

Gaza's March of Return Reflects a Desire for New Palestinian Politics

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The initiative behind the march defies the Israeli policy of disconnecting Gaza from the rest of the Palestinians. However, Gazans are not wretched and passive charity cases but a politically aware public

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- Israel's clash with reality on Gaza
- Gaza footage shows protester shot in the back while running away from Israeli border

Repressing the fight for national rights and equality is not an exact science. Even after 70 years of experience, one cannot know whether killing unarmed protesters who did not endanger a single Israeli soldier will deter and thin the numbers of demonstrators in the coming weeks – or exactly the opposite.

But even 70 or 50 years of experience in repression is not enough for the army and the politicians to abandon their view of the Palestinians as marionettes of Hamas, just like they were seen as puppets of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization in the past. Tens of thousands of unarmed people (even if some of them do belong to various Palestinian security forces) do not participate in a mass march, despite Israeli warnings, simply because they obey Hamas and its sophisticated tricks. If the Israeli military and the political leadership prefer to present it in this light to their home arena, for their own reasons, it demonstrates contempt for the Israeli public. If they really believe this, it is a chronic lack of understanding of the situation, which is characteristic of unelected rulers and regimes.

As with many initiatives for mass action, it is hard to know how the March of Return came about. Some of those behind the initiative are members of the relatively young generation who are identified with rival political organizations but are furious over their groups' descent into infighting. A few of them gained experience as activists against the internal Palestinian split in 2011 and discovered that their work to end it was not enough to develop momentum. The political groups – Hamas, Fatah and the smaller organizations – adopted the initiative. This is not a trick but political awareness.

The dates chosen for the march are not the result of cynical manipulations. Land Day marks the killing of Palestinian demonstrators, citizens of Israel who protested the expropriation of their lands, and has become a national day that unites Palestinians regardless of the fences or passports that separate them. The pain over the loss of their homeland in 1948 is not a pretense. The choice of a six-week long continued action along the border fence is a political attempt to break through the Israeli-imposed external blockade, as well as an internal one.

It's not Palestinian nationalism that is dying (a view expressed by observers in Israel, who attribute

it to the political failures of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas). What is dying is the traditional organization that represented it until now – the PLO – and Hamas is failing in its attempts to become the alternative that is acceptable for everyone. Palestinian society, which is sick and tired of its leadership and the political split, is teeming with initiatives. People are feeling around for something new that will break down both the physical and psychological barriers that divide the various parts, while basing it on the components of national Palestinian identity acceptable to all. This is also how we must look at the March of Return this year – whether Israel continues and succeeds in its fatal repression of it, or not.

The Israeli decision to use lethal means to repress a popular civil action is a political and not military-logistical choice. Despite the authenticity of the march's message for return, the Israeli government and army are not afraid that the fulfillment of the right of return is now on the agenda. This is not the reason they gave soldiers orders to shoot to kill – the means that in the short and medium term is the surest to repress the protest. The initiative behind the march shakes the stability of the central pillar of Israeli policy and its plans to prevent the Palestinian national project by severing the Gaza Strip from the rest of Palestinian society in the West Bank and Israel. This separation, gradually carried out over 27 years, not only directly caused the terrible economic and environmental deterioration, but also aided the creation of two Palestinian governments – which has also served Israeli intentions quite well. The march is a social and political initiative that is trying to bypass the two-government obstacle.

It can be assumed that the Israel Defense Forces and its spokespeople will know how to respond to any development: If the March of Return protests come to an end, it will be attributed to the iron fist used on the first day. If the demonstrations continue, they will explain that the fist was too weak. From the beginning, military sources claimed that the demonstration was not as peaceful as the organizers presented it to be. As Amos Harel wrote in Haaretz: "A few firebombs were thrown, a few roadside bombs were laid down, tires were burned and there were a few attempts to cut the fence and cross into Israel." Was every one of the 15 killed involved in such alleged acts, which, even if they were carried out, did not immediately endanger the lives of the soldiers or other Israelis? Was every one of the roughly 700 wounded by live ammunition involved in these alleged acts? By the time we see detailed testimony and pictures documenting how some of those killed and wounded had been shot in the back, and the festive, civilian atmosphere that prevailed among the marchers before the killings, it will already be yesterday's news.

The army allows itself to violate international law and shoot at unarmed civilians, and even kill them, because Israeli society accepts this as an a priori act of defense, without investigating the details. And despite a few feeble condemnations, even governments around the world do not represent an obstacle to deter Israel. The March of Return – whether it continues or not – declares to Israel and the international community that the residents of the Gaza Strip are not wretched and passive charity cases, but a politically aware public.

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P.S.

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<https://portside.org/2018-04-01/gazas-march-return-reflects-desire-new-palestinian-politics>

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