



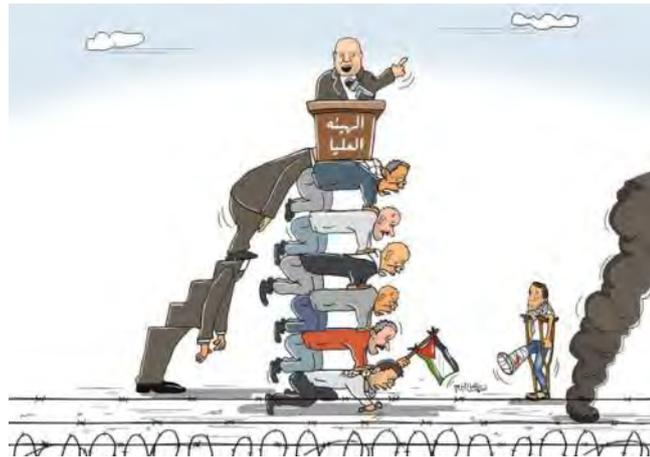
## Nature and Functioning of the Supreme National Authority of the Return Marches and Lifting the Siege

April 10, 2019

### Overview

- ▶ A year has passed since the return march project began. Preparations for the project began in early 2018 **as an initiative of social activists and organizations operating in the Gaza Strip**. In the early stages, when the idea was being formulated, the organizers of the march claimed that the events would not be of a political nature, that official representatives of the various organizations would not participate, and that there would be no violence. Hamas supported the idea of the marches, but preferred to remain behind the scenes in the initial preparation stage.
- ▶ **However, Hamas quickly took over the reins and took control of the return marches**, even before the first march took place, on March 30, 2018. The longer the marches continued, the greater the importance attached to them by Hamas. This is because, in Hamas's view, **the marches enable it to achieve several goals**: letting off steam by the Gazan public in particular, and the young people in particular, and diverting their feelings of frustration, which stem from the daily hardships, against Israel; obtaining financial and economic support for the Gaza Strip, which will alleviate the severe hardships prevailing there; lifting the siege from the Gaza Strip and opening the border crossings for free passage. Along with all this, at the hearts and minds level, raising awareness of the "refugee problem" and the refugees' aspiration to return to their places of residence in Israel (hence the name of the marches: "the return marches").
- ▶ Despite the great importance that Hamas attaches to the march project, it initially **preferred to avoid direct control over it and permitted, and in the ITIC's assessment even encouraged, the establishment of a civilian leadership for the marches called the "Supreme National Authority of the Return Marches and Lifting the Siege"** (hereinafter: the Supreme National Authority or the National Authority). **The existence of such an authority has many advantages for Hamas**: The Authority obfuscates Hamas's direct responsibility for the considerable violence that has been displayed during the marches; It enables it to mobilize most of the terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip for the

march project. It enables Hamas to have large sections of Gazan society participate in the march project, thereby **ensuring its continuity**; It also enables Hamas to demonstrate outwardly that **the return marches enjoy broad popular support**. In addition to all of the above, the very existence of the National Authority as a supreme entity that ostensibly operates the marches **enables Hamas to divert the criticism** that arose during the return marches **to the National Authority**<sup>1</sup>.



**Right: Criticism of the Supreme Authority that the return marches are carried out at the expense of the residents of the Gaza Strip. The line on top reads: “The Supreme Authority” (Facebook page of Ismail al-Bazm, a cartoonist from the Gaza Strip, April 1, 2019). Left: Current profile photo of the official Facebook page of the Supreme National Authority of the Return Marches and Lifting the Siege (Official Facebook page of the National Authority, April 2, 2019). The message of the return of the Palestinian refugees to Israel is clearly conveyed in the logo.**

► In the year that has passed since the beginning of the marches, **the National Authority has been handled by Hamas**. Outwardly, the Authority declares that it is responsible for coordinating the marches and flotillas and even for handling entities that carry out acts of violence (the Night Disturbance Units and a unit that launches incendiary and explosive balloons). **However, it is Hamas that in practice determines the nature of the marches and regulates their level of violence, in accordance with its strategy and its changing tactical considerations.** It is Hamas that **gives the marches the organizational, logistical, political and media framework**, based on the resources at its disposal as the largest and dominant organization in the Gaza Strip. In addition, Hamas operatives are those who are

<sup>1</sup> In addition, **the joint operations room of the various terrorist organizations** (the “resistance”) was established. Its purpose is to ensure that the military attacks of the organizations are carried out within the framework of Hamas’s policy and to prevent uncoordinated activity by rogue organizations.

close to the border fence and engage in clashes with the IDF. Among the operatives who died during the marches, Hamas operatives constitute the highest percentage.

