



## Summary of Recent Escalation Along the Gaza Strip Border

October 2, 2018

### Overview

Since mid-September 2018 **Hamas has raised the level of its anti-Israel violence**. It increased the number of riots and propaganda demonstrations along the border and their accompany violence. Events peaked during the "return marches" on Friday September 21 and 28, 2018, attended on both days by up to 20,000 Gazans. Rioters clashed with IDF forces, threw IEDs and hand grenades at the soldiers and made frequent attempts to cross the security fence. There was also a significant increase in the number of incendiary kites and balloons launched into Israel, some of which were armed with explosive devices.

- ▶ The rise in violence led to increased friction between rioters and IDF forces, which in turn led to an increase in the number of Gazan casualties (seven killed and 506 wounded during the September 28 riots, according to the Hamas-controlled ministry of health in the Gaza Strip). Hamas' provocations and the large number of resulting casualties **may potentially lead to another round of escalation**, even if Hamas' intention is only to control the increased violence and tension.
- ▶ Apparently the violence was influenced by **a sense of frustration, because progress towards reconciliation and a possible arrangement stalled after after Hamas officially announced the end of indirect negotiations with Israel** (al-Arabiya al-Hadath, September 23, 2018). In the background, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is threatening to cut off funds it transfers to the Gaza Strip, UNRWA faces difficulties and the economic situation is stagnant.



Gazan cartoonist Isma'il al-Bazam: the Gaza Strip as a potential bomb  
(Facebook page of Isma'il al-Bazam, September 20, 2018).

## The "Return Marches"

### The events of Friday, September 21, 2018

► The "return march" held on September 21, 2018, had "Lifting the siege" as its slogan. There were about 17,000 participants, a particularly large number. Before the events a call was issued to the public to participate, and transportation was organized to take demonstrators to the "return camps" near the border (Paldf, September 18, 2018). Demonstrators gathered at the five traditional friction points along the border and **clashed with IDF soldiers**, burning tires and throwing stones. **They also threw IEDs and hand grenades. Many attempts were made to cross the security fence.** One IDF soldier was wounded by shrapnel. A spokesman for the Gazan ministry of health reported that one Palestinian had been killed and 312 wounded (Twitter account of Ashraf al-Qidra, September 21, 2018).



**Right: Gazans at the "return march," September 21, 2018. Left: Gazans cut through the barbed wire fence during the "return march" (QudsN Facebook page, September 21, 2018).**

- In response to the events Israeli Air Force aircraft carried out a number of attacks in the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian media reported attacks on observation posts in the "return camp" in Gaza City (Filastin al-Yawm, September 21, 2018).



**The "Tire-Burning Unit" brings tires to the eastern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, September 28, 2018).**

## The events of Friday, September 28, 2018

- The "return march" held on September 28, 2018, had as its slogan "the al-Aqsa intifada." **There were about 20,000 participants, who gathered at the traditional and a number of new friction points.**<sup>1</sup> The events were accompanied by extreme violence directed against the Israeli security forces.
- Rioters sabotaged security installations and **threw more than 100 IEDs and hand grenades at IDF forces.** They also launched incendiary kites and balloons into Israeli

<sup>1</sup> Reportedly, the Palestinians decided to increase the number of locations for "return march" gatherings (al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 22, 2018).

territory. A large number of attempts to break through the security fence were recorded; the rioters threw IEDs and grenades (IDF spokesperson, September 29, 2018). According to the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, seven Gazans were killed and 506 were wounded (Twitter account of Ashraf al-Qidra, September 28, 2018).



Right: "Return march" participants in the eastern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, October 1, 2018). Left: "Return march" participants in the eastern Khan Yunis (Palinfo Twitter account, September 28, 2018).



Gazan rioters break through the security fence in the eastern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, September 29, 2018).



Rioters walk on and then burn a poster with pictures of Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah. The Arabic reads, "Criminals" (Palinfo Twitter account, September 28, 2018).

► In response to the events Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip, including a Hamas post in the northern Gaza Strip. The IDF neutralized IEDs and hand grenades thrown into Israeli territory (IDF spokesperson, September 29, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that an observation post east of the Zeitun neighborhood had been attacked (Shabakat Quds Twitter account, September 28, 2018).



**Right: Hand grenades thrown at IDF soldiers during the riots. Left: A pipe bomb (IDF spokesperson, September 28, 2018).**

## Anti-Israel Propaganda Events

### Riots

► Between the "return marches" riots were held with thousands of participants. Some of the demonstrations were held during the night as part of the activities of what Hamas calls "the night harassment unit." There were many rioters and the activities they engaged in were particularly violent, and included IEDs thrown at IDF forces. Their violence resulted in many Gazan casualties. The main riots were the following:

- ◆ On **September 26, 2018**, about 1,500 Gazans gathered along the border. IDF forces responded with live fire, reportedly wounding 17 rioters.
- ◆ On **September 25, 2018**, a Gazan approached the security fence and placed an IED. During the evening about 1,000 rioters gathered at a number of locations along the border.
- ◆ On the night of **September 23, 2018**, riots were held along the border and about 1,500 participants clashed with IDF forces. The riots continued the following day with several thousand Gazans participating. The Gazan ministry of health reported that in

clashes in the eastern part of Gaza City one demonstrator was killed and 20 were wounded (Facebook page of Ashraf al-Qidra, September 23, 2018).

## "Protest flotillas"

- ▶ In addition to the riots along the border, on Mondays Gazans have begun **launching boats in protest**, sailing from the shore of the Gaza Strip to the northern naval border with Israel.
  - ◆ On the afternoon of **September 24, 2018**, the ninth "protest flotilla" sailed towards Zikim on the Israeli-Gazan border. IDF forces shot at the boats. A spokesman for the Gazan ministry of health alleged that one person was killed and 90 injured (Twitter account of Ashraf al-Qidra, September 24, 2018).



**Right: The "flotilla" sails towards Israel. Right: Crowds of Gazans watch the ships (QudsN Facebook page, September 24, 2018).**

- ◆ On the afternoon of **October 1, 2018**, the tenth "protest flotilla" sailed from the port of Gaza towards the northern Gaza Strip. At the same time, a large riot was held on the shore, where Gazans burned tires (Dunia al-Watan, October 1, 2018). IDF forces shot at the boats and rioters. According to a spokesman for the Gazan ministry of health, 37 Palestinians were wounded (Twitter account of Ashraf al-Qidra, October 1, 2018). Senior Hamas figures were present at the events, including **Fathi Hamad, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, and senior figures from other organizations.



**Gazans watch the boats sail towards the Gaza Strip's northern naval border (Twitter account Palinfo, October 1, 2018).**

## Arson Terrorism

► Alongside the increase in violence on the ground there has also been **a significant increase in arson terrorism**, after a relative lull during the indirect talks held for an arrangement with Hamas during the past two weeks. On September 19, 2018, the "Sons of al-Zouari Unit" (the Gazan incendiary balloon unit) **announced they would renew and expand their activities** (Dunia al-Watan, September 19, 2018).



**"Sons of al-Zouari" operatives prepare incendiary balloons during the September 28, 2018 "return march" (Palinfo Twitter account, September 29, 2018).**

► The massive launchings of incendiary kites and balloons from the Gaza Strip was renewed, some of them setting fires in Israel. **Some of the balloons had IEDs attached** and were life-threatening. The local councils of the communities near the Gaza Strip issued new

instructions to residents. According to a Jewish National Fund worker in the western Negev, during the month of September firefighters operated at about 70 sites (Ynet, October 2, 2018).

► On **October 1, 2018**, a suspicious balloon was found at a junction between the southern Israeli cities of Ashqelon and Kiryat Gat, a region relatively far from the Gaza Strip which incendiary balloons generally do not reach (Ynet, October 1, 2018).

► On **September 24, 2018**, a series of incendiary balloons landed near the Kissufim Forest. An IED attached to one of the balloons exploded when it hit the ground. No casualties or damage were reported (Ynet, September 24, 2018).

► On **September 23, 2018**, Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked near a squad of Gazans launching incendiary balloons in the northern Gaza Strip (Ynet, September 24, 2018).

## Statements from Senior Hamas Figures

Senior Hamas figures continue to encourage and take an active part in protest events. They have responded favorably to the increase in the number of events and participants, and say that **the "marches" and clashes with the IDF will continue until "all their objectives have been achieved."**



**Yahya al-Sinwar at the September 28, 2018, "return march" in eastern Khan Yunis (Palinfo Twitter account, September 28, 2018).**

► Some of their statements were the following:

- ◆ **Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, said the "marches" make it clear that the Palestinian people will continue holding them until they have achieved their objectives, which are the liberation of Palestine and the return to its territory. He said he was pleased by the variety of activities that have taken place during the "marches," adding that during the past weeks there have been activities

throughout the Gaza Strip, including those of "the night harassment unit" (al-Aqsa, September 21, 2018).

◆ **Fathi Hamad, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, warned Israel and "its allies" not to continue the "siege" on the Gaza Strip, saying that it would lead the besieged Gazans to "explode." He praised the Gazans who participate in the "marches," saying they will continue "until the Palestinian people achieves its objectives" (alresala.net, September 28, 2018).

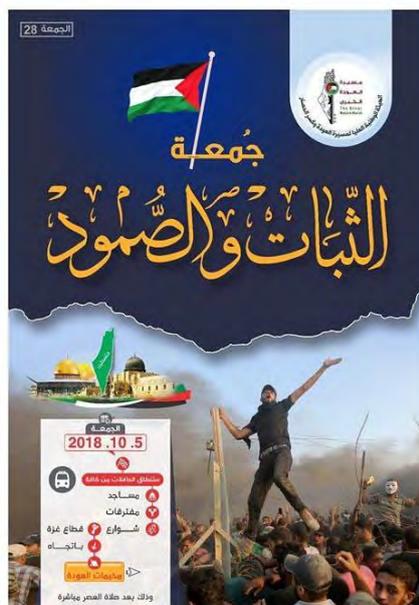
◆ **Khalil al-Haya, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, said the weapons of the Palestinians would be aimed at Israel until they reached Jerusalem and al-Aqsa. He claimed Israel was the real enemy and that the Palestinians were willing to continue their intifada and marches until the [so-called] "siege" was lifted.

◆ **Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri** said that the increase in the "return marches" during the past two weeks was intended to send Israel the message that the Palestinian people were determined to lift the "siege" on the Gaza Strip, regardless of the cost (Palestinian TV, September 19, 2018).

◆ **Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem** claimed that the increase in the number of participants in the "marches" and the fact that there was a variety of activities showed that the Palestinians were conducting an ongoing struggle which they were determined not to lose (Hazem Qassem's Facebook page, September 22, 2018).

## Plans for Continuing the "Marches" and Psychological Warfare

► According to reports, the slogan of the October 5, 2018, "return march" will be "Resistance and a firm stand" (Filastin al-Yawm, September 28, 2018). The residents of the Gaza Strip have been called on to attend.



**A poster issued by the "National authority of the great return march" calls on the public to participate in the "return marches" on Friday, October 5, 2018. Their slogan is "the Friday of resistance and a firm stand" (Facebook page of the National authority of the great return march, October 2, 2018).**

► On September 28, 2018, the "night harassment unit,"<sup>2</sup> which has been increasingly mentioned as responsible for the clashes along the border fence, issued a video. In it a **unit representative tells the residents of the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip border to leave their homes at 20:00 and return to them only when the unit decides they can.** According to the video, the unit is planning to escalate and use new methods to confuse the residents of the communities near the border. The unit will erect tents near the eastern border of the Gaza Strip in which operatives will sleep until "the siege is lifted." They will throw stink bombs and spray the fields and trees in Israel with poison, and launch balloons every day carrying shock grenades (Shehab, September 28, 2018, and the Facebook page of the "night harassment unit," September 29, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> About a month ago the media reported the activities of new units young Palestinians called "the units for night harassment." Their objectives are to keep the IDF soldiers along the Gaza Strip border on constant alert, to exhaust them and to keep them from resting. Their means for achieving their objectives include burning tires under the cover of darkness in areas near the security fence, throwing Molotov cocktails at IDF posts along the border, operating sirens to cause the soldiers to call alerts, etc (Safa and Palestine Online, September 16, 2018).



**One of the activities of the "night harassment unit" east of al-Bureij in the central Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, September 30, 2018).**

