Hamas has successfully motivated tens of thousands of Gazans to **let off steam** which has been accumulating for a long time, the result of the worsening economic situation in the Gaza Strip. Hamas succeeded **in creating a linkage between the deteriorating economic situation in the Gaza Strip and the escalation of the conflict with Israel** (according to Yahya al-Sinwar, "Gaza will not starve...if it explodes it will explode in Israel's face"). In addition, regarding governance and organization, Hamas has proved it can organize a broad civilian protest **by recruiting, motivating and organizing tens of thousands of Palestinians** (and has been sending a message to both Mahmoud Abbas and Israel that the population supports it). **On the ground**, the events have

challenged the IDF, **forcing it to deploy exceptional forces to face mass riots and provocations** with the participation of operatives affiliated with Hamas and the other terrorist organizations.

◆ **In the realm of politics and the media:**

- **The march was covered by the global media** and received with sympathy mainly in Western Europe and the UN (to a great extent because of IDF gunfire, which was regarded as non-proportional, and caused the deaths of many Palestinians.)² In addition, **Hamas managed to contain the events to a limited arena near the fence, avoiding escalation with Israel and deterioration of the confrontation, even in view of the Palestinian killed and wounded.**

◆ **Failures and problems so far:**

- The main goal of **bringing the so-called "right of return" to the attention of the international community and of the Arab-Muslim world has not been achieved.** The global and local media that support the Palestinians **focused on the violence itself and what was perceived as Israel's non-proportional response, and not on the goal of the "right of return"** which the march is supposed to promote. Politically, the Palestinians (and the Arab states) **failed in their efforts to wrest an operational resolution from the UN Security Council to investigate the events**, largely because of American backing for Israel.
- **On the ground**, so far Hamas and the demonstrators **did not have the practical success** they wanted to turn into a media win (such as breaking through the fence into Israeli territory, killing IDF soldiers or disrupting the daily lives of the civilians living in the communities near the Gaza Strip). **In the internal Palestinian arena**, in Judea and Samaria the events did not lead to large-scale solidarity demonstrations (Palestinian TV, which is controlled by the PA, barely covered the events). In the **pan-Arab arena** the events did not lead to outpourings of solidarity and support. The opposite was true, as **Mohammad bin Salman, the Saudi Arabian crown prince**, turned a cold shoulder to the events in the Gaza Strip, stating, during a visit to the United States, that the Israelis had a right to a land of their own, a statement in direct contradiction to the "right of

² Responses from the UN and Western media generally ignored attempts to invade Israeli territory and violate its sovereignty. They also ignored the mass violence employed, and the central role played by Hamas in organizing the events and instigating violence..

return" that seeks to change Israel demographically and destroy it as the national homeland of the Jews.³

Forecast for the future

► In ITIC assessment, Hamas and the organizers of the **march will make an effort to preserve the tension between the Gaza Strip and Israel at least until May 15, 2018**. They will try to motivate large crowds to move towards the border fence and **prevent tensions within the Gaza Strip population from dissipating**. The demonstrations will continue to focus on Fridays and days specially marked by the Palestinians, such as "prisoners' day." At the same time, violent provocations of the IDF will continue along the border, as will efforts to be creative to find new issues for media and propaganda activities, such as massive burnings of Israeli flags, displaying thousands of copies of the "key of return," using loudspeakers to sound sirens, extensive use of fireworks, bussing in women, children and the elderly, and holding torchlight parades along the border.

► In ITIC assessment, when **the events peak** (on or around May 15, Nakba Day, and May 14, when Trump is expected to relocate the American embassy to Jerusalem) **Hamas and the other terrorist organizations may try to carry out exceptional events. For instance, sending massive numbers of Gazans to the border and attempting to break through the fence (and publicize it as a sign of "victory."** Hamas may also increase its incitement and call on Palestinians in Judea and Samaria to join the events and riot and carry out terrorist attacks.

