



A Possible Renewal of the Return Marches

September 7, 2023

Overview

- ▶ On August 30, 2023, the Supreme National Authority for Return Marches and Lifting the Siege¹ (Supreme National Authority) issued an announcement about rebuilding the return camps near the border security fence in the eastern Gaza Strip and preparing them for the possible renewal of the return marches. Tractors and heavy equipment were observed leveling the ground and access roads. According to the organizers, the camps are being prepared for demonstrators who will protest the continuation of the "siege" of the Gaza Strip and demand the return of the refugees to the lands from which they were displaced in 1948.
- ▶ Meanwhile, for the past three weeks "demonstrations" have been held in eastern Gaza City near the security fence. They were relatively small, attended by only several dozen Palestinians who gathered near the Karni Crossing and threw rocks and IEDs at the IDF forces. Some of them tried to climb the security fence. The IDF forces responded with riot control measures and sniper fire. Several Palestinians were injured.



Right: Palestinians riot near the security fence (Wafa, September 2, 2023). Left: A Palestinian cuts through the fence (Shehab Twitter account, September 1, 2023)

¹ The Supreme National Authority was established by Hamas in 2018 to coordinate and organize "return marches" in the Gaza Strip. The Authority is composed of representatives of all the Palestinian organizations and headed by senior PIJ figure Khaled al-Batash. For further information see the April 11, 2019 ITIC report, Nature and Functioning of the Supreme National Authority of the Return Marches and Lifting the Siege."

► The events were apparently instigated by Hamas, which has to deal with the financial crisis in the Gaza Strip and Israel's threats to attack terrorist leaders. Hamas apparently also initiated the work being done to repair the camps. Senior Hamas figures who were contacted refused to comment.

► **Despite the announcement, the possibility of renewing the return marches and the events along the border, the Supreme National Authority leadership claimed it had not yet made a decision because an in-depth discussion was required and there had to be a national consensus.** Moreover, contrary to the unified position of the past, many Palestinian organizations, led by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), currently oppose the renewal of the return marches, mainly because from their perspective they are not "cost-effective." Senior figures in the Gaza Strip, political commentators, and social media users argued that the Palestinians had paid a steep price for the return marches while the situation in the Gaza Strip had not improved.

► The idea to hold "the great march of return" was first proposed in early 2018 as a "non-violent" [sic] mass protest in which thousands of Palestinians would march towards the Israeli border and attempt to break into Israeli territory "to return to their homes." To that end, it was proposed that a "return camp" be established near the border for a permanent presence of Palestinian activists. It was apparently the brainchild of Hamas, which was joined by PIJ operatives, social activists and local journalists. In practice, it was organized by the Supreme National Authority of the Return Marches and Lifting the Siege.

► According to the organizers, the objective was to emphasize to the world the "right" of the Palestinian refugees to "return to their homes." However, the real cause was the predicament Hamas found itself in, due mainly to the deterioration of the Gaza Strip's economy. The first march was held close to Land Day, March 30, 2018;² for the next two years Palestinians gathered at the return camps along the border almost every Friday.

► Although the organizers claimed the events were grassroots and non-violent, **they were attended by operatives of the military-terrorist wings of the organizations in Gaza Strip and usually spun out of control and escalated into riots in which Palestinians attacked IDF forces.** The "demonstrators" routinely burned tires and threw IEDs, Molotov cocktails and rocks at the IDF forces securing the fence on the Israeli side. They also cut through the fence

² Since 1976, Israeli Arabs have marked Land Day to show their adherence to their lands.

and tried to enter Israeli territory, and on one occasion detonated an IED at the Keren Shalom fuel terminal.

► The marches required IDF forces and the Israel Police Force to make special preparations, including the deployment of special forces and snipers to prevent damage to the fence and penetration into Israeli territory. Two hundred and seventeen Palestinians were killed during the marches,³ and hundreds were wounded, many of whom are still in rehabilitation.

Further Information

Decision to repair the return camps for the renewal of the marches

► On August 30, 2023, the Supreme National Authority issued an announcement about rebuilding the return camps near the security fence in the eastern Gaza Strip and preparing them for the possible renewal of the return marches. According to reports, the Authority had begun preparing the camps to receive mass numbers of Gazans who would protest the continuation of the Israeli "siege" and demand the return of the Palestinian refugees to the lands from which they were displaced in 1948. Sources reported the decision to renew the return marches had been made because of "the tightening of the siege on the Gaza Strip, and the inability of the mediators to make Israel respect the agreements" (Ma'an, August 30, 2023; Safa, August 30, 2023). In the meantime, "sources" in the Authority leadership claimed **renewing the marches was still theoretical because deliberations had to be held, after which a national consensus and decision could be reached** (al-Akhbar, Lebanon, September 4, 2023).



Preparing the return camps (Right: Safa, August 30, 2023. Left: al-Quds al-Arabi, August 31, 2023)

³ For further information see the January 21, 2019 ITIC report, "Examination of the list of fatalities in the "return marches" reveals that most of them are operatives of terrorist organizations, about half of whom affiliated with Hamas."



Right: Hanging Palestinian flags along the road for a return camp (al-Quds al-Arabi, August 31, 2023). Left: Operatives of Hamas' military-terrorist wing in position near the security fence in the eastern Gaza Strip (Left: @refugeesps Twitter account, August 30, 2023)

Hamas' position

- ▶ During an interview, **Suheil al-Hindi, a member of the Hamas political bureau**, refused to comment on whether a decision had been made to renew the return marches, saying only that events on the eastern border were an expression of popular sentiment, which rejected the "siege" and the restrictions imposed by Israel. He claimed the Palestinians had the right to use all means, including return marches, to confront Israel in Judea and Samaria, Jerusalem or the Gaza Strip (al-Araby al-Jadeed, September 3, 2023).
- ▶ A Hamas "source" said that renewing the marches along the border was meant to preserve a specific form of "popular resistance" [popular terrorism]. According to the "source," the return marches provided the organizations, Hamas in particular, with the ability to maneuver without employing "armed resistance" [terrorist attacks], and in the past the marches had proven their effectiveness in dealing with the "siege" and relieving pressure on the Gaza Strip. However, the "source" claimed Hamas would ensure marches did not have a high price in terms of harm to the demonstrators, and the "demonstrations" and clashes with Israel would probably be "more moderate" than in the past (al-Madn Center, September 4, 2023).
- ▶ The "source" also said Hamas intended to use the marches to convey messages, including to the mediators (Egypt, Qatar, the UN), and to pressure Israel ahead of the holiday season (the Jewish New Year, Yom Kippur and Succoth). It was also a response to the Israeli threats of carrying out targeted killings outside Judea and Samaria, in particular in the Gaza Strip (al-Madn Center, September 4, 2023).
- ▶ "Informed sources in Hamas" claimed it was necessary to play the "popular march" card to force Israel and the mediators to pay for quiet in the Gaza Strip, and to keep Israel from

responding to the escalation [of terrorist attacks] in Judea and Samaria by tightening the "siege" on Gaza (Lebanese al-Akhbar, September 4, 2023).

► **Mustafa al-Sawaf, a Hamas-affiliated political commentator from Gaza**, was of the opinion that renewing the return marches would convey a message to the world, the region and Israel about the options available to the Palestinians, including the return marches, which could be used to exhaust Israel. He also claimed **they did not intend to repeat the marches of the past**. While it was true those marches did exhaust Israel to a great extent, they also caused many Palestinian casualties, and therefore, he said, the marches could have a different form and character in light of lessons learned. Referring to the messages the return marches were supposed to convey to Israel, al-Sawaf claimed the main one was that the Palestinians had many options, not only rifles and rockets, but the option of civilian resistance. Regarding the objections of the Palestinian street and some of the organizations to renewing the return marches because of the price the Palestinians paid in the past in terms of dead and wounded, he claimed that every march would be part of a national consensus and not held by a single organization (Quds Press, September 2, 2023).

