



## Preparations for the mass "return march" to mark the first anniversary of the marches and Land Day

March 28, 2019

### Overview

With the escalation that followed the rocket fire from the Gaza Strip in the background, preparations continue to be made for the "return march" that will take place on Saturday, March 30, 2019. The events will mark one year of "return marches" as well as Land Day, affiliated with Israeli Arabs. A series of events are planned, which will be held at the usual five sites of the "return marches." The events will be accompanied by a general strike and closed schools to increase the number of participants. The organizers are also trying to attract Palestinians in Judea and Samaria,<sup>1</sup> the Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the refugee camps in the dispersal to join the protest activities. It is unclear if and to what degree there will be a response to the calls from terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip.

► Following are characteristics of information about the "return march" appearing in the Palestinian media:

- ◆ **Number of participants:** Hamas and the march organizers are making an effort to have a **mass anniversary march** as an expression of popular support for the "return marches." So far, the largest number of participants was at the first march held a year ago and at the march held on May 14, 2018 (approximately 40,000 participants at each). Hamas and the organizers are apparently making an effort to have a significantly larger number of participants (i.e., approaching 100,000 and perhaps even more). One of the march organizers said preparations were being made for **hundreds of thousands of participants**.
- ◆ **The use of violence during the march events:** **The march organizers stated**, as they did before previous marches, **that the march would be peaceful, held using non-violent methods**. In spite of the statement, it can be expected that on the ground there may be violent activities near the border fence, based on the usual repertoire:

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<sup>1</sup> **Senior PIJ figure Ahmed al-Mudallal** called on the Palestinians in the West Bank to go to friction points with IDF soldiers on March 30, 2019, and to block the roads leading to the "settlements" (al-Aqsa TV, March 24, 2019).

clashes with IDF soldiers, the throwing of hand grenades and IEDs, burning tires, sabotaging the border fence and installations near the border, attempts to break into Israeli territory and launching IED and incendiary balloons.

◆ **Threats to Israel:** Senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) figures **threatened Israel**, warning that "the rifles of the resistance" would continue to defend the march participants. They said that if Israel dared "to shed the blood of Palestinians" there would be a harsh response from the organizations' joint operations room. Possible violent attacks and the warnings accompanying them **create the potential for an uncontrolled deterioration of the situation on the ground**, even if Hamas and other march organizers have no interest in it.

◆ **Medical, logistic and media preparations:** The ministry of health in the Gaza Strip is making preparations to receive many wounded Palestinians. The ministry is raising its level of alert and increasing the size of its medical teams with foreign medical teams. It was also decided to erect tents at a number of hospitals to increase their medical capabilities. In the meantime, **logistic preparations are being made at the five "return camps" for a large number of participants**. The preparations include the provision of food, water and intensive media coverage of the events (radio, TV, a campaign on the social networks).

◆ **Time table:** The participants will gather only at the usual five "return camps." The various activities **will begin at around 13:00 in the afternoon and continue until 18:00 in the evening**. At the end of the march an announcement will be issued by the organizing committee, which includes and representatives of the various Palestinian organizations and groups (the Supreme National Authority of the Great Return March).

► In the meantime, **Egyptian mediation efforts continue for an agreement and to prevent escalation**. On March 27, 2019, a delegation from Egyptian General Intelligence entered the Gaza Strip and met with Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip. The delegation also met with representatives of other organizations. The Israeli media reported that Israel presented the Egyptian mediators with a series of measures to ease the situation in the Gaza Strip in return for a cessation of the violence, including a demand that the Saturday march not be violent (Ynet, March 28, 2019). The Egyptian delegation left the Gaza Strip at noon on March 28, 2019, entering Israel. The delegation is expected to return to the Gaza Strip during the evening (Hamas-affiliated Palinfo Twitter account, 28, March 2019).