► As a result, as the peak of the events of May 14 and 15 approach, **the riots along the border security fence may escalate** (even at the cost of an increase in the number of Palestinians killed, a cost Hamas is ready to pay). Hamas and the other terrorist organizations may also decide on **an exceptional military-terrorist activity as proof they were victorious** (such as firing rockets), although **it may invite a serious Israeli response**. In ITIC assessment, as long as Hamas has more failures than successes, its motivation may **increase to carry out an activity that will have great media coverage and show "victory."**

³ During his visit to the United States, Mohammad bin Salman was interviewed by Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor in chief of The Atlantic. Goldberg asked him if he believed the Jewish people had a right to a nation state, at least in a part of the land of their ancestors. Mohammad bin Salman replied, "I believe that each people, anywhere, **has a right to live in their peaceful nation**. I believe the Palestinians and the Israelis **have the right to have their own land**" (ITIC emphasis) (The Atlantic, April 2, 2018).



The profile picture of the Twitter account of Hamas- affiliated Palinfo encourages breaking through the border security fence for the sake of al-Aqsa. The Arabic reads, "We return#I return (Palinfo Twitter account, April 8, 2018).

Structure of the report

► This report has the following sections:

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- Incitement to violence and hatred
- Prominent statements of senior Hamas figures
- Organizing the population
- Low profile criticism from Gazans and organizations
- Future plans

◆ The extent of external support

- The Palestinian Authority (PA)
- Israel and its neighboring Arab states
- The international arena

Overview of the Events So Far

Summary of the events

- ▶ After about two months of logistic, organizational and media preparations, events for the "great return march" began. So far there have been **two mass Friday demonstrations on the Gaza Strip-Israeli border**. Both demonstrations were attended by **tens of thousands of Palestinians** (nearly 40,000 on the first Friday and nearly 20,000 on the second). On weekdays the numbers dwindled to between several hundred and 1,000. During the demonstrations, on several occasions Palestinians attempted to cross the fence, place IEDs and clash with IDF forces.
- ▶ The Palestinian ministry of health reported 29 Palestinians killed and about 1,200 wounded by IDF fire and riot control measures. Seventy-nine were reportedly in critical condition. **In addition, Israel had two bodies, and another Palestinian died of his wounds**. The funerals held for those killed were relatively quiet. Apparently there is an understanding among organizers not to exhaust the Gazan public and therefore they would rather recruit participants for Fridays and specific days, **until the events planned for the climax of the march on May 15, 2018, Nakba Day**.



Tent camp erected in the eastern Gaza Strip for the beginning of the march (Wafa, March 30, 2018).

- ▶ Despite the complex interim balance of pluses and minuses noted above, **Hamas boasts of the achievements the "great return march" has had so far**, and praises its own solidarity with the residents of the Gaza Strip. **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, said the Palestinian people had "sent shock waves through Israeli security" (Hamas

website, April 7, 2018). **Ahmed Bahar, Hamas deputy chairman of the Palestinian Legislative Council**, said the so-called "right of return" was "a sacred right" and that the activities would continue despite Israel's responses (qudspress.com, April 8, 2018). **Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, said during a visit to a demonstration site that the residents of the Gaza Strip were opposed to the so-called Israeli "occupation" and not to the "resistance" [i.e., the terrorist organizations] (YouTube al-Jazeera channel, April 6, 2018).

IDF deployment and policies

- ▶ Before the demonstrations and riots on March 30, 2018, **the IDF deployed reinforcements along the Gaza Strip border** in preparation for the riots and attempts to vandalize and possibly break through the border security fence. Additional units were placed on reserve. Dozens of snipers were stationed along the border across from friction points for pinpoint prevention of any Palestinian attempt to enter Israel and **use the demonstrators as shields for firing weapons, placing IEDs, vandalizing the fence or entering Israeli territory** (as in fact occurred). Additional barbed wire was strung behind the border fence to prevent entrance into Israeli territory. The forces were also provided with riot control equipment (Israeli media reports).
- ▶ According to the IDF spokesman and an article in the Israeli daily Haaretz, the soldiers had instructions to open fire and shoot to kill at any armed person who threatened them. Snipers were permitted to shoot anyone who approached the fence in an attempt to enter Israeli territory. The distance permitted for approaching the fence was designated at 100 meters. Closer than that, soldiers were allowed to shoot at the lower part of their bodies (Haaretz, April 8, 2018)..



IDF forces deploy near the Gaza Strip border (IDF Spokesman, March 31, 2018).

The March 30 demonstrations and following events

► The events of the "great return march" began on March 30, 2018, the date on which Palestinians mark Land Day. Beginning in the early morning, almost 40,000 demonstrators, among them women and children, arrived at the tents that had been erected at eight main locations. Rioters burned tires and threw stones at the Israeli security forces and at the fence.

- **The riots provided an opportunity for the operatives of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations to attempt to cross the fence and damage the Israeli security installations along the border.** Towards evening most of the demonstrators left and only a few dozen remained at the site (IDF Spokesman and the Israeli media, March 31, 2018). During the rioting **19 Palestinians were killed, most of them while attempting to enter Israeli territory.**



Right: Palestinian demonstrators near the border security fence. Left: Palestinians riot against IDF soldiers near the border security fence (Facebook page of al-Risalah, March 30, 2018).



Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau (right) and Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip (left) at "great return march" events (Facebook page of al-Risalah, March 30, 2018).

► On the evening of March 30, 2018, **two Palestinians approached the border security fence in the northern Gaza Strip and shot at soldiers. Their shots were immediately responded to by light arm and tank fire; the tanks also shot at other terrorist targets. Israeli Air Force aircraft also attacked.** There were no casualties and no damage was reported (IDF Spokesman, March 30, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that a Hamas observation post, a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and other targets had been attacked (Khabar 'Ajel, March 30, 2018).

► During the following days **demonstrations along the border continued. They were limited in scope** and generally attended by only a few hundred Gazans. In addition, a number of attempts were made to cross the border security fence. On the night of **April 5, 2018**, Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked an armed terrorist near the fence in the northern Gaza Strip. Around noon rioters attacked IDF forces. A number of Palestinians were injured (Ynet, April 5, 2018).

The April 6 demonstrations and following events

► Apparently learning from the events of March 30, **Hamas' internal security forces issued safety instructions to the demonstrators.** They included not wearing prominent clothing, hiding their faces, not taking pictures and not using state-of-the-art telephones (Facebook page of Hamas internal security, April 4, 2018). A call was issued to burn large numbers of tires, creating a smokescreen to **cover violent provocations near the fence and make it hard for the Israeli snipers to aim and shoot.** Demonstrators were also asked to use mirrors to dazzle the IDF forces. The organizers of the march reportedly reached an

agreement with companies to bring large numbers of tires to locations in the Gaza Strip (al-Aqsa, April 5, 2018).



Palestinians collect tires in the eastern Gaza Strip for burning at the "great return march." (10,000 tires were reportedly collected) (Palinfo Twitter account, April 6, 2018).

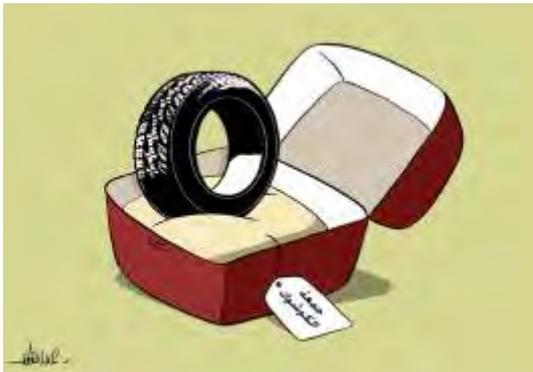
► On April 6, 2018, **about 20,000 demonstrators and rioters participated in "tire Friday" at five locations.** The main sites were in **Gaza City and Khan Yunis.** The IDF declared the area a closed military zone. In IDF assessment the smaller number of demonstrators was the result of IDF deterrence. According to the IDF Spokesman, many Palestinians decided not to participate and those who did were careful not to confront the soldiers. However, the IDF Spokesman reported that **Palestinians sent children to the front lines, and said the IDF was careful not to harm them** (IDF Spokesman, April 6, 2018). The Israeli media reported that soldiers used less live fire and more riot control measures (Haaretz, April 8, 2018).



Right: Rioters prepare catapults to heave rocks at IDF forces (Facebook page of al-Risalah, April 6, 2018). Left: Gazans prepare mirrors to dazzle IDF forces (Facebook page of al-Risalah, April 2, 2018).



Women and children near the border security fence during the April 6 demonstrations (Paltoday, April 6, 2018).