► **The Supreme National Authority is composed of the terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip, including large organizations, small organizations, and even insignificant ones.** It also includes representatives of institutions, social organizations, clans, refugee committees, and additional activists from all sectors of Gaza society. Moreover, in order to ensure the engagement in the march project of Hamas's main rival organization, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), **Hamas agreed to grant this organization extensive representation in the Supreme National Authority and the various Authority committees** and to appoint PIJ senior operative **Khaled al-Batsh as coordinator of the marches.** Nevertheless, **the PIJ has often stood out as a militant rogue organization that prefers to act according to its own considerations or according to the strategy of Iran, its sponsor,** although it does pay lip service to the need for unity and coordinated action.

► **The National Authority's leadership includes around 19 members, together with 11 designated committees representing diverse spheres of activity.** The committees subordinate to the leadership are: The Notables and Mukhtars Committee; The Refugees Committee; The Legal Team; The Needs Committee; The Wording and International Relations Committee; The Public Activity Committee; The Information Committee; The Youth Committee; The Women's Committee; The Student Committee; and the Medical Committee. These committees are headed by Hamas and PIJ members, and members of additional organizations and various sectors of Gaza society.

► **The National Authority was formally established on March 7, 2018, around three weeks before the first march. Khaled Al-Batsh held a press conference in which he announced "the establishment of the National Authority of the Camp [the tent camp] and the March on the Border"** (a name that was subsequently changed). Al-Batsh noted that **the National Authority was established by agreement between Hamas, Fatah, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Palestinian People's Party (the Palestinian communist party) and additional Palestinian organizations.** He noted that the members the Authority included representatives from human rights institutions, clans, dignitaries, refugee committees, healthcare institutions and activists from all sectors of Palestinian society (Quds Press, March 7, 2018). Senior Hamas figure Ismail Radwan and Fatah operative Imad al-Agha (Fatah later suspended its

participation in the National Authority) also took part in the press conference, in order to demonstrate unity among the important organizations with regard to the march project.

## Methodology

- ▶ The research basis for the study is an official document published by the leadership of the National Authority on the eve of the first return march (Fatah-affiliated Amad website, March 29, 2018). The names and telephone numbers of the 159 members of the National Authority leadership and the members of the various committees subordinate to it appeared in the document. The document was signed by the National Authority's coordinator, apparently **Khaled Al-Batsh of the PIJ**, and is intended for distribution to the media and journalists interested in interviewing Authority members.
- ▶ The names appearing in the basic document were examined on an individual basis by the ITIC. For most of the names mentioned in the list, there was a connection to the return marches and to the role mentioned in the document. For a small number of those mentioned, no verification was found. Some of the names in the document were incorrect. On the other hand, several names mentioned during the year as National Authority operatives were not mentioned in the document. Moreover, the examination revealed that some of those mentioned in the document had little or nothing to do with the marches.

At the end of the examination process, the ITIC identified **118 names of activists who were members of the leadership of the National Authority and its subcommittees** (some of the activists mentioned in the document are members of more than one committee). In addition, **the names of 10 additional activists** who were not mentioned in the document were identified during the course of the study. In total, **nearly 130 names of activists serving in the leadership of the National Authority and its subcommittees were identified**. A detailed examination of these names and an examination of the conduct of the marches during the past year served as the basis for examining the nature and functioning of the National Authority and for understanding the interrelationship between the National Authority and Hamas and the other organizations.

