

INSS Insight No. 1040, April 11, 2018

From the First Intifada to the "March of Return"

Yohanan Tzoreff

The "March of Return" events have brought out the masses. It seems that since the first intifada the Palestinian arena has not witnessed such widespread mass participation as evident in the recent protests along the Gaza Strip border - on Land Day, Friday, March 30, 2018, and the Friday that followed. As the organizers see it, this is the start of a series of moves, intended to peak on May 15, 2018. The higher number of fatalities than generally known in mass events of recent years and the large number of wounded have aroused in the Palestinians the desire for revenge and increased the motivation to continue the demonstrations. On the other hand, the number of dead and wounded has also deterred many from continuing the activity along the border fence.

A new chapter appears to have opened in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, in which the Palestinian public is asked to decide which of the two paths proposed by the respective leaderships – in Ramallah and in Gaza – should be adopted. In the background are the echoes of failure of both paths – the path of negotiation and security coordination led by the Palestinian Authority, and the path of armed opposition led by Hamas, whose legitimacy was strongly undermined after Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014. This is the peak of a process that began with the first intifada that erupted in late 1987. It quickly emerged at that time that the instigators intended to exploit their wide international support to change the means of struggle and move from violence to talks, from living in Israel's place to living alongside it – a development that accelerated the announcement of the formation of Hamas, which saw the direction taken by the instigators of the intifada, Fatah, and the Palestinian national movement as a disaster that would lead to the loss of any chance for the refugees to return to their homes and rehabilitate the Palestinian people from the misery inflicted by the Nakba. A few days after the Palestinian National Council declared Palestinian Independence (November 15, 1988) a poster from the United National Command patronizingly called on Hamas to accept the announcement, to desist from dividing the Palestinian people, and to merge all loyal forces in the melting pot of the uprising.

That was the start of a struggle that gradually evolved into a fight between two factions, each representing its own world view with solid beliefs and foundations. So far, the Palestinian national movement, headed by Fatah, has enjoyed exclusivity. Its national

concept granted a sense of home to all who saw themselves as part of the Palestinian people. The movement believed in Arabism, on condition that the Palestinian identity would be established and gain sovereign expression. Hamas, on the other hand, talks in religious nationalist terms, does not see Palestinian sovereignty as a sacred matter, and claims that there is no contradiction between Palestinian identity and Muslim identity – they are two complementary components that do not affect particular primal identity. Hamas thereby placed a heavy challenge before the Palestinian national movement, undermined its ethical values, and attracted many followers. The fear of losing Palestine in the religious and conservative camp aroused by the 1988 declaration of independence found refuge in the political home offered by Hamas.

Today, 30 years later, two exhausted movements are facing each other, as the general public looks at them askance, disappointed by the loss of direction and the absence of a leadership that can lead by consensus to a solution that will end their long suffering. Fatah under Abu Mazen has preference, as the representative body that has gained wide international recognition, controls nearly all the resources of the Palestinian people, and is the address for all aid and contributions from countries committed to international treaties, or those who see themselves as aligned with this cause. Nevertheless, it suffers from steady erosion of its status among the public, which sees its corruption, its failed continued rule, and its inability to realize its political aims: these sentiments have been expressed repeatedly in numerous surveys taken in the Palestinian Authority. Hamas on the other hand for many years rode the wave of "radical rejection." Its intransigence and unwillingness to speak in terms of compromise, and its numerous attacks on Israel or against Israelis have given it heroic status, and often embarrassed its rival Fatah. However, since its 2007 takeover of the Gaza Strip Hamas has gradually lost public support, in years that exposed the gap between words and deeds, and between adherence to armed opposition and responsible governance, particularly after three broad military operations in which it came into direct conflict with the IDF and narrowly escaped. In Operation Protective Edge, Hamas was confronted with public criticism of its *raison d'être*, i.e., the "armed opposition." Since then, there a clear question mark has hovered over this alternative, and Hamas must proceed cautiously.

The entry of Donald Trump into the White House, his adoption of the Israeli position on the conflict – as defined by Abu Mazen in particular and the Palestinians in general; his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (December 6, 2017); and his intention to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem ended the status of the United States as an "honest broker" and removed any attempt to promote US-led negotiations from the Palestinian agenda. This is the most severe dead end for the Palestinian issue since the start of US-mediated negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. On the other hand, it is helping to unite the two factions of the Palestinian people.

Against this background, the events at the border fence have provided an element of unity, transcending the blatant competition between the two camps. Abu Mazen would probably like to ask the Security Council to discuss the escalation that led to 29 Palestinian deaths, irrespective of Hamas involvement. He was the one who decided to reject the imposition of sanctions on Gaza that he had recently announced in the course of severe criticism of Hamas and the assassination attempts against Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and Head of Intelligence Majid Faraj. The return of the Palestinian issue to the focus of the international agenda also serves his policy.

In effect, the "March of Return" events at the Gaza border confirmed what was already known from the first intifada. Then it was the Strip that instigated the uprising, bringing old men, women, and children into the streets and giving real expression to the force of the masses. The Strip was also the first, in the second year of the popular uprising, to fight against its negative aspects and encourage its dissolution. Now, the severe distress in Gaza, together with widespread feelings of inferiority and discrimination, could ignite a fire when the time is right and there are immediate grounds. Today's reality is more severe than in the past, and the split between the factions has weakened the Palestinians and prevented any effective action. However, President Trump's announcements regarding Jerusalem and the relocation of the US Embassy have provided a common denominator to unite the sources of Palestinian power – Hamas supporters, Abu Mazen and their respective opponents alike.

At the same time, it is doubtful whether the crowds can deliver the same achievements they furnished in the first intifada. This is due to public suspicions regarding the intentions of both camps, the absence of international and Arab support so far, and the deterrent element of Israel's response. On the other hand, the "March of Return" events on two successive Fridays show that the element of mass participation has not lost its power. Even the fact that the rise in the scope of attacks and friction with Israel since Trump's "Jerusalem announcement" has continued longer than any trend since the conflict of 2014, shows that there is energy to sustain further action of this kind.

The main test is for Hamas, as the ruler of the Strip. Will it succeed by means of the "March of Return," which it is leading but did not initiate, to extend the common denominator between the rival Palestinian camps, to intensify the motivation to participate and maintain the tension and escalation along the border, until the planned climax on May 15, or will it be satisfied with the attempt to place the blame for the failure of internal Palestinian reconciliation and the weakening internal reality on the Palestinian Authority leadership in Ramallah? Time will tell.

Israel, while seeking to contain the border events and prevent further escalation, and while supporting Abu Mazen's call for "one law, one authority, and one gun" in the Palestinian arena, must deal with the results of the growing humanitarian plight in the Gaza Strip, which is partly due to sanctions imposed by the Palestinian Authority on Hamas. Thus, Israel must try to recruit support designed to ease the population's distress.