Cartoon by Alaa' al-Laqta encourages Palestinians to use tires. Right: "The return march#tire Friday (Facebook page of Alaa' al-Laqta, April 5, 2018). Left: "Tire Friday" (Facebook page of Alaa' al-Laqta, April 4, 2018).

Despite the decrease in the number of demonstrators on April 6, **the confrontations between rioters and the Israeli security forces were more violent.** Under cover of the smoke from the burning tires there were **eight attempts to throw IEDs, Molotov cocktails were thrown and there were a number of attempts to cut through and cross the fence.** The IDF forces prevented violent activity. Nine Palestinians were killed during the riots (seven died immediately and two later). Among those killed were a 13-year-old boy and a journalist (IDF Spokesman and the Israeli media, April 6, 2018). On April 7, 2018, an IDF force located a hand grenade near the Karni crossing in the central Gaza Strip. **On April 6 a hand grenade was thrown at IDF forces from the Gaza Strip** (IDF Spokesman, April 7, 2018).



Palestinians vandalize the border fence (Palinfo Twitter account, April 7, 2018).



Tires burn east of Jabaliya (Palinfo Twitter account, April 6, 2018). Left: Palestinian burns the American flag near the fence (Safa, April 6, 2018).



Palestinians wave knives and Molotov cocktails at the "great return march" east of Khan Yunis (Palinfo Twitter account, April 5, 2018).

► On the afternoon of April 8, **2018 three Palestinians crossed the border fence in the northern Gaza Strip**. After a short time in Israeli territory they returned to the Gaza Strip. IDF tanks shot at them. A search of the area revealed **the Palestinians had planted two IEDs**. In response Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked a target in a Hamas military facility in the northern Gaza Strip (IDF Spokesman, April 9, 2018). The Palestinian media reported an attack on a post of Hamas' military-terrorist wing in Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip (Paldf, April 9, 2016).

Medical deployment

► **The organizers of the march and Hamas took into consideration that in view of the expected violence Palestinians would be wounded, and prepared accordingly.** Before the events began **Iyad al-Bazam, spokesman for the ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip**, said the security forces and the health system in the Gaza Strip were prepared and deployed throughout the Gaza Strip to provide support and public aid (Twitter account of March 30, date, 2018).



Field hospital set up by the Palestinian Red Crescent in the eastern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, April 5, 2018).

► In view of the large numbers of wounded, the Red Crescent and the Palestinian ministry of health declared **a state of emergency at all the medical centers and hospitals in the Gaza Strip** (Twitter account of Shabakat Quds, March 30, 2018). Hamas' military wing announced a blood donation drive to all its members in the northern Gaza Strip. The ministry of health also called on all Gazans to donate blood (Palinfo Twitter account, March 30, 2018).

► **Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip**, said the ministry was again asking all international institutions and organizations to rush medicine and medical equipment to the Gaza Strip for emergency rooms, operating theaters and intensive care units, as there were severe shortages in the Gaza Strip (Shehab, April 6, 2018). Reportedly, delegations of volunteers from France, the United States and Australia arrived in the Gaza Strip to treat wounded Gazans (Dunia al-Watan, April 7, 2018).

Number of Palestinians killed and the percentage of terrorist operatives among them

► Since March 30, 2018, 32 Palestinians have been killed. **Most of them (20) have been identified as affiliated with the military wings of Hamas and other terrorist organizations. Most of them were killed during clashes with IDF forces. Some were killed during terrorist activities:**

Hamas rushed to pay reparations to the families of those killed and injured. According to **Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem, Hamas paid \$3000 to the families of every Gazan killed, \$500 to the families of those who were critically wounded, and \$200 to the families of those who were seriously wounded.** The degree of injury was determined by the Hamas ministry of health. According to Hazem Qassem, the support was given as part of "Hamas' national and social responsibility" (Hamas website, April 5, 2018). **Note:** Such ad hoc grants are given to encourage Gazans to participate in violent actions, and are supplementary to the financial support received from the PA by the families of Palestinians who are killed and wounded.

Involvement of Hamas

During the preparations for the march Hamas avoided taking center stage, but once the events had begun it took control to exploit them for its propaganda and political purposes. Hamas invested money and encouraged the masses to participate. It was Hamas that organized the busses bringing Gazans to the demonstration sites. Activities were held in the tent camps attended by the Hamas leadership, including **Isma'il Haniyeh**, head of Hamas' political bureau, **Yahya al-Sinwar**, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip, **Khalil al-Haya**, deputy head of the Hamas political bureau, and **Tawfiq Abu Na'im**, responsible for Hamas' security forces (al-Aqsa TV, March 30, 2018).



Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip, gives an inflammatory speech at one of the tents, claiming Palestinians are not afraid to die for the sake of al-Aqsa mosque, the homeland and the holy sites. He also said that more pressure on the Gaza Strip would cause it to explode (al-Jazeera YouTube channel, April 6, 2018).



Right: Mahmoud al-Zahar, senior Hamas figure, takes a selfie with march participants east of Gaza City. Left: Tawfiq Abu Na'im, commander of Hamas' internal security forces, visits the return march in the eastern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, April 6, 2018).

► **Isma'il Haniyeh headed a delegation of senior Hamas figures who visited the homes of the families of Palestinians who had been killed.** He told them that the "great return march" was the greatest popular and public event "during the past seven years." He praised the shaheeds and said the return march would not be stopped until they reached Jerusalem and al-Aqsa mosque (al-Aqsa TV, April 1, 2018). He denounced the "aggressive policies of the occupation" [i.e., Israel], claiming the march was "peaceful," proof of which was that children participated. He claimed there had been nothing to justify the deaths of the Gazans during the events (al-Quds, April 2, 2018).



Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, consoles one of the mourning families (Palinfo Twitter account, April 4, 2018).



Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip, visits the tent camps near the fence (Palinfo Twitter account, April 8, 2018).

Incitement to violence and hatred

The inflammatory speeches given by senior Hamas figures, the large number of Hamas operatives along the front lines near the fence and, as a result, the large number of Hamas operatives killed, the large numbers of acts of violence carried out by rioters near the fence and the terrorist attacks carried out during the events – **all clearly prove that the declarations (made by Hamas and others) that the march would be peaceful and nonviolent were empty words.** The Hamas leadership enabled, and **in ITIC assessment will continue to enable, violent clashes along the border and terrorist attacks near the fence, and has done nothing and will do nothing to stop them,** as long as the confrontation with the IDF continues to be under controlled.

- ▶ Despite the fact that Hamas instructed those giving sermons in the mosques to represent the events as nonviolent (in accordance with its false media pronouncements), **there were those who gave sermons inciting the Gazans to violence and clashes with the IDF.** Prominent among them was **Sheikh Salah Abu Rajab, who gave a sermon in Khirbat Ikhza'a** (east of Khan Yunis) about a week before the march. He compared the "great return march" to an expression in the Qur'an (Surah al-'Isra, verse 7), **in reference to the destruction campaign that would be visited upon the Jews if they returned to their evil ways [i.e., a call to destroy Israel]. That part of his sermon appeared on Facebook pages affiliated with Hamas.**
- ▶ On March 30, 2018, on the first Friday of the march, **Sheikh Salah Abu Rajab went to a tent camp** east of Khan Yunis and gave a sermon to the assembled masses. He **denounced the Jews and the United States, inflaming the masses with his rhetoric.** He encouraged the crowd to implement the "right of return," saying "Gaza will not kneel," that "Palestine is

here and the occupation will be banished." He shouted "Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, **the soldiers of Muhammad will return**"⁴ (YouTube, March 30, 2018).



Sheikh Salah Abu Rajab delivers a sermon inflaming a large crowd during the march (YouTube, March 30, 2018).



Right: Profile picture of the Facebook page of Sheikh Salah Abu Rajab shows him holding a knife, and incitement to stab Jews (Facebook page of Sheikh Salah Abu Rajab, October 14, 2015). Left: The Palestinian flag with a swastika in black, planted near the border security fence (Twitter account of Ophir Gendelman, April 6, 2018).

Statements from senior Hamas figures

► **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, said during the march that "Today our people go out to tell Trump we will not give up Jerusalem, there is no replacement for Palestine, there is no solution except for the return, there is no future for the enemy on our land." A few days before the march, on March 26, 2018, he said "**We all know Gaza is the mouth of a volcano that can erupt at any minute**, and no one can predict the results or consequences for the entire region."

► **Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, said on March 30, 2018, that "The 'great return march' is a message from the Palestinian people to those who

⁴ Khaybar, Saudi Arabia, was settled by Jews and invaded by Muhammad in 628 AD. The Jews surrendered to his army after their allies betrayed them in the decisive battle and joined Muhammad. During modern times, the battle of Khaybar has come to symbolize the victory of Islam over the Jews, and Hamas uses it to threaten Israel.

impose a siege on us, telling them to rethink their steps. **The return march will continue and not be halted until we reach the moment of truth where we rip up the borders of those temporary people.** The return march is our correction towards the right path, according to which we will not give up, and we are prepared to sacrifice for it."

► **Senior Hamas figure Khalil al-Haya**, during preparations for the march on March 21, 2018, said, "**An explosion can be expected from the Palestinian people...if it happens we will turn it towards the [Israeli] occupation.**" Visiting one of the tent camps he said, "No matter how long it takes, the souls of our dead will decorate this [Palestinian] blessed land. We have waited a long time but the day of the blessed return is coming close. The enemy will not turn the Palestinian people from its path during its defensive war and jihad."

Organizing the population

► Following the events of March 30, 2018, the organizers in the Gaza Strip began trying to leverage the march's achievements **to encourage the public to participate in coming events.** Calls were heard throughout the Gaza Strip for people to go to the buffer zones and tent locations. Gazans were also invited to attend memorial rallies for those killed. The social networks posted new ideas for demonstrations, one of which was burning tires near the fence and using mirrors (ideas that were put into practice on April 6, 2018).

► Other ideas proposed, which may be put into effect, included using loudspeakers to broadcast sirens to confuse Israelis living near the Gaza Strip, using pails to cover the tear gas canisters fired by the IDF and setting off fireworks. Demonstrators were asked not to arrive with their faces uncovered but to mask them, because according to reports the IDF was photographing them and using facial recognition software to identify and kill military operatives (al-Aqsa TV, April 4, 2018). The Facebook page of the "great return march" suggested **bringing furniture and old women and infants to the border in trucks** (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 5, 2018).

Low profile criticism from residents and organizations

► Despite the relatively good response of participants during the two Friday demonstrations, **criticism of Hamas and the march's organizers was voiced** on the social networks. There were remarks such as "Poor people stood at the front and were wounded and killed, while the rich could sit at home in safety." Calls were heard for the sons and even families of senior Hamas figures to be seen at the demonstrations, which would necessitate the presence of Hamas operatives on the ground. **There was also criticism of the large**

number of Gazans killed after they had been assured that the march would be safe and nonviolent.

► Jamil Abdel Nabi posted on his Facebook page his objections to young people risking their lives. His argument was that **the "homeland" wanted them alive, not dead** (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 3, 2018). A call was also posted to the Facebook page of the "great return march" **asking young Palestinians not to risk their lives** (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 3, 2018).



Post by Jamil Abdel Nabi objecting to young Gazans' risking their lives. The "homeland," he says, wants them alive, not dead (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 3, 2018).

► Beyond popular criticism, apparently the clashes with IDF forces and the large number of Gazans killed and wounded **angered the march's organizers** (who claimed the march would be nonviolent and without clashes with the Israeli security forces). Beneath the surface **there may be tensions between the activists who believed the march could be held without violence and Hamas and the other terrorist organizations, which inflamed emotions and caused many violent incidents.**

► For instance, **Ahmed Abu Ratima, spokesman for the march**, wrote on his Facebook page that the idea of using tires and mirrors was inconsistent with the principles of the return march. He said that their use had been planned on the assumption that there would be clashes with the IDF forces, which, **he said, contradicted the principle of a nonviolent demonstration at a distance of 700 meters from the fence** (Facebook page of Ahmed Abu Ratima, April 3, 2018). A message was posted to the Facebook page of the march telling

young Palestinians that "**We want you on the ground, not under it**" (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 2, 2018).

► The "**international coordinating committee of the march**" issued an announcement stating that Hamas had enflamed the public and helped the march's success. However, it also expressed concern at the conduct of [certain] individuals that contradicted the plan for the march and its character, especially **the masked operatives deflecting the march from its peaceful path** (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 6, 2018).

Future plans

► The organizers plan to repeat the activities at the border **every Friday until May 15 (Nakba Day)**. To preserve the momentum, the so-called "supreme national authority of the return march" launched a hashtag for Friday, April 13, 2018, to be devoted to the burning of Israeli flags (Palinfo Twitter account, April 8, 2018).

