Return march events marking the first anniversary of the marches and Israeli Arab Land Day

March 31, 2019

Overview

On Saturday, March 30, 2019, a return march was held to mark the first anniversary of the marches and the Israeli Arab Land Day. The event was expected to climax a year of marches, and extensive preparations were made for it. Before the events, Hamas and the organizers made efforts **to enlist a large number of participants** to demonstrate popular support. The background to the recent escalation in the Gaza Strip was rocket fire targeting central Israel; the deployment of large IDF forces near the border; the presence of the Egyptian mediators' delegation in the Gaza Strip.

Return march participants near the security fence (Palinfo Twitter account, March 31, 2019).

- **About 40,000 Palestinians participated in the events**, far more than the weekly average. Two senior Hamas figures, **Isma'il Haniyeh and Yahya al-Sinwar**, who participated in the events, expressed satisfaction with the results. During the events **the level of violence was lower than that demonstrated at recent return marches.** This time Hamas made sure to restrain the demonstrators, who were ordered to distance themselves from friction sites with the IDF near the fence. **To that end, for the first time, several hundred Hamas operatives (apparently from the**

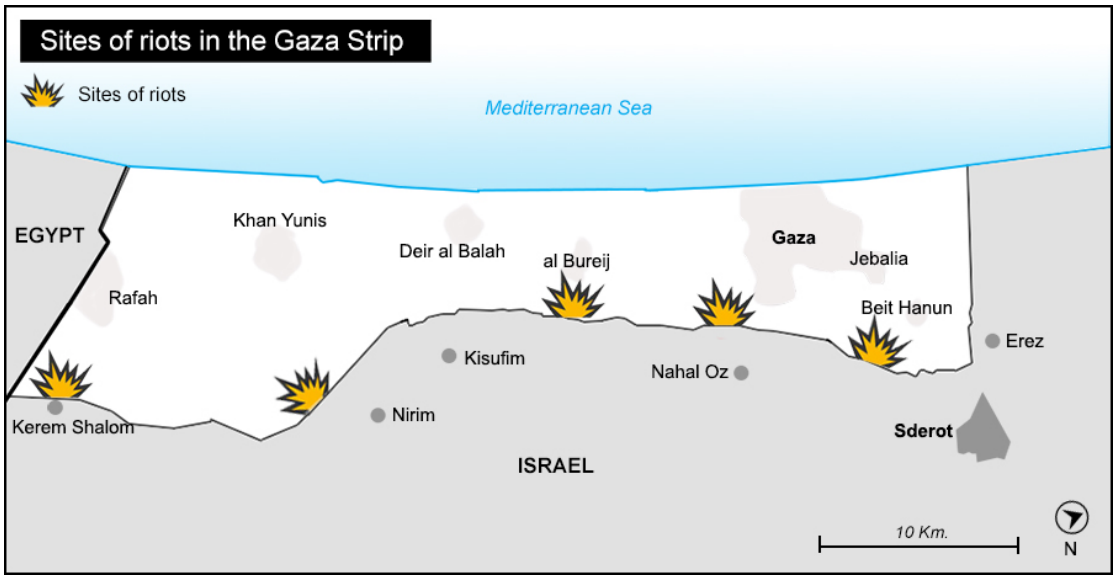
security forces) were deployed. **They wore orange vests** and prevented the demonstrators from approaching the border fence and clashing with IDF soldiers or crossing the border into Israeli territory. The presence of the Egyptian mediating delegation at the demonstration sites also had a moderating influence.

- **However, before and after the return march there were acts of violence**: **throughout the night of March 29, 2019 hundreds of hand grenades and IEDs were thrown at the border fence** and loud explosions were heard. That was part of the psychological warfare waged by the Night Harassment Units (whose activities are directed by Hamas) against the residents of the Israeli communities near the border and IDF soldiers. In response the IDF attacked a Hamas military post (IDF spokesman, March 29, 2019). **After the march, on the night of March 30, 2019, five rockets were fired into the western Negev**, apparently in response to the deaths of three rioters during the march (another rioter died on the morning of March 30, 2019, before the march began). In any event, senior Hamas figures stated that the return marches would continue in the coming year. The march organizers called on the Palestinian public to come to the next march, which will be held on April 5, 2019.
- **Despite the rocket fire**, on the morning of March 31, 2019, the Kerem Shalom Crossing and the Erez Crossing opened for regular activity, after they had been closed for a week (since the rocket fire that hit a house north of Tel Aviv). Palestinian fishermen were allowed to go to sea again. **The objective of the Israeli gestures was to promote the talks for an arrangement, currently being held with Egyptian mediation**.

