The Gaza March of Return: What You Need to Know

On Friday, March 30, Hamas launched its six-week-long “March of Return” campaign, which called on Gazans to gather near the border with Israel and to march on the border. Organizers claim the march is intended to highlight the plight of Gaza, the broader Palestinian situation, and the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees.

The largest and deadliest confrontation took place on May 14, the day of the US Embassy dedication in Jerusalem. An estimated 50,000 Palestinians protested on the Gaza border and by the end of the day at least 60 Gazans were dead and thousands wounded. Some engaged in violent activities, including attempted infiltrations into Israel and the use of various weapons against IDF soldiers and outposts. IDF soldiers responded with riot dispersing methods, and, in some cases, live fire.

Following the tensions along the border in Mid-May, Hamas and Islamic Jihad fired scores of mortars and rockets from Gaza into southern Israel. On May 28, over a hundred such weapons were fired into Israel. One hit a kindergarten in the early morning hours. Another damaged a power line which provides electricity to Gaza. On May 30 both Hamas and Israel acknowledged an informal ceasefire had been reached.

Friday Demonstrations:
On the first day of demonstrations, on Friday, March 30, an estimated 30,000 Gazans joined the March. While there were many who protested peacefully, there were large groups of protestors who approached the border fence intending to damage or break through the demarcation line. These violent groups came to the protest with Molotov cocktails, explosives and burning tires, and some carried guns.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reacted to this activity close to the border, utilizing tear gas, rubber bullets and live fire, killing sixteen and injuring between 700-1000, primarily by tear gas and other riot dispersing weapons. The IDF says that of those killed, at least 11 were identified (some by the IDF, some by Hamas and Islamic Jihad themselves) as active members of Hamas and other terrorist groups and they assert that the IDF fired only on those who were attempting to take action against the border fence or Israeli soldiers.

The subsequent demonstrations through April drew smaller crowds, and organizers called in advance of the various weekly events for the burning of tires, flags, a “women’s march” and other acts. At some demonstrations, protestors sent flaming kites into the air with the intent of flying into Israel and setting land aflame. At each event scores of protesters attempted to reach the border fence, some throwing explosives and rocks. As in the first demonstration, the IDF responded including with live fire, and by early May the total number of Palestinians killed reached 45, with thousands injured.

Israeli officials have asserted throughout this crisis that the IDF’s actions are defensive in nature, and are being taken to protect Israeli communities on the other side of the barrier from those seeking to breach it.

Hamas leaders have pledged to continue these demonstrations through the month of Ramadan.

The May 14 Protest:
The week of May 13 had long been expected to be a tense period for Israelis and Palestinians along with the wider region given a confluence of anniversaries and events. These include the May 14 opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem, the 70th anniversary of the Palestinian commemoration of what they call “the Nakba” (meaning “catastrophe”) of Israel’s creation on May 15, and the start of Ramadan.

On Monday, May 14, these anniversaries and events came together with a celebration in Jerusalem for the Embassy opening, but also with violence and significant casualties in Gaza. Televised news featured a “split screen” with the embassy festivities on one side, and, discordantly, the chaotic scenes from Gaza on the other side.

Hamas heavily mobilized the Gaza population, shutting down schools and workplaces and bussing people to the demonstration points. Hamas’s leader in Gaza Yahya Sinwar had urged demonstrators in recent weeks to “tear down the wall and tear out their [Israeli’s] hearts.” Sever days before May 14, he suggested that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians could breach Israel’s security barrier.

In anticipation of the demonstrations, Israel had warned Gazans via social media and in leaflets dropped by drones, that efforts to breach the border would be dealt with immediately, and that demonstrators should not attempt to march on the barrier. This same message was relayed throughout the day on May 14 via loudspeaker.

As in past demonstrations, some protestors did so in a non-violent manner, while others were armed with weapons or explosives with the intent of storming the border fence and inflicting harm to Israelis. According to the IDF, Hamas squads – situated in 2 different locations – were discovered attempting to place explosive charges on the fence to enable mass infiltration into Israel. In addition, throughout the day at least ten explosive devices were thrown or planted along the border area, and 25 kites carrying firebombs were sent over the fence, causing 23 fires on Israeli farmland.
There are reports that even as some Palestinians approaching the border were killed and injured, Hamas loudspeakers at a gathering point for the protests were misleadingly encouraging demonstrators to burst through the fence, claiming falsely that Israeli soldiers had abandoned their positions.