► The march's Facebook page posted an idea for a Friday of "keys of the return," there was also a proposal for a chain of a million people from Rafah to Beit Hanoun, and for a Friday of torches (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 5, 2018).



Hashtag launched by the "supreme national authority of the return march" in preparation Friday, April 13, 2018, calling for the burning of Israeli flags (Palinfo Twitter account, April 8, 2018).

The Extent of External Support

The Palestinian Authority (PA)

- ▶ **Beyond the borders of the Gaza Strip only isolated events marked Land Day.** In Judea and Samaria **the protests were limited and relatively quiet**, despite the fact that in previous years Land Day was marked in Judea and Samaria with protests and riots at many sites. On March 30, 2018, about 1,200 Palestinians participated in demonstrations in Judea and Samaria. Reportedly, 14 were injured. On April 6, 2018, there were demonstrations at several sites, with a few hundred participants. In Judea and Samaria there was an increase in the number of tires burned, although not a significant increase.
- ▶ In response to the deaths of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, on March 31, 2018, Mahmoud Abbas declared a day of national mourning and a general strike, closing the schools and universities (Wafa, March 30, 2018). **Beyond that, Mahmoud Abbas did not express support or solidarity with the events in the Gaza Strip. The PA media kept a low profile in covering the events.**

Israel and the neighboring Arab states

- ▶ The calls from the Gaza Strip to Palestinians in the countries bordering Israel to hold **similar demonstrations were not met with significant response.** In **Lebanon** there was a small amount of support in the village of Maroun al-Ras (near the Israeli-Lebanese border) and in **Syria** in the Khan al-Sheikh refugee camp. Israeli Arabs, whom the organizers of the march tried to recruit, held a rally in **Sakhnin. The events were local and limited, and did not receive much media coverage.** Hamas issued pictures of the solidarity rallies held in Lebanon, New York City and in front of the Israeli embassy in Athens, but the events were limited and did not receive extensive publicity (Palinfo Twitter account, April 7, 2018).



March held by Israeli Arabs in Sakhnin in solidarity with the Gazans killed (Palinfo Twitter account, April 7, 2018).



Right: March held in London in support of the "great return march." Left: March in support of the "great return march" in front of the Israeli embassy in Athens (Palinfo Twitter account, April 7, 2018).



Rally held in New York City in support of the march (Facebook page of the "great return march," April 7, 2018).

The international arena

► In the international arena there were a few expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians and **condemnation of Israel for using "excessive force."** The secretary general of the UN and the high commissioner of the EU called for an independent, transparent investigation of the events. The UN Security Council held two emergency sessions, called by Kuwait, to

condemn Israel. **On both occasions the United States used its veto** (Washington Post, April 6, 2018).

► **Fatou Bensouda, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**, issued a statement about the Gaza Strip in which she called on both sides to avoid violence. "Violence against civilians – in a situation such as the one prevailing in Gaza – could constitute crimes ... as could the use of civilian presence for the purpose of shielding military activities," Bensouda said. She also said that the use of civilians to defend military activities (a hint at Hamas) was also liable to be considered a crime into which a preliminary investigation could be begun. She said "any new alleged crime committed in the context of the situation in Palestine may be subjected to my Office's scrutiny." She added that she would record "any instance of incitement or resort to unlawful force" by either side in the conflict. (Reuters, April 8, 2018).

► **Riyadh Mansour, PA representative to the UN**, said that despite the "negligence" of the Security Council regarding an investigation into the events, the Palestinians would continue trying to act through the Council. However, he said the Palestinians had other options, among them the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly and the UN Secretary General, who could appoint a committee to investigate the rights of the Palestinians (al-Arabiya al-Hadath, April 7, 2018).

Rafiq Abu Dhalfa, coordinator of the march's legal committee, said they had begun proceedings to try the IDF for its "crimes." He said they had already contacted many local Arab and international sources to agree on the steps to take to try Israel in the ICC. To that end, he said, they were **documenting and collecting all the videos, pictures and recordings relating to the events. He claimed they had enough "proof" to open an international investigation against the IDF** (alresala.net, April 4, 2018).