## The structure of the study

### ► The National Authority and its activity:

- ◆ The return marches: development of an idea
- ◆ Overview of the marches and the events that accompanied them
- ◆ Structure of the National Authority and its committees
- ◆ Hamas's central role in handling the National Authority
- ◆ The PIJ's role
- ◆ Fatah's role

## Appendices (in Hebrew only, available on the ITIC's website)

### ► Appendix A: Members of the leadership of the National Authority

### ► Appendix B: Members of the designated committees subordinate to the leadership of the National Authority:

- ◆ The Notables, Mukhtars and Tribes Committee
- ◆ The Refugees Committee
- ◆ The Legal Team
- ◆ The Needs Committee
- ◆ The Drafting and International Relations Committee
- ◆ The Public Activity Committee
- ◆ The Information Committee
- ◆ The Youth Committee
- ◆ The Women's Committee
- ◆ The Students Committee
- ◆ The Medical Committee

## The National Authority and its activity

### The return marches: development of an idea

► The return March project began on March 30, 2018 and has been going on continuously almost every Friday for a year. **Preparations for the project began in early 2018 as an initiative of social organizations in the Gaza Strip.** The basic intention was to organize mass demonstrations, which would depart from several locations in the Gaza Strip and march towards the border with Israel in order to attract worldwide attention to the “right of return” of the Palestinian refugees. From the outset, the organizers of the march noted that this would not be a single event but rather a series of activities that would continue over time<sup>2</sup>.



**The logo of the “Great Return March” of February 22, 2018. The logo includes the emblem of the United Nations and the number 194, indicating the UN resolution of December 11, 1948, which includes a section on the Palestinian refugees. It also includes a map of Palestine in the colors of the Palestinian flag and a hand holding a key symbolizing the “right of return.”**

► During the preparations for the march, the organizers claimed that **the events would not be of a political nature and that official representatives of the various organizations would not participate.** Nevertheless, **Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip encouraged the organizers** and assured them that they supported the march. The Facebook page of the Great Return March published statements written by **Dr. Issam**

<sup>2</sup> For further information about the preparations for the “Great Return March,” see the ITIC’s Information Bulletins from February 11, 2018, March 7, 2018, and March 27, 2018.

**Adwan, head of the Hamas Refugee Department**, who stressed the necessity and importance of the event, which is no less important than the “armed struggle” (Facebook page of the Great Return March, March 6, 2018). At a meeting with the heads of organizations in the Gaza Strip, Ismail Haniyah, Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, called on the Palestinians in the West Bank and elsewhere to prepare themselves for the return march, in which, according to him, the whole world would be told that “Palestine is in our hearts and no one can revoke the right of return” (PALINFO, March 5, 2018). **Hamas Political Bureau member Khalil al-Hayya** said that Hamas supported the **march and that its members would take part in it** (Al-Aqsa TV, March 1, 2018).



**Ismail Haniya calling for participation in the return marches at a meeting with the leaders of the organizations in the Gaza Strip (PALINFO’s Twitter account, March 5, 2018; Hamas’s Twitter account, March 5, 2018)**

- **In order to organize the return marches, a supreme network was established, which was initially called the Coordinating Committee of the Great Return March** (the “lifting the siege” component was added later). The committee members announced that they were working to establish national committees in other countries, which would organize demonstrations and marches to be held concurrently with the March in the Gaza Strip (Safa, March 6, 2018). According to the organizers of the march, the activity is coordinated with the Palestinians in the Palestinian Diaspora and with Israeli Arabs. In addition, attempts were made to mobilize the residents of Judea and Samaria to hold similar events simultaneously (which in practice hardly existed).
- During the preparations, the organizers of the events **stressed that the marches would take place without violence and called for no confrontations with the IDF forces**. Hamas also came out with similar declarations. In early February 2018, around a month before the

first march, senior Hamas figures said that the marches would take place “peacefully,” without confrontations with the IDF. Such statements were repeated throughout the entire period of the marches, although there were calls on the social media to break through the fence and penetrate Israeli territory. A year after the start of the marches, it became clear that **the statements about the nonviolent nature of the marches were nothing but lip service, and that all the marches included various degrees of violence, with Hamas regulating the violence and determining the height of flames according to its own interests.**



