

## The Great March of Return and the Palestinian Nakba

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There are moments that play a part in defining the identity, and to a certain extent the future, of a state. For Palestinians, that moment was the Nakba (Catastrophe) that took place on the 15th of May in 1948, just one day after the state of Israel was declared. The atrocities committed by Zionist militias following that event, the most well-known of which was the Deir Yassin massacre, soon turned into a history of displacement. As a result, around 700,000 Palestinian were expelled from their homes and forced to flee to neighbouring countries<sup>1</sup>. Today, around seven million of their descendants live in diaspora<sup>2</sup>, confined in refugee camps mainly in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Some fled to different Arab countries like Egypt and Iraq, while others managed to settle in other parts of the world. Seventy years later, and despite the UN resolutions' affirmation of the plea of return as a fundