



Hamas threatens escalation and encourages terrorist attacks during Ramadan

March 22, 2023

Overview

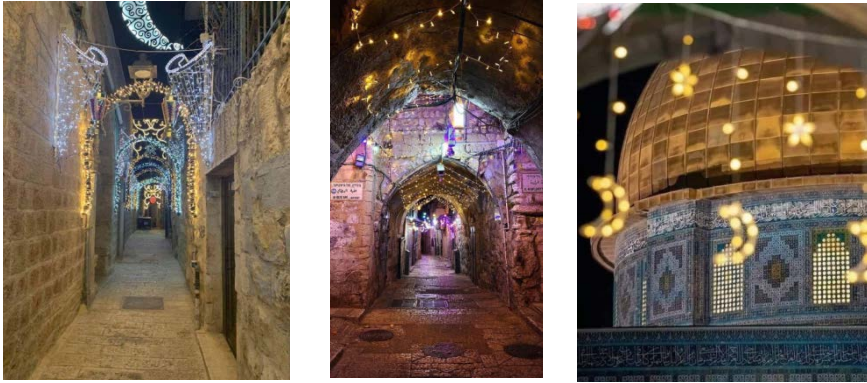
► Ramadan will officially begin on March 23, 2023 and end on April 21, 2023. Given the current tension in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem and the events of past years, Palestinian sources, especially in the Hamas leadership, reiterate that **the situation is unstable and likely to deteriorate sharply**. They threaten **escalation and worse** if Israel continues its "activities against the Palestinians and al-Aqsa mosque," for them the red line which could ignite the region. **Marwan Issa, the deputy head of Hamas' military-terrorist wing**, gave a rare interview where he claimed that **any change in the status quo of al-Aqsa would cause "a regional earthquake."** The security prisoners in Israeli jails also claimed they would go on hunger strikes throughout the month.

► **International and Arab efforts are being made behind the scenes to prevent escalation and increased tension during Ramadan.** Two security summit meetings were held, one in February 2023 in Aqaba and the other in March in Sharm el-Sheikh, where representatives from Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA), the United States, Egypt and Jordan tried to reach understandings and reduce tensions. In the meantime, the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced measures to ease the Palestinians' lives during the month. The police in Jerusalem will increase their forces, especially in the eastern part of the city and the holy sites.

► In recent years Ramadan has become a time for rising tension and an increase in violent clashes between the Palestinians and the Israeli security forces. The violence spread to the Gaza Strip and, after Operation Breaking Dawn in May 2021, caused Hamas, which regards itself as the "defender of the holy sites," to predicate a "new equation:" any activity they choose to interpret as an attempt to "attack" east Jerusalem and al-Aqsa will be met with escalation in the south and rocket fire into Israel.

► Statements from Hamas spokesmen and especially from Marwan Issa are essentially strategic messages from the Hamas military-terrorist hierarchy and may indicate Hamas' intentions for the coming month. They are also a message meant to inform Israel that any

change in the status quo on the Temple Mount or an increase in the presence of Jews or Jewish prayers will be met with a "response." However, most of the spokesmen, including Marwan Issa, note that the ball is in Israel's court, and if Israel does not cross what they have defined as their red lines, Hamas will not be "forced" to respond and for the time being will leave the battle to the terrorists in Judea and Samaria.



The Temple Mount and Old City of Jerusalem decorated for Ramadan (Shehab Twitter account, March 14, 2023; Wafa, March 21, 2023)

Further Information

► On March 23, 2023, Ramadan will officially begin and will end on April 21, 2023. Given the current tension in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem, Palestinian sources have reiterated that **the situation is unstable and likely to deteriorate sharply**. They threaten **escalation and worse** if Israel continues its activities against the Palestinians and al-Aqsa mosque, for them the red line which could ignite the region.

► In the meantime, the media office of the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails announced that the leaders of the Fatah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) prisoners would begin a hunger strike on the first day of Ramadan. The office also called on the Palestinian public to participate in protest marches in the various cities. According to reports, six prisoners representing the Palestinian organizations have already begun the hunger strike and are supposed to be joined by 2,000 more (prisoners' media office Telegram channel, March 21, 2023). The announcement was disseminated by the Palestinian organizations' media.

Statements from Hamas leaders

► For some time the Hamas leadership has been warning that **given the current situation on the ground they expect an "explosion" during Ramadan and that their patience is running out**. The threats come in the wake the recent terrorist attacks, which they

supported, praised, and celebrated, and Israeli threats of counterterrorism activities in Judea and Samaria. However, Hamas spokesmen claim escalation will only occur if Israel changes the status quo ("crosses the red lines") in Jerusalem, and for the time being they leave confrontations to the terrorists in Judea and Samaria.

► A particularly important statement was made by Marwan Issa, the deputy commander of Hamas' military-terrorist wing, who does not often appear in public. Interviewed by Hamas' al-Aqsa TV, he said that the political program in Judea and Samaria had come to an end because Israel had destroyed the Oslo Accords, and promised that **"the coming days will be full of events."** He warned that **any change in the status quo of al-Aqsa would lead to a "regional earthquake."** However, he claimed, they would give an opportunity to the "resistance" [anti-Israeli terrorist activities] in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem, since at this point in time those were the locations for action with strategic influence. He claimed giving the "resistance" in Judea and Samaria an opportunity did not mean Hamas was abandoning them or that the Gaza Strip would be silent. He claimed they would defend the Palestinians with all their forces should the need for intervention arise. He added that the Palestinians' "spirit of martyrdom [for the sake of Allah]" in Judea and Samaria was unprecedented, and that the Palestinians and their "struggle" in Judea and Samaria were in excellent condition. They had a high level of awareness for the "resistance project" and national unity for dealing with Israel. He also claimed **"resistance activity" in all "Palestine" was necessary and had to be supported materially, and its morale and media also needed support to keep the Palestinians from having to "struggle" alone.** He added that in the meantime the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades [Hamas' military-terrorist wing] would increase its strength and construct a "resistance strategy" (Safa, March 15, 2023).