**The level of violence exercised during the Saturday march may be a certain test case for the degree of Hamas' willingness to reach an agreement in the near future.**

### **The background of the "return marches"**

► For the past year the "return marches" have been held regularly on Fridays, accompanied by a variety of violent activities. The marches and their extensive violence are **a central component of Hamas' strategy of the controlled violence that has ben exercised against Israel for the past year**. The objective is to put Hamas in a position of power to extract an arrangement from Israel that will provide Hamas with economic advantages and include practical manifestations of the "lifting of the siege." The strategy also serves Hamas as a way to channel the frustration and anger of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip away from the Hamas and towards the struggle against Israel. **At the same time, Hamas has been careful (so far) not to exaggerate (in its opinion), in order not to be dragged into a broad military confrontation with Israel.**

► **To give the marches a "popular," inter-organizational image, and to keep the marches from being identified exclusively with Hamas, controls an organizing body called the "Supreme National Authority of the Great Return March"** (the Supreme National Authority). The Supreme National Authority includes about 120 members with representation from a long list of terrorist organizations and bodies (among them tiny groups), operating in the Gaza Strip and local respected figures. **The Supreme National Authority operates in accordance with Hamas strategy but represents itself as in charge of the "return marches" and the [violent] activities that accompany them.** In any event, **the entire logistic and financial backing for the marches and their various events is provided mainly by Hamas**, which decides the nature and amount of violence during them, **although it does not have absolute control over the events on the ground** (since various operatives occasionally try to challenge Hamas' strategy).

### **Planned events**

► The Supreme National Authority coordinator, **senior PIJ figure Khaled al-Batash**, gave a press conference where he presented the activities of the [so-called] **"million-man Land Day march"** planned for Saturday, March 30, 2019. During the march there were will activities at the five "return camps" along the eastern Gaza Strip border. He also said that on Saturday there would be a general strike in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Israel. Al-Batash also called on the residents of the Gaza Strip to participate en masse in the events. **He also called**

**on the residents of the West Bank to go to the junctions, friction points with the IDF and the bypass roads; and called on Israeli Arabs to demonstrate against Israel and its policies.** He repeated that the march activities would be "non-violent and popular."

► The organizers of the march announced the cancellation of the Friday, March 29 march, saying all the events would be held on March 30. They also said the events would be held at the five usual sites (the "return camps"). They are located east of Jabalia (northern Gaza Strip), east Gaza City (central Gaza Strip), east of the al-Bureij refugee camp (central Gaza Strip), east Khan Yunis (southern Gaza Strip) and near Rafah (southern Gaza Strip). **They said no new activity sites would be opened.** In ITIC assessment, and according to the experience of the past year, the "return camps" are the launching grounds for thousands of rioters who may try to reach the security fence on the Gaza Strip border to clash with the Israeli security forces and try to break into Israeli territory.



**Two prominent figures in the Supreme National Authority: senior PIJ figure Khaled al-Batash, and senior Hamas figure Isma'il Radwan during "return march" activities on Friday, March 22, 2019 (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 22, 2019).**

► **Muhammad al-Harazin, a member of the Supreme National Authority** and senior PIJ figure, said that preparations included **extending the area of the usual five "return camps," organizing public services** and providing a response to every need of the march participants. He said a program had been prepared by the Supreme National Authority and supporting institutions (medical services, security, and the municipalities) **to receive hundreds of thousands of march participants.** He also said **the events would be covered extensively by TV and radio stations, and the press.**



Notices posted to the Supreme National Authority Facebook page in preparation for the "Land Day and return million-man march" (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 24, 2019).

► In all probability Hamas and the Supreme National Authority are fully aware that the significance of mass participation in the march events may lead to be an increase in the extent of the rioting near the border fence and a rise in the level of violence. Therefore the Hamas-controlled ministry of health in the Gaza Strip had been making preparations to receive a large number of injured Palestinians.