**Earthworks to prepare the area east of Gaza for the tent camps and the construction of a dirt embankment. According to the Palestinians, the embankment was intended to protect them from the IDF forces (PALINFO’s Twitter account, March 26, 2018)**



**A post that appeared on the Facebook page of the Great Return March almost a month before the first march: “We will strike the security fence” – i.e., the border fence (Facebook page of the Great Return March, February 28, 2018). Such postings, distributed on social media, were an indication of the violent nature of the return marches in the future.**

► **The Supreme National Authority was established around three weeks before the first march.** Its establishment was announced at a press conference attended by senior figures

from Hamas, the PIJ and Fatah, and representatives of other organizations and entities operating in the Gaza Strip. Senior PIJ operative Khaled Al-Batsh noted that **the National Authority was established by agreement between Hamas, Fatah, the PIJ, the PFLP, the Palestinian People’s Party, and additional Palestinian organizations.** He added that the members the Authority include representatives from human rights institutions, clans, dignitaries, refugee committees, healthcare institutions, and activists from all sectors of Palestinian society (Quds Press, March 7, 2018).

### Overview of the marches and the events that accompanied them

**The return march of Friday, March 30, 2018 (which took place on Land Day) was the opening shot for the events that lasted one year and, according to statements by senior Hamas figures, will continue** (although initially the organizers considered May 15, 2018, Nakba Day, as the final event). Since the first march, marches took place almost every Friday, gaining momentum and attracting a large audience. **The demonstrations were accompanied by violent clashes with the IDF forces near the border fence, resulting in many dead and wounded Palestinians.** Within a few weeks after the first march, the organizers did not content themselves with Friday marches **and, in order to maintain the level of tension and violence between Fridays, they added other events during the rest of the week.**



**Right: Palestinian rioters near the security fence. Left: Clashes with IDF forces near the security fence. During the first return march (Al-Resalah’s Facebook page, March 30, 2018)**



**Right: Burning tires near the border fence with Israel (Shehab Facebook page, April 20, 2018).**

**Left: Giant slingshot used for throwing stones and rocks at the IDF forces**

**(Al-Qabas, April 20, 2018)**



**Rioters climbing the fence in eastern Gaza City**

**(Facebook page of the Supreme National Authority for the Return March, March 22, 2019)**

► **The number of participants in the return marches usually ranged from around 8,000 to around 10,000, but on three occasions the number of participants reached around 40,000** (March 30, 2018, May 14, 2018, and March 30, 2019). The marches are accompanied by a variety of violent actions whose nature and scope occasionally change: stone throwing, throwing Molotov cocktails, hand grenades and IEDs, shooting at the IDF forces, damaging the border fence, sabotaging the border crossings, attempts to infiltrate into Israel and launching kites and balloons equipped with incendiary devices and explosives at Israel.

► In addition, special units were established for launching explosive and incendiary balloons, with the goal of causing damage and casualties and harassing the IDF and the civilian population of the Western Negev communities at night (“The Night Disturbance Unit” and Bani al-Zawari, which are in charge of launching incendiary devices and explosives). **The systematic violence in the past year created a volatile and unstable situation that led to**

**seven rounds of escalation, during which about 1,100 rockets and mortar shells were fired at Israel.**

### **Structure of the National Authority and its committees**

► In the ITIC's assessment, the leadership of the National Authority and the committees subjected to it **consist of close to 130 members**. Among the organizations represented in the leadership and the committees, **prominent are Hamas (14 representatives), the PIJ (13 representatives), and the PFLP (11 representatives)**. **Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, on the other hand, had only five representatives at the outset**, and they suspended their membership in the National Authority starting in May 2018 (due to the rift between Fatah and Hamas). In addition to the three leading organizations, **many insignificant organizations and entities are also represented** in the National Authority **and its subordinate committees, to present a façade of a “popular” leadership**, representing the entire variety of forces operating in the Gaza Strip Palestinian society.

► It should be noted that on the whole, members of the National Authority do not participate in the march activity and the violent events. Those who do take part in the events (there are some who regularly appear every week) **usually stay behind in the return camps and do not arrive in the areas near the security fence, where violence and rioting take place**. So far, no member of the National Authority is known to have been hurt in one of the return marches, **while on the other hand, there are conspicuously high numbers of Hamas members who died in the violent actions which they carried out during the marches and other weekdays**. Yet, **at least some of the National Authority members encourage the participants to get close to the security fence and confront the Israeli security forces**.

► A list published on the eve of the first return march by the Amad website (which is affiliated with Fatah) mentioned **19 names of leadership members**. There are reportedly **11 designated committees operating under the leadership, each consisting of 4-15 members**. The committees mentioned are the Notables and Mukhtars Committee; the Refugees Committee; the Legal Team; the Needs Committee; the Wording and International Relations Committee; the Public Activity Committee; the Information Committee; the Youth Committee; the Women's Committee; the Student Committee; the Arts and Heritage Committee; the Medical Committee (Amad website, March 29, 2018). Some of the leadership members are also members of subcommittees. Members were also found who were active in more than one committee. Almost all those whose names were mentioned are political

activists. Very few committee members who were found were identified as operatives of military wings or security apparatus of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations. The exact responsibility of each committee and its share in organizing the various activities is unclear.

► Analysis of the names of the members of the leadership of the National Authority of the Return Marches and Lifting the Siege reveals that, in addition to the representatives of the well-known terrorist organizations (Hamas, PIJ, PFLP, DFLP, Fatah), **relatively many insignificant organizations are also represented** (Al-Sa'eqa, the Palestinian Liberation Front, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command, and others). **In addition, a large variety of social organizations operating in the Gaza Strip are also represented in the leadership of the return marches.** Clerics and women were given relatively small representation (with the exception of the Women's Committee). No organizational criterion was identified as a means for determining the composition of the committees. It seems that when appointing people to serve on the committees, preference was given to selecting professionals rather than preserving the principle of equal representation for all the organizations.

► Following are some of the organizations and various entities represented in the leadership and the various committees:

- ◆ **Hamas** – 14 representatives
- ◆ **PIJ** – 13 representatives
- ◆ **Fatah** - four representatives and another representative affiliated with the Palestinian Authority, who apparently belongs to Fatah (these representatives appear not to be active anymore)
- ◆ **PFLP** – 11 representatives
- ◆ **DFLP** – four representatives
- ◆ **PFLP-GC – (Ahmad Jibril's organization)** – one representative
- ◆ **Al-Sa'eqa (an organization which was established at the time by the Syrian Ba'ath Party and operated mainly in Syria)** – one representative
- ◆ **The Front for the Liberation of Palestine (an organization established following a division in the PFLP-GC; its center of activity was in Lebanon)** - three representatives
- ◆ **The Arab Liberation Front (an organization established in Iraq)** – two representatives

- ◆ **The Popular Struggle Front (a small organization which is a PLO member)** – nine representatives
- ◆ **The Palestinian National Initiative Movement (affiliated with the Palestinian left wing)** – four representatives
- ◆ **The Palestinian Democratic Union, FIDA (a party established following a split in the DFLP)** – six representatives
- ◆ **The Palestinian People’s Party (party which was split from the communist party)** – three representatives
- ◆ **The Popular Resistance Movement (Zakariya Dughmush’s organization)** – two representatives
- ◆ **The Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR)** – one representative
- ◆ **The Al-Ahrar Movement (an organization established in 2007 by Khaled bin Hilal, a former Fatah member; the organization is affiliated with Hamas today)** – two representatives

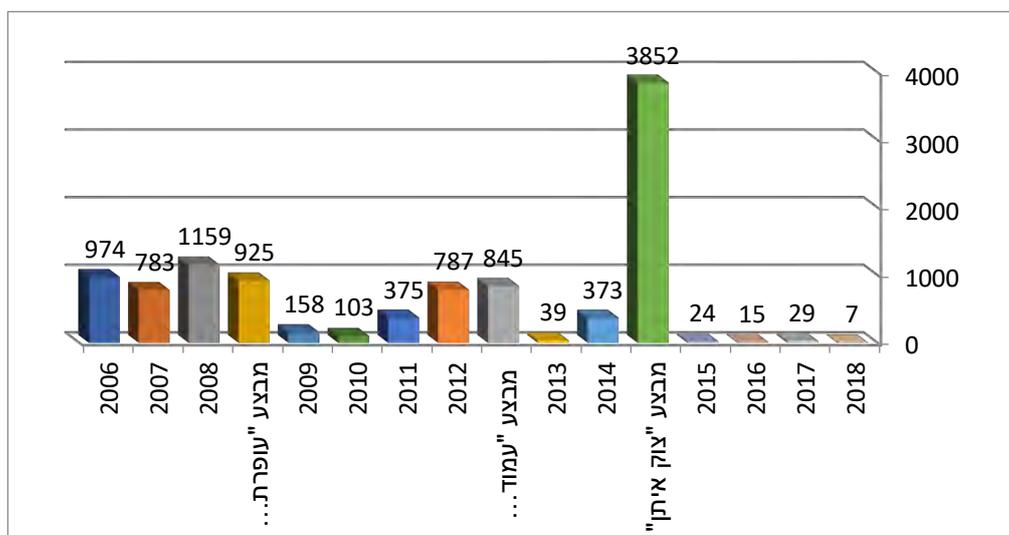
### Hamas’s central role in handling the return marches

► The return marches, which started on March 30, 2018, represent the most outstanding expression **of the new policy adopted by Hamas about three and a half years after the end of Operation Protective Edge**. Since the operation and until March 30, 2018, Hamas adhered to a **policy of restraint**, which was mainly reflected **in a drastic decrease in the scope of rocket fire at Israel** (which, for about three and a half years, was the lowest since Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip). The relative quiet which prevailed at the Gaza Strip border with Israel was also maintained when popular terrorism (“the popular resistance”) reached its peak in Judaea and Samaria. **Hamas’s policy of restraint was successfully imposed on rogue terrorist organizations**, which once in a while fired sporadically, but were usually confronted with Hamas’s effective thwarting activities.<sup>3</sup> During this period, relative calm prevailed in the Gaza Strip **for an unprecedented period of time** since Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip.

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<sup>3</sup> For analysis of Hamas’s new policy, see the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from June 27, 2018: “Hamas’ new policy towards Israel: from restraint and calm to controlled violence, creating escalation”

## Rocket fire from the Gaza Strip by year until March 30, 2018

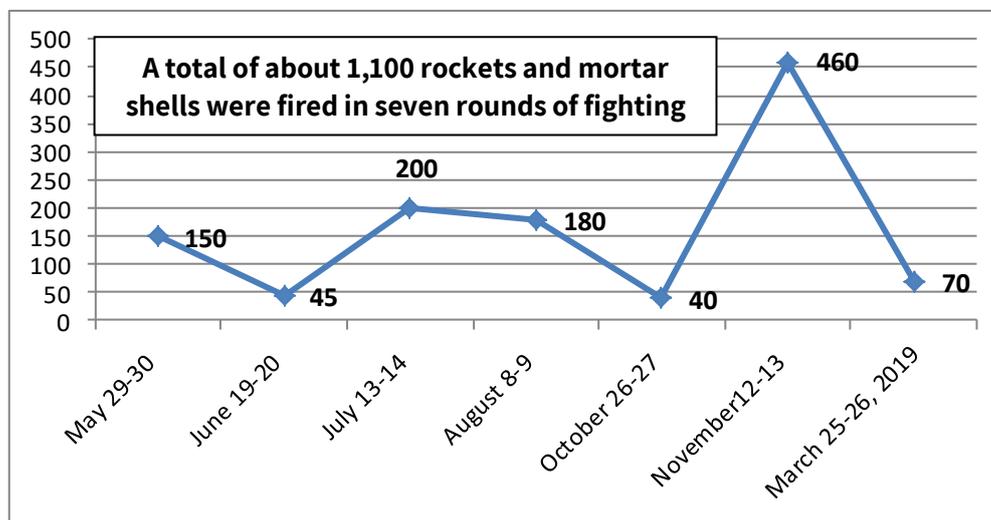


► In the year that has passed since the marches began, **Hamas's policy of restraint was replaced with a new policy of controlled violence against Israel.** The purpose of this policy is **to put Hamas in a power position vis-à-vis Israel, position from which it will be able to conduct indirect negotiations on a settlement that will grant Hamas economic advantages and will also include practical expressions of "lifting the siege."** This policy is also used by Hamas **as a means to divert the feelings of resentment and frustration prevailing among the population due to the harsh economic conditions to the struggle against Israel.** At the same time, Hamas takes care **not to go too far (in its view), in order not to be dragged into an extensive confrontation with Israel,** which Hamas tries to avoid (although it does take into account such a development).

► **The return marches serve as a central component in the policy of restraint,** since they **enable Hamas to regulate the level of violence while presenting it as a "popular activity"** carried out by "peaceful means," which is shared by all the organizations and representatives from all sectors of Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip. **In the ITIC's assessment, because of this reason, Hamas is highly interested in portraying the National Authority to the external world as the entity that organizes the return marches, although in practice, the leadership of the return marches conducts itself according to Hamas's strategy.** This is also the reason for the fact that **in the National Authority and its committees,** there is representation for a vast variety of organizations and entities operating in the Gaza Strip; and that **the National Authority is not headed by a Hamas figure but rather by a PIJ**

operative, **Khaled al-Batsh**, whose role is referred to as **Coordinator of the National Authority of the Return Marches** (or sometimes as Chairman of the National Authority).

### Firing rockets and mortar shells in escalation rounds since the beginning of the return marches (2018-2019)



► At the beginning of the return marches, Hamas tried to remain behind the scenes and present the events as a popular initiative of Gazan activists. **However, when events turned into a routine, Hamas took over the reins and became the main force running the return marches and giving them their organizational, logistical, political and media support. It is Hamas which sets the levels of violence. Those participating in the riots near the border fence are mostly affiliated with Hamas** (as revealed from declarations of senior Hamas figures and from the ITIC's analysis of the identity of the fatalities). And yet, when dictated by Hamas's interests (for instance, during the progress in the Egyptian mediation efforts), Hamas's frontline forces stationed near the border (the retraining force) **are working to decrease the level of violence and regulate it in accordance with Hamas's strategic considerations** (and not according to those of the National Authority, **which is handled by Hamas and is subordinate to its strategy**).



**Tent camp set up east of Gaza City in advance of the first march on March 30, 2018  
(WAFA, March 30, 2019)**

► **In time, events became routine and organized.** Designated units were established, such as the **Night Disturbance Units**, whose purpose is to wage psychological warfare against the Israeli residents of the Western Negev and against the IDF soldiers, by various means, prominent among which are burning tires under cover of the night in areas close to the security fence along the border with the Gaza Strip; throwing Molotov cocktails at IDF positions; sounding sirens to make the IDF forces declare a state of alert, and more (Safa, September 16, 2018; Palestine online, September 16, 2018). Additional unit was also established, which “specialized” in launching incendiary balloons and kites (Bani al-Zawari Unit) which subsequently developed into explosive balloons.



**IEDs thrown at the Israeli border by the Night Disturbance Units in the Gaza Strip. The IEDs bear the inscription (in Arabic and in Hebrew) “Death to Israel.”**

► In spite of the organizers’ declarations, **the return march events in the Gaza Strip which have been going on for about a year are accompanied by extensive violence**, taking their toll in fatalities and wounded among the Palestinians, mainly among rioters on the front line confronting the IDF forces. According to the ITIC's examination, **since the beginning of the return march events on March 30, 2018, a total of 203 Palestinians were killed.** As for the

identity of the fatalities (updated to March 25, 2019), it was found that **about 150 are affiliated with Hamas or other terrorist organizations (about 80%)**. Among the fatalities with organizational affiliation, **prominent were those who belong to Hamas or are affiliated with it** (96 fatalities, about 51% of the total, 45 of whom are operatives of Hamas's military wing).

### The PIJ's role

► **The representation of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is prominent** in the leadership of the National Authority and its various committees (13 representatives compared to 14 of Hamas). The Authority is headed by **Khaled al-Batsh, a senior PIJ operative** whose position was defined as **Coordinator of the National Authority of the Return Marches** (sometimes he is referred to in the media as Chairman of the National Authority of the Return Marches).



**Right: Khaled al-Batsh (Facebook page of the National Authority of the Return Marches, August 10, 2018). Left: Al-Batsh speaking at the "Return Tent" (Palestine Online, September 29, 2018)**

Hamas gave the PIJ extensive representation and created the façade that the National Authority of the Return Marches was led by Khaled al-Batsh. The reason for creating that façade **was Hamas's interest in enlisting the PIJ's support for its policy. And yet, during the year that passed, the PIJ stood out several times as a rogue organization preferring to act according to its own considerations or according to the strategy of Iran (which is its sponsor), without coordinating its moves with Hamas and the joint operations room of the various organizations.**

## Fatah's role

In the beginning, Fatah regarded the return marches as a means to raise awareness of the issue of the “right of return” of the Palestinian refugees (which is an internal Palestinian consensus). Therefore, Fatah took part in the marches and even had several representatives in the National Authority, albeit smaller in number than those of Hamas and the PIJ (and sometimes even less than the number of representatives of insignificant organizations). However, at a later stage, Fatah suspended its participation in the National Authority due to the rift with Hamas **and following Fatah's claim that Hamas has taken over the marches and introduced new content into them in accordance with its own interests (adding the goal of “lifting the siege” to the original goal of increasing awareness of the “right of return”)**.

► **During the second half of May 2018, senior Fatah figures stated that as far as they were concerned, the return marches had come to an end:**

- ◆ **Atef Abu Sayf, Fatah's spokesman (member of the National Authority)** noted that **as far as Fatah was concerned, the return marches ended on May 15, 2018**, the date in which the Palestinians commemorated 70 years of Nakba (the Palestinian catastrophe, i.e., Israel's War of Independence) and the date on which the US Embassy was relocated to Jerusalem. According to the Fatah's spokesman, this was the date agreed upon in the first place between the organizations which started the return marches. Fatah's announcement stressed that the Palestinian struggle would not be stopped until the actual implementation of the “right of return” (Fatah's Information and Culture website, May 16, 2018).

- ◆ **Senior Fatah figure Yahya Rabah said that Fatah should end its participation in the return march since Palestinian organizations, headed by Hamas, were making use of the march for purposes other than those for which it was intended.** He claimed that Hamas added to the goal of the return marches, the struggle for the “right of return,” another goal, “breaking the siege” on the Gaza Strip (which is indirectly perceived as intended also against the Palestinian Authority). Fatah's senior figure added that Hamas's conduct was base rather than “national,” and that Fatah would not keep silent in view of Hamas's mistakes in running the marches (Al-Monitor, May 24, 2018).

► **Thus, the rift between Hamas and Fatah also found its expression in Fatah’s refusal to take part in the National Authority.** When the ITIC examined the participation of **Imad al-Agha, Fatah’s senior representative in the leadership of the National Authority,** it discovered that **he had participated in the leadership’s activities only in the beginning, during March-May 2018.** It seems that he stopped his activity due to the tension created between Fatah and Hamas after Fatah blamed Hamas for attacking a mourners’ tent erected in memory of Razan al-Najjar, with the purpose of “appropriating” the dead woman (she was killed on June 1, 2018, in the southern Gaza Strip). Following this incident, Fatah also suspended its membership in the committee of the national and Islamic forces in the Gaza Strip (Dunya al-Watan, June 6, 2018).

Although Fatah does not approve of Hamas-controlled National Authority, **Fatah operatives continue to take part in the riots near the border fence. Atef Abu Sayf, Fatah’s spokesman,** made a declaration in this respect. According to Abu Sayf, **Fatah is always on the ground and its operatives sustained fatalities and wounded as a result of the marches** (Anatolia News Agency, December 3, 2018). **This statement is supported by the findings on the ground:** According to the ITIC’s examination, **out of 203 fatalities in the return marches, a total of 45 were referred to as affiliated with Fatah** (updated to April 3, 2019). The Fatah spokesman noted in that interview that Fatah had a representative in the National Authority but it was opposed to turning the marches into an instrument to promote the lull with Israel, as carried out by Hamas.