

Preparations for the Nakba March: Hamas's Cognitive Campaign

Kobi Michael and Gabi Siboni

The Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip is heavily engaged in preparations for a major event, the “Great March of Return,” when thousands of Gaza’s Palestinians will march toward the security fence and position themselves in tent cities along the Israeli border. This event, scheduled for May 14, 2018, marking seventy years since the establishment of the State of Israel, is designed to highlight the Palestinian refugee issue and connect it to the plight of those living the Gaza Strip. The move is also designed to serve the Hamas leadership in Gaza in its struggle within the Palestinian arena, given its assessment that the reconciliation talks with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) are doomed to fail, and in order to position Hamas as leader of the national struggle and a worthy alternative to Fatah. The move is likewise presumably designed to divert the frustration of Gaza’s citizens with Hamas to the national struggle against Israel. The hope is that a move on such a large scale will push Israel into a corner and confront it with an international political-cognitive challenge hard to contend with, given the size of the threat and the fact that it involves unarmed citizens protesting their predicament against armed troops, who embody the cause for all their woes. This is the cognitive message that Hamas seeks to relay to the world. In addition, Hamas hopes the move might embarrass the Israeli leadership both at home and in the international arena, and generate a change in world public opinion that will translate into an international effort to end the economic-infrastructure disaster in Gaza.

The statements disseminated by Hamas as part of its preparations for the event seek to link UN Resolution 194 of December 1948 (which they interpret as endowing international legitimacy to the Palestinian right of return) to the symbols of the refugee narrative (such as the key to a house abandoned by its Palestinian owners, or those expelled during the 1948 War) and to the national Palestinian ethos of Greater Palestine. It also appears that the march’s organizers intend to draw a parallel between the Nakba and the Holocaust, by dressing the participants in striped prisoner uniforms.

The organizers, who also work on the social networks, aim to mobilize some 100,000 participants for the march. This figure seems highly unrealistic, although with continuing efforts, the participants could well number many thousands. The organizers have taken pains to define the march as non-violent, seeking to solicit international sympathy and

support for the Palestinian cause. Such events, however, could easily get out of hand and escalate into violence. Indeed, for the organizers, deterioration to violence could serve the message they seek to drive home, since it could prompt Israel to retaliate. This would discredit Israel and help augment the desired impression in the international arena as well as in the Palestinian domestic arena.

Although the entire move is cognitive in essence, it confronts Israel with a challenge that involves a security-physical threat in the form of an attempt to cross the Israeli border. At the same, Israeli retaliation would cast Israel in a bad light vis-à-vis the various target audiences. To cope with these challenges, Israel must respond on several planes.

Israel cannot permit damage to its security infrastructure or attempts by the demonstrators to cross the barrier. If this occurs, IDF will use force. Past experience has shown that it will use riot dispersal means, though in extreme cases sniper fire might be employed aimed at hitting the lower half of the body of demonstrators endangering IDF troops. Such pictures are just what the organizers are after.

In a cognitive-based battle, Israel must take into consideration four target audiences; the Hamas leadership; the Gaza Strip population; the international arena; and the Israeli public. The cognitive counter-effort must be formulated around three principal messages: first – the Hamas leadership has failed in its management of the Gaza Strip, and has failed in its responsibility toward its citizens, preventing them from receiving the aid they need so badly to alleviate their humanitarian predicament. It attempts to absolve itself of any responsibility and channel the frustration to provoked friction with Israeli troops along the border, making cynical use of the civilian population and endangering it, as it did in previous wars when it used them as human shields. The second message: Israel will defend its borders and its sovereignty and prevent Palestinian civilians from damaging the border fence or crossing into Israel, in accordance with international law. Finally, Israel calls on the Hamas leadership and the international community to avoid endangering the lives of the Palestinian population unnecessarily, warns the Hamas leadership of the price it may have to pay for its direct responsibility for clashes that could develop, and warns Gaza's citizens of the unnecessary risk to human life in the service of Hamas's interests.

These efforts should be put into effect before, during, and after the event. The effort should be conducted vis-à-vis all the target audiences in a proactive manner, in all available channels, covertly and overtly, directly and indirectly. The messages should be conveyed to the international community on every possible platform, in coordination with the United States. In tandem, Israel needs to convey direct messages to Gaza's population. This could be done by means of leaflets, social networks, and the disruption

of radio and television broadcasts that aim to mobilize the population for the planned protest march. In addition, and depending on the likelihood of the event's implementation, Israel would do well to work with Egypt, Qatar, and any other regional element that has working relations with Hamas and wields influence over it, in order to forewarn it of the planned provocation.

Part of the Israeli effort should be reflected in immediate action to alleviate the hardship in the Gaza Strip: increasing the supply of water and electricity and significantly increasing the supply of medicines to hospitals, even if contrary to the PA's preference – if the latter elects to continue to impose sanctions on the Gaza Strip and refuses to pay for fuel, electricity, water, and medicines. In this case, Israel should prefer the welfare of Gaza's residents over the interest of the PA in its struggle against Hamas, and even subtract the costs of aid from tax money that Israel collects for the PA.

Israel must foil this Palestinian effort to organize another form of campaign against it. The goal is to disrupt Hamas's planned protest march before it starts, significantly limit its scope if it does occur, and show determination regarding the intention and ability to obstruct it if it takes place. Success of the protest, even if partial, with deterioration to violence, Palestinian casualties on a relatively large scale, and international sentiment translated into pressure on Israel, could trigger additional similar events, both in Gaza and the West Bank.

Hamas's attempt to draw a parallel between the reality in Gaza and the Holocaust by the march on the Gaza border necessitates a very strong response by Israel, mobilizing the international community to step up the pressure on the Hamas leadership. It is also necessary to prepare for an eventuality of a protracted campaign, with potential for escalation that is liable to develop on the border with Gaza. Should the march go ahead as planned, it should be disrupted without the use of arms, and with adequate forces and riot control means to prevent Gazan citizens from reaching the border fence and damaging it. In the event of a mass procession, the clear aim is to prevent damage to the border fence, more than obstructing the march itself. Moreover, Israel should take steps on the diplomatic, economic, and military levels to prepare the ground for the cognitive campaign in the respective target audiences, should a conflict ensue.