A senior Hamas official has since claimed that of at least 60 people killed at the border, 50 were members of Hamas, calling it “an official figure”. Hamas had previously acknowledged that 10 of the 60 fatalities on May 14 were members of its internal ministry security forces. Another terrorist group, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, has claimed three of the fatalities that day as members of its armed wing, including a minor.

The significant number of casualties raised questions regarding the IDF’s use of force, and specifically its use of live fire. The IDF said that the expressed intent to breach the border threatened Israeli civilians and communities in southern Israel (with fears of potentially thousands of Gazans crossing the barrier, some threatening to commit violence against Israelis, kidnap Israelis and Israeli soldiers). The IDF maintains that it responded in the only way it could to what it called rioters approaching the barrier. According to the IDF, its usual methods of crowd dispersal – tear gas and rubber bullets – were not effective in this situation, and they maintain they only used live fire when there were direct efforts to breach the fence, or when protestors were threatening the barrier and IDF soldiers with explosives and weapons. There have been some reports and video clips of Gazans being shot while not visibly engaged in efforts to breach the fence or violence towards Israel.

**International Reaction:**

The IDF’s use of force and use of live ammunition has engendered criticism by the UN, EU and other international leaders, as well as human rights groups since the first protest on March 30. There has also been condemnation of Hamas’ using civilians and children as a cover for the violent actions of their operatives. The
significant death toll and injury on May 14 led to numerous diplomatic expressions of condemnation of Israel and calls for investigations into “excessive use of force” and lack of “proportionality.” Turkey and South Africa recalled their ambassadors to Israel. In a series of public statements, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan harshly criticized Israel and compared it to Nazi Germany. At a discussion on the violence at the United Nations Security Council, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley pushed back on the criticism of Israel, saying, “No country in this chamber would act with more restraint than Israel has. In fact, the records of several countries here today suggest they would be much less restrained.” On May 18, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution condemning “the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by the Israeli occupying forces against Palestinian civilians” and establishing an investigation into the events. The resolution did not condemn Hamas nor address the use of violence to attack the border as part of the demonstrations.

**What is Hamas’ goal with the March of Return?**

Through the mobilization of the March of Return, Hamas is apparently aiming to affirm its relevancy as the leader of the Palestinians and to divert attention from the deep dissatisfaction among the people of Gaza with Hamas’ management of the Gaza Strip.

According to analysts, the march has two distinct strategies. The first, through the outwardly peaceful, civilian elements of the demonstration, is to raise international awareness of the plight of Gazans and Palestinians. The second, through the militants who are attempting to approach and attack the border line, is to use the demonstrators as human shields for the group’s terrorist ambitions, as well as to provoke a strong Israeli response that will garner headlines and support for their efforts.

The people of Gaza, who since 2007 have been governed by Hamas, have long suffered from poverty, lack of social services, and the breakdown of infrastructure
supplying electricity, water and managing sewage. This situation has grown worse with the combination of Hamas’ social and religious repression and mismanagement, Israel’s security blockade, the effective blockade by Egypt, and recent moves by the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority which, in an intensification of its rivalry with Hamas, has limited the flow of funds and payments to Gaza.

Hamas has been designated by both the United States and the European Union as a terrorist organization. Hamas calls for the eradication of the State of Israel and is avowedly opposed to peace negotiations.

Hamas has a long record of diverting attention from domestic problems to the conflict with Israel. This was a driving force of the Israel-Hamas conflicts in 2008, 2012 and 2014. Hamas’ usual mode of attack – rocket fire and infiltration into Israel through tunnels – has been stymied by Israeli defensive measures.

Related:

ADL Statement on Violence at the Israel-Gaza Border

For additional insights into this dynamic situation, you may wish to read the following perspectives:

The Real Dispute Driving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A cycle of denial has defined the shared existence of neighboring peoples for seven decades by Yossi Klein Halevi (The Atlantic)

Samson the Weakling by Michael Koplow (Israel Policy Forum)

13 Inconvenient Truths About What Has Been Happening in Gaza by Yair Rosenberg (Tablet)
Abandoning the split screen, Israeli TV tunes out Gaza to bask in Trump's love by Raul Wootlif (Times of Israel)

Hamas incites violence to hide its own shortcomings by Amos Yadlin (YNet)