



The return marches: towards a new format?

December 22, 2019

Overview

► Hamas and other terrorist organizations participating in the return marches have recently been discussing whether or not to continue the marches, and **ideas for new formats have been raised**. Apparently after almost two years and 85 return marches, Hamas has come to the conclusion that **the marches and their inherent violence have exhausted themselves**. That is because Hamas is interested in **achieving a short-term, minimalist arrangement**¹ in which there is no need to continue the marches in their current format. Moreover, the Gazans are showing signs of becoming tired of the marches (and Hamas is obliged to consider the public and its hardships).

Nevertheless, in ITIC assessment **Hamas has no interest in stopping the marches, which are inherently violent, and would prefer instead to hold them less frequently and with a lower level of violence**. In ITIC assessment, there two main reasons for that. One is that Hamas wants to keep means for **exerting pressure on Israel**, although with less violence. The other is that Hamas wants to mitigate, or if possible to prevent, internal Palestinian criticism from both the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (which is more belligerent and wants to preserve the marches and their inherent violence) and from the Palestinian Authority (which can be expected to represent a complete cessation of the marches as the failure of Hamas' policy).

¹ For further information, see the December 12, 2019 bulletin " Hamas's perception of the lull agreement with Israel, recently discussed in Cairo."



Criticism of the Supreme National Authority of the Great Return March, for holding the marches at the expense of the Gazans. The Arabic reads, "The Supreme National Authority"² (Facebook page of Isma'il al-Bazam, a non-politically aligned Gazan cartoonist, April 1, 2019).

Statements about a change in the return marches' format

► Hamas and Supreme National Authority senior figures recently revealed **that the continuation of the marches and their format are being reevaluated**. For example:

◆ **Hamas spokesman Abd al-Latif al-Qanua** said the return marches would not stop. **They will continue**, he said, **but in a different format** (Sawa, December 20, 2019).

◆ **Senior Hamas figure Suheil al-Hindi** said deliberations were currently being held where ideas have been raised about **limiting the frequency of the return marches**, although the general consensus is that **they will continue** (Arabi21, December 16, 2018).

◆ **Senior Democratic Front figure and member of the Supreme National Authority Talal Abu Zarifa** said that after almost two years of return marches, the Supreme National Authority was holding comprehensive reevaluations about the nature of the marches and their strategic objectives. He said several proposals were being discussed, **including holding them once a month or on nationally-marked days** (Safa, December 21, 2019).

The return marches and their objectives

► On March 30, 2018, Hamas began implementing a new policy to exert **controlled violence** on Israel. That replaced its **policy of restraint**, which had been in place for three and a half years since the end of Operation Protective Edge. The main feature of the policy is **mass return marches** accompanied **by a variety of violent activities**. The activities include throwing IEDs, hand grenades and Molotov cocktails at IDF soldiers; launching IED and

² The Supreme National Authority is the umbrella organization that directs the marches, although Hamas has the conclusive opinion on their format and how they are conducted.

incendiary balloons and kites into Israeli territory; sabotaging the border security fence; attempts to break into Israel territory, and on occasion shooting attacks. The belligerent atmosphere created in the Gaza Strip and the IDF's responses to violent attacks (which caused Palestinian casualties) **created nine significant rounds of escalation**. So far Israel and Hamas have been able to **contain the escalation** and prevent it from turning into a broad military conflict, which **neither side wants**.

► Hamas regarded the return marches as **an important means to achieve a number of objectives**: exerting controlled pressure on Israel which enables Hamas to receive financial and economic support for the Gaza Strip (easing the hardships of the residents); easing the "siege" on the Gaza Strip (opening the crossings with Israel, opening the Rafah Crossing, extending the fishing zone); enabling the Gazan population in general and the younger generation in particular to let off steam; **channeling the frustrations caused by daily hardships in the Gaza Strip towards Israel**. In addition, on the media-propaganda level, their objective was to **raise awareness of the problem of the Palestinian refugees** and the so-called "right of return" (thus the marches are called "return marches," and the themes of the marches have stressed the issue of the refugees).

Hammas' current considerations regarding the return marches

► The statements regarding the marches apparently reflect the assessment of Hamas (and other organizations participating in them) questioning the benefits derived from continuing them. In ITIC assessment, after nearly two years the marches in their current format have exhausted themselves. That can be seen by the **evident march fatigue of the Gazans**, especially regarding the steep price they have had to pay (fatalities and wounded, and the disruption of daily life during the repeated rounds of escalation).

► One clear indication of their fatigue is **the consistent decline in the number of march participants** (at the height of the marches there were tens of thousands of marchers, then 10,000-15,000, then 6,000-7,000, and during the past two weeks, an average of about 2,400). In all probability Hamas and the other terrorist organizations have taken that into consideration, evidenced by the fact that **for three consecutive weeks no march was held** (a hitherto unprecedented occurrence).³

³ Between Friday, November 15, 2019, and Friday, November 29, 2019, no march was held. The march was renewed on December 6, 2019, with about 4,200 Palestinians participating. On December 13, 2019, the number fell to 2,200, and on December 20, 2019, there were about 2,600 participants.



The relatively poor turnout and empty chairs at the return camp in eastern Khan Yunis at the march on December 13, 2019 (Facebook page of the Malka return camp, December 13, 2019).

- ▶ Another possible Hamas consideration is the pressure exerted on Israel by the return marches in their present formant is about to exhaust itself both regarding the humanitarian situation and the "lifting of the siege" (the two important components **of a possible minimalist arrangement**). In ITIC assessment, as far as Hamas is concerned, it is very doubtful whether continuing the current level of pressure during the marches will lead to new significant concessions from Israel. In addition **Hamas has no interest in a long-term lull agreement, as that would mean giving up its fundamental principles.**
- ▶ While the effectiveness of the marches is dwindling, **their inherent dangers of escalation remain strong.** The dangers may be realized by the violence near the fence and the IDF's response to it,⁴ or as a result of the activities of the so-called "rogue" organizations, especially the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (which, in violation of Hamas policy, has carried out sporadic rocket fire since the end of the most recent round of escalation).

⁴ Even when the number of march participants lessened, **acts of varying degrees of violence continue near the security fence** with ups and downs (throwing IEDs, sabotaging the fence, attempts to break into Israeli territory, etc.).

Given all its considerations and constraints, **Hamas may take the middle road of not stopping the return marches but rather reducing their frequency and lowering the level of the accompanying violence.** The middle road **will help Hamas continue to make progress towards a short-term minimalist lull arrangement** to improve the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and ease the "siege," but **without committing itself to make concessions on principle as part of a long-term arrangement.** Such a middle road will allow Hamas **to maintain leverage with Israel** but **with less violence and greater supervision.** However, should Hamas decide not to change the format of the marches, that means it will continue its policy of controlled violence and its readiness to preserve the potential of a flare-up with Israel and more rounds of escalation, and possibly an overall deterioration of the situation on the ground