► **Faiz Abu Shamala, a Hamas-affiliated political commentator from Khan Yunis**, claimed the return marches were a long-term strategic measure which would "devour all Israeli considerations [sic]." He added that in addition to keeping Israel busy, they conveyed the message that the "resistance" and the residents of Gaza would continue continuous confrontations. He said the young people of Gaza should go to the confrontations and keep Israel busy around the clock, not to relieve the pressure on Gaza, but as a strategic move of continuous activity (Quds Press, September 2, 2023).

PIJ responses

► Apparently activists of the PIJ, which was active in the previous marches, have doubts about the renewing them. According to reports, Khaled al-Batash, the senior PIJ operative who coordinates the marches, had not been informed in advance when Hamas began logistical preparations for the marches. According to "PIJ sources" the organization's external leadership is not interested in leading the marches at this stage. The PIJ justified its position to Hamas in closed consultations, stating the Gaza Strip was greatly dissatisfied by how the marches had been conducted and the way the idea had been exploited. Therefore, according to the sources, the PIJ proposed the marches be limited to specific events and activities

conducted without approaching the fence, thereby ensuring the safety of the participants (al-Madn Center, September 4, 2023).

Other responses

► Palestinian political commentators related to the renewal of the marches, the reasons for their renewal and the degree of their usefulness. **Many of them were opposed because, they claimed, the marches did not help or advance anything. Some predicted that even if the marches were renewed they would be limited in scope.** Some of the opinions were the following:

◆ **Ismat Mansour** noted that Israel's tightening of the "siege" on the Gaza Strip after the escalation of the "resistance" operations [terrorist attacks] in Judea and Samaria, and the mediators' inability to force the "occupation" to implement the understandings reached, had been behind the idea to renew the return marches (al-Quds al-Arabi, August 31, 2023).

◆ **Hani Suleiman claimed it would be a mistake to renew the return marches, which in the long run would exhaust the Palestinians, who paid the price. Israel was not under pressure** because it used force and did not respond to external mediation to ease the "siege" of the Gaza Strip. He called on the organizations not to be blinded by one form of struggle and to look for better options to confront Israel's punitive measures. It was the young Gazans, he claimed, who paid for the marches, with the increase in the number of those disabled by gunshot wounds (al-Quds al-Arabi, August 31, 2023).

◆ **Taysir Muheisen** claimed the Supreme National Authority's announcement of renewing the marches was only a first step that served as a message because it had not been followed by an announcement of the return of "popular activities" or "hard measures," such as the activities of the night harassment units, the naval demonstrations or incendiary balloon launchings. He called the announcement a message to the mediators to intervene, which meant it would be possible to stop at this stage and not officially return to the "activities" [of 2018-2019] (al-Araby al-Jadeed, September 3, 2023).

◆ **Talal Awkal from al-Ayam said the decision to renew the return marches had apparently been made by Hamas, and so far not all the organizations had agreed to it.** He said that before the marches were renewed, previous experience had to be

examined and evaluated for "profit and loss." He claimed renewing the marches was "a message of strength to the people of Israel," as Hezbollah harasses Israel and leaves it helpless (Khabar, September 3, 2023).

Palestinian criticism

► **Harsh criticism was voiced of the renewal of the return marches in the Palestinian social networks and media**, most of it directed at Hamas, because of the serious injuries suffered by rioters when IDF forces responded. For example:

- ◆ According to **Mahmoud al-Zaq, a member of the Popular Struggle Front's political bureau**, the decision had not been discussed at the meetings of the monitoring committee, in which all the Gazan organizations participate and which coordinates joint activities. He stated that no decision had been made by the factions to renew the return marches. Representatives of other organizations agreed with him and claimed they had been surprised by the decision (al-Ayam, September 1, 2023).

- ◆ Internet user Khalil Qashta wrote that the decision to renew the marches raised many questions. He wanted to know what the purpose of renewing them was, and why now. After past experience had left hundreds of dead and thousands of wounded, what would the results be this time? (Khalil Qashta's Twitter account, August 30, 2023).