► Dr. Ahmed Shatat, head of department of doctors in the ministry of health, said that in preparation for March 30, **government hospitals would raise their level of alert in preparation for taking care of the expected patients.** He said teams of doctors would be transferred to hospitals to provide a response to their needs, and they would be reinforced by teams of foreign doctors. He also said it had been agreed with the institutions to free up beds to allow for the reception of the wounded. It was also agreed with the International Red Cross to enlarge the emergency rooms in a number of hospitals by **erecting tents to provide for more wounded.** He said they were also cooperating with the pharmacy department and other relevant partners to ensure the provision of necessary drugs and disposable medical equipment so that every possible scenario could be dealt with (ministry of health in the Gaza Strip website, March 20, 2019).

► **Da'ud Shehab, a member of the Supreme National Authority** and in charge of the PIJ's media bureau, said the activities would begin immediately after the afternoon prayer, with the arrival of participants at the five "return camps." At the end of the day a summary announcement would be issued by the Supreme National Authority (al-Mashriq News, March 23, 2019). On March 27, 2019, the Supreme National Authority reported to the media that the

marches would leave on March 30, 2019, at 13:00 in the afternoon, from all the regions of the Gaza Strip (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 27, 2019).

### The nature of the events and threats against Israel

► This past year the "return marches" have been accompanied by riots and serious acts of violence,<sup>2</sup> despite the repeated claims of the organizers that the marches are popular and peaceful. This time as well the organizers of the events, headed by PIJ operative Khaled al-Batash, declared that the march would be popular and non-violent to ensure that none of the participants are hurt (al-Mashriq News, al-Istiqlal, March 23, 2019).

► However, judging by past experience, it can be assessed that during the march rioters will arrive at the border, clash with IDF soldiers and try to break into Israeli territory. During the riots the usual acts of violence may be repeated, including the throwing of hand grenades and IEDs, and launching IED and incendiary balloons. Therefore, aware that violence may trigger an IDF response, **the organizers of the march sent a threat to Israel.** According to **Khaled al-Batash**, Israel ("the enemy") has to understand that the marches are popular but the **"rifles of the resistance" will continue to protect the marches so they can continue to defend the "right of return," evading the "deal of the century" and breaking the "siege" of the Gaza Strip** (Dunia al-Watan, March 24, 2019).

► **Hamas also sent a threat to Israel: Suheil al-Hindi, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, warned Israel not to attack the "civilians" planning to participate in the "million-man return march." He said that if Israel ("the occupation") "crosses the line" or dares to shed the blood of the Palestinians, **the organizations' joint operations room will have a harsh response.** He added that the Palestinians had many options (palsawa, March 22, 2019). Sources within the joint operations room also issued a warning, saying that "every stupid Israeli action will be answered with harsh violence by the organizations in Gaza" (Dunia al-Watan, March 24, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> The response of the IDF to the extensive violence during the "return marches" caused many Palestinian casualties among the rioters who operated near the border. According to an Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center study, **198 Palestinians** have been killed in the last year since the marches began. As to their identity, (updated to March 25, 2019), **150 of them were affiliated with Hamas or other terrorist organizations (i.e., 80%). Among those killed affiliated with the terrorist organizations, most of them either belonged to Hamas or were affiliated with it** (96 fatalities, i.e., 51% of the total number of fatalities, of them 45 operatives of Hamas' military wing). **That is clear evidence of the great weight of Hamas' operation of violence near the border.**

## Notices calling on the Palestinian public to participate

► The Supreme National Authority Facebook page continues posting notices and videos calling on the Palestinian public to participate in the "Land Day and return million-man march" (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 27, 2019). The notices show indicate of violence accompanied by messages about the so-called "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees and the determination of the Palestinians to continue the "return marches." For example:



Notices posted to the Supreme National Authority Facebook page on the eve of the "million-man march." Right: "We taught the enemy the lesson that the Palestinians cannot be turned away." Left: "Free revolutionaries are about to complete the journey" (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 24, 2019).



Notices posted to the Supreme National Authority Facebook page for the march. Right: "The largest Land Day [demonstration]." Left: The key represents the so-called "right of return" on a map of "Palestine" (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 27, 2019).



Right: "A year has gone by, and the march continues." Left: "Honor is visible on the faces of the brave" (Supreme National Authority Facebook page, March 27, 2019).