**Blurred picture of Marwan Issa attached to statements made to al-Aqsa TV
(Hamas website, March 15, 2023)**

► Other statements were the following:

◆ **Khaled Mashaal, chairman of the Hamas leadership abroad, said the Palestinians were going to "escalate" during Ramadan and the days in the shadow of Israel's aggression would be intense.** He claimed the Palestinians understood they could not restore their homeland by any means except "resistance." He called on the Palestinians to unite as the "resistance" had already united in Nablus, Jenin and Gaza (Shehab, March 4, 2023).

◆ **Saleh al-'Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, who directs Hamas activities in Judea and Samaria, said in an interview that the "resistance" in Judea and Samaria would continue because they had no other option, and Israel had to know that the future "would be more difficult."** He said Hamas closely monitored Israel's activities in Jerusalem, and **its attempts to exploit Ramadan to enforce its policies** and allow the settlers to hold religious ceremonies would be met with a Palestinian response (Hamas website, March 14, 2023). On a later occasion, during a ceremony in Gaza City to launch a book about Amad Aqal,¹ a former Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades commander, al-'Arouri gave a speech **in which he called on every armed Palestinian to use his gun in clashes with Israel, the settlers and Israel's security forces** (Hamas website, March 20, 2023). He made no specific mention of Ramadan.



Saleh al-'Arouri (Hamas website, March 20, 2023)

◆ **Khalil al-Haya, a member of Hamas' political bureau, claimed they were in an ongoing confrontation with "the occupation" and might begin a new battle during Ramadan.** He said the "resistance" was improving its organized activity against the "occupation" in various locations, among them Nablus, Jenin and Jericho. He added that while the PA was "unpatriotic," Hamas would not condemn its security

¹ Amad Aqal was the commander of Hamas' military-terrorist wing. He died in a targeted killing in November 1993 after he had been pursued by the Israeli security forces for two years, during which he carried out a series of shooting attacks against IDF soldiers.

services because they were part of the Palestinian people's "resistance" (al-Aqsa TV Telegram channel, March 19, 2023).

◆ **Muhammad Hamada, Hamas spokesman for Jerusalem affairs**, interviewed by al-Aqsa TV, said Israel was worried about everything related to Ramadan, and that the area in front of the Western Wall was one of the most sensitive and dangerous sites for Israel. He said **the Palestinian people would now allow the "occupation" to attack al-Aqsa, and aggression against it would be a ticking time-bomb**. He claimed Israel was pushing for a religious war against al-Aqsa and Jerusalem, and **was delusional if it thought aggression against al-Aqsa would not have a price** [sic] (al-Aqsa TV Telegram channel, March 18, 2023).



Muhammad Hamada interview on al-Aqsa TV (al-Aqsa TV Facebook page, March 18, 2023)

◆ **Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem** claimed **an increase in Israel's aggressive activities against al-Aqsa, particularly during Ramadan, was liable to open the door to a dangerous escalation**. He added that al-Aqsa was a place of great sanctity, and any attack on its worshippers or its holy nature would ignite the entire region. He also said **Marwan Issa's statement that any attempt to divide al-Aqsa** [i.e., the times of prayers] **would be met with an "unprecedented reaction" from the "resistance"** (sabaq24, March 16, 2023). Hamas also organized a march in Khan Yunis in support of al-Aqsa, Judea and Samaria and the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. During the march **he warned Israel not to engage in dangerous escalation in Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem during Ramadan**. He said Israel was playing with a burning fuse, noting the "equation" [attack in response to "attack"] determined by Hamas during Operation Guardian of the Walls was still in place (Hamas website, March 17, 2023).



Hazem Qassem speaking during a march in Khan Yunis (Hamas website, March 17, 2023)

Political commentary on Marwan Issa's statements

► Palestinian political commentators discussed Marwan Issa's interview, most of them regarding it as a call for escalation or even confrontation in the Gaza Strip during Ramadan.

The more prominent were the following:

- ◆ **Husam al-Dajani, a political columnist and commentator from Gaza**, said Marwan Issa's statements had reflected the regional political situation, and that the situation was "explosive." He said they were a message for the mediators, because if they did not restrain Ben-Gvir and Netanyahu there would be an upheaval, especially in the Gaza Strip. However, in his opinion the existing tense atmosphere in the Gaza Strip would not allow for a confrontation during Ramadan (Dunia al-Watan, March 15, 2023).
- ◆ **Iyad al-Qara, a political columnist and commentator from Gaza**, said the statements made by Saleh al-'Arouri and Marwan Issa were a warning to Israel regarding Judea and Samaria and the situation in the Gaza Strip in general and al-Aqsa in particular (Dunia al-Watan, March 15, 2023).
- ◆ **Taysir Muheisen, a political columnist and commentator from Gaza**, said Marwan Issa's statements had come at a very important time because **they had been made close to Ramadan**, and might lead the Palestinians to a confrontation with Israel (Dunia al-Watan, March 15, 2023).
- ◆ **Mustafa al-Sawaf, a Hamas-affiliated political commentator**, said Marwan Issa's statements indicated **they were on the brink of an extensive, comprehensive confrontation**. He claimed the statements were meant to inform Israel that any damage done to al-Aqsa was a red line that would ignite the region and turn it into an earthquake [sic] (Shehab, March 15, 2023).