- ◆ Internet user Saado Sami Khalaf wrote that five years ago he had been one of the first to participate in the return marches and had often gone straight to points of friction with IDF forces. He claimed that at first it was a wonderful, extraordinary experience that united all Palestinians, but the price was very high and many of the wounded were still paying it (Saado Sami Khalaf's Facebook page, August 31, 2023).

- ◆ Internet user Khaled Hijazi wondered what the logic was behind renewing the return marches, especially since the last time they failed to achieve a goal. He called them deadly and destructive for young people, unjustified and unnecessary, and therefore an investigation had to be held and accountability demanded for everything that had happened in the past (Khaled Hejazi's Facebook page, August 30, 2023).

- ◆ An Internet user identifying himself only as Jamal, and who often criticizes Hamas, posted a photo of the building of Qatar's National Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza and wrote, "The correct destination for the return marches (the return of the dollar) should be the residence of [Committee Chairman] Mohammed al-Emadi" (Twitter account of @JmalStark01, 1 in September 2023).



Jamal's tweet (@JmalStark01 Twitter account, September 1, 2023)

- ◆ There were also Internet users who questioned the benefits of the marches and posted comments reminding Hamas of the large number of casualties and the severe damage suffered by the participants of the return marches.



Right: A tweet from "al-Hakim" asking what the objective and benefit of renewing the return marches are and what their previous achievements were (@Hakeam_ps Twitter account, August 30, 2023). Left: A tweet from "Ahmed" with a picture of "The achievements and results of the blessed return marches!" (@ahmadGazapal Twitter account, August 30, 2023)

Clashes in the eastern part of Gaza City during the last month

- Palestinians have recently clashed with IDF soldiers several times along the border security fence. Most of the clashes were on Fridays and similar to the incidents of the return marches, although on a more limited scale:

- ◆ On **Friday, September 1, 2023**, about a hundred Palestinians rioted near the security fence in eastern Gaza City. The rioters threw IEDs and made several attempts to cross the fence. IDF forces responded with riot control measures and sniper fire (IDF spokesman's Twitter account, September 1, 2023). The Palestinian media reported that dozens of Palestinians approached the security fence in the Malka area, in the eastern part Gaza City, after a march held to protest Israel's actions against the Palestinians.

The rioters gathered near the fence, waved Palestinian flags, burned tires and chanted slogans in support of Judea and Samaria, al-Aqsa Mosque and the prisoners. The ministry of health in Gaza reported nine wounded (Shehab, September 1, 2023; al-Quds, September 1, 2023).

◆ On **Friday, August 25, 2023**, a number of "popular activities" were held in the various Gaza Strip districts and near the security fence to show support for Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem and the "resistance" against Israel and the settlers. A demonstration was organized in the Malka return camp in the eastern part of Gaza City. "Demonstrators" went to the security fence and clashed with IDF forces. Three Palestinians were reportedly injured by tear gas. It was also reported that for the second time in a week Palestinians detonated a powerful IED near the border security fence in eastern Gaza City (Shehab, August 25, 2023; Twitter account @tawra8001, August 25, 2023; Filastin al-A'an, August 25, 2023).



Right: "Popular activity" near the security fence (Shehab Telegram channel, August 25, 2023).

Left: Picture from a video of the IED explosion (@tawra8001 Twitter account, August 25, 2023)

◆ On **Friday, August 21, 2023**, an "activity" was held in the eastern part of Gaza City to mark the anniversary of the arson attempt at al-Aqsa Mosque. Buses brought thousands of people from the northern Gaza Strip, central Gaza Strip and Gaza City to the Malka return camp to the east of Gaza City. **Khader Habib, a senior PIJ figure**, spoke on behalf of the national and Islamic forces, which had organized the event. **Muhammad Hamada, Hamas spokesman for Jerusalem**, also spoke (Safa, August 21, 2023). After the speeches, crowds of Palestinians went to the security fence in eastern Gaza. IDF soldiers fired live ammunition and tear gas grenades. Medical sources in Gaza reported 18 casualties (Shehab, August 21, 2023).



Right: Palestinian protesters on their way to the border. Left: Rioters climb the security fence in eastern Gaza (Telegram channel of journalist Hassan Aslih, August 21, 2023)