The return march in the Gaza Strip

- The march events were held on Saturday, March 30, 2019, from the morning until the early afternoon in pouring rain. A general strike was declared in Gaza City. **About 40,000 Palestinians participated in the return march events**. Participants went to the five usual sites, most of them gathering in the northern Gaza Strip. Transportation was organized to the "return camps" from most of the important mosques in the Gaza Strip.

- **During the events the level of violence was relatively low**. Several thousand demonstrators (including children) approached the security fence at a number of sites along the fence, threw stones and burned tires. In several instances hand grenades and IEDs were thrown (IDF spokesman, March 31, 2019). At one of the sites Palestinians tried to sabotage the security fence and hang Palestinian flags on it. As opposed to previous marches, no attempts to break into Israeli territory were reported (Ynet, March 30, 2019).



- According to a spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, **four Palestinians were killed** during the events. One was killed on the morning of March 30, 2019, before the events began. A fourth died a few hours later. Reportedly, 316 Palestinians suffered varying degrees of injuries (Ashraf al-Qidra's Facebook page, March 30, 2019).
- **On the night of March 30, 2019, five rockets were fired into the western Negev,** apparently in response to the fatalities during the march**.** They fell in open areas. No casualties or damage were reported. In response to the rocket fire IDF tanks shot at several Hamas observation posts near the security fence (IDF spokesman, Ynet, March 31, 2019). The Palestinian media reported hits on a post of Hamas' restraint force and on four observation posts east of Deir al-Balah and Gaza City. No casualties were reported (Shabakat Quds, Dunia al-Watan, March 31, 2019).

Right: Return march participants near the security fence (Palinfo Twitter account, March 31, 2019). Left: Palestinian demonstrators in the northern Gaza Strip (Shehab Facebook page, March 30, 2019).

Right: Palestinian rioters near the security fence in the eastern Gaza Strip. One of them is waving an axe (Shehab Facebook page, March 30, 2019). Left: Palestinian rioter holds a wire cutter for breaking through the fence (QudsN Facebook page, March 30, 2019).

Right: Children near the security fence east of Jabalia (Palinfo Twitter account, March 31, 2019). Left: Children near the security fence in the central Gaza Strip (Shehab Facebook page, March 31, 2019).

Hamas' regulation of the violence

▶ Before the events the Supreme National Authority of the Great Return March posted a notice on the social networks calling on residents **to follow the instructions of the "order and organization committees."** The residents were also called on to cooperate with the committees responsible, whose members would be deployed in all the "return camps." The Supreme National Authority called on residents not to

burn tires but to focus on "creative activities to commemorate the Palestinian legacy" (Paltoday, March 30, 2019)

Palestinian demonstrators en route to the march in the central Gaza Strip (Shehab Facebook page, March 30, 2019).

- Despite the large number of participants (similar to the number at the first march and the one held on May 14, 2018), during the events **there was a low level of violence and a show of relative restraint**. As opposed to former return marches, **Hamas closely supervised the demonstrators**, who were requested to keep a distance of several hundred meters from the fence. The IDF spokesman reported **on several hundred Hamas operatives wearing orange vests who prevented demonstrators from reaching the fence** (IDF spokesman, March 30, 2019). According to the Hamas ministry of the interior, **8,000 operatives of the security forces and policemen were deployed in the various Gaza Strip districts** (Shehab Twitter account, March 30, 2019). At the same time, **members of the Egyptian security mediators' delegation were on the ground at a number of demonstration sites** (Shehab Twitter account, March 30, 2019). Apparently their presence was also a moderating influence. The members of the delegation were accompanied by **Isma'il Haniyeh** (Amama, March 30, 2019).

Operatives of Hamas' security forces, wearing orange vests, deploy in the northern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, March 31, 2019).

Men and women of the Hamas police force before their deployment (ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip Facebook page, March 30, 2019).

Statements from senior Hamas figures and the march organizers

- Senior Hamas figures, among them **Isma'il Haniyeh**, head of Hamas' political bureau, and **Yahya al-Sinwar**, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip, **were present at the events and toured the main sites of the demonstrations**. Senior Hamas figures expressed satisfaction at the number of participants, stressing that **the marches would continue in the coming year**.

- According to **Yahya al-Sinwar**, the Palestinian people had proved its strength by coming en masse to the region of the border. He said the people supported the "resistance" and the "armed resistance." He also said **they were beginning a new year of marches, during which they would deal with Israel in a different way** (al-Aqsa, March 30, 2019). **Senior Hamas figure Isma'il Radwan** said the marches would continue until the "siege" had been lifted and the occupation ended. To Israel he said that its "terrorism" would not bring about the end of the marches (al-Aqsa TV, March 30, 2019)

Right: Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, at the "return camp" in the eastern Gaza Strip. Left: Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip, at the "return camp" in the eastern Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, March 31, 2019).

- At the end of the events an announcement from the Supreme National Authority was read by Maher Muzhir, a member of the political bureau of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Also present were senior Hamas figures Isma'il Haniyeh and Yahya al-Sinwar. Muzhir thanked the participants and **called on the Palestinian people to continue taking part in the coming return march events**. The next march will be held on Friday, April 5, with the theme, "the victory of honor" (al-Aqsa TV, March 30, 2019).

Political activity in the days before the march

- **In the days before the march security tension increased along the Gaza Strip border**. After the Egyptian security mediators' delegation postponed its arrival a number of times because of the situation on the ground, the delegation arrived on March 28, 2019, and met with senior Hamas figures. They also met with representatives from the other organizations and with the leadership of the Supreme National Authority. During the meetings the Egyptians updated them on their discussions with Israel. No official information was reported about understandings reached by Hamas and Israel.

A Hamas website, quoting sources with access, reported that apparently Qatar **promised to raise to $40 million the amount of money it will transfer to Hamas**, using an alternative channel instead of Israel. Israel agreed, in principle, **to establish a commercial zone near the Kerem Shalom Crossing**; **to extend the fishing zone to 15 nautical miles** (as of March 31, 2019); **to allow medicines to enter the Gaza Strip** (as of April 1, 2019); **to transfer diesel fuel and to develop lines for the provision of electricity** (alresala.net, March 29, 2019). According to a different source present at the meeting, **members of the Egyptian delegation asked the organizers to stop using violent methods,** in order to enable them to exert pressure on Israel and reach a lull agreement. According to the source, Hamas promised to stop the launching of IED and incendiary balloons**, but insisted that the return marches would continue, although without violence**. The issue of the continuing activities of the Night Harassment Units is still under discussion (Dunia al-Watan, March 30, 2019).

- According to information reported by Isma'il Haniyeh about the talks with the Egyptians**, Hamas is investing efforts with the Egyptians to resolve the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip by reaching genuine understandings with Israel**. He noted the need to stop the Israeli fire and "aggression," and the need for humanitarian aid in the Gaza Strip. He claimed Hamas was currently "at a crossroads," examining the seriousness of Israel's positions and its responses to the demands presented to it. He said that depending on Israel's response, Hamas would make decisions about the nature of the return march events, while "all possibilities are on the table" (al-Watan TV, March 29, 2019)

Violent activities of the Night Harassment Units

- During the days before the return march, while mediation talks were being held with the Egyptian delegation, rocket fire, the launching of IED balloons and the activity of the Night Harassment Units continued. They peaked during **the night of March 29, 2019, when throughout the night hundreds of hand grenades and IEDs were thrown at the fence and loud explosions were heard**. In response an IDF tank attacked a Hamas military post (IDF spokesman, March 29, 2019).

- **On the night of March 27, 2019**, a rocket was launch from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory. It was intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system over the Ashqelon region (IDF spokesman, March 27, 2019).
- **On the night of March 26, 2019**, a rocket was launched form the Gaza Strip at the western Negev (IDF spokesman, March 26, 2019). IED balloons were launched and a camouflage net over an IDF position was set on fire. In response Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked a number of terrorist targets in the southern Gaza Strip, among them a Hamas military compound and site for the manufacture of weapons in Khan Yunis, and a Hamas military site in Rafah (IDF spokesman, March 26 and 27, 2019).

Land Day events in other places

- The organizers of the return march called for mass participation in events held outside the Gaza Strip. However, **the response to the call** (including among Palestinians in Judea and Samaria) **was relatively low,** and **only a few events were held**, with **a small number of participants**:
  - **Judea and Samaria**: In northern Ramallah and al-Bireh a march was held in the direction of the Israeli community of Beit El, in support of the march in the Gaza Strip. It was attended by **Wasel Abu Yusuf**, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee; **Mustafa Barghouti**, secretary general of the Palestinian National Initiative; and **Walid Assaf**, chairman of the Authority for the Struggle against the Fence and the Settlements (Wafa, March 30, 2019). According to reports, a Palestinian was injured while rioting against the Israeli security forces (Shabakat Quds Twitter account, March 30, 2019).

Right: Mustafa Barghouti (far left) at the march (Wafa, March 30, 2019). Right: Palestinians riot at the northern entrance of al-Bireh (Wafa, March 30, 2019).

◆ **Tubas (Nablus region)**: A march was held in **Tubas** attended by Mahmoud al-'Alul, deputy Fatah chairman, and Tawfiq al-Tirawi, a member of Fatah's Central Committee (Wafa, March 30, 2019). In **the al-Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem** and in **Qalandia** rallies were held to protest Israel's expropriation of land (Wafa, March 30, 2019).

Right: Mahmoud al-'Alul at the march in Tubas (Advantage Husam Haddad's Facebook page, March 30, 2019). Left: The march in Qalandia (The Authority of the Struggle Against the Fence and the Settlements Facebook page, March 30, 2019).

◆ **Israeli Arabs**: The main march to mark Land Day was held in Sakhnin, in the Lower Galilee (Arab48, March 30, 2019).

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◆ **Lebanon**: Throughout Lebanon a number of events in support and solidarity with Land Day were held. A mass rally was held in Sidon on March 29, 2019 (Palestinian Information Center Facebook page, March 29, 2019). The Palestinian Institute for Youth and Sport, the al-Israa' Scout Association and the Islamic Association of Palestinian Students in Lebanon held activities and mini-flotillas at a number of ports in Lebanon with the slogan, "We return to our land." In the ports of Tripoli and Tyre symbolic mini-flotillas were held, and in

the ports of Beirut and Sidon activities were held in solidarity with the return marches (alqudsnews.net, March 31, 2019).

Activities in Lebanese ports (arabi21, March 30, 2019).

- **In Adeisseh, south Lebanon**, 248 trees were planted in the name of the 248 Palestinians killed in Lebanon and the return marches in the Gaza Strip (Ali Shoeib, al-Manar correspondent in south Lebanon, March 29, 2019).

The grove of trees planted for Palestinian fatalities, Adeisseh, south Lebanon ("Global campaign for the return to Palestine" Facebook page, March 31, 2019).

- **Syria**: A demonstration was held in the Khan Danoun refugee camp south of Damascus. The demonstrators called for the return of the Golan Heights to Syria as the first step in the restoration of Jerusalem and the other "occupied territories" (al-Mayadeen, March 30, 2019).
- **Western countries**: Demonstrations were held in New York, Paris and London (al-Mayadeen, March 30, 2019). A march was held in Paris from the Place de la République to the Place de l'Opéra, demanding the lifting of the "siege" of the Gaza Strip (al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 30, 2019). A demonstration was held by the British Palestinian Forum in London in front of the Israeli embassy (al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 30, 2019).

Demonstration in New York (Shehab Facebook page, March 30, 2019).

Right: Demonstration in Paris (europalestine solidarity website, March 31, 2019). Left: Demonstration in London (Zaher Birawi's Facebook page, March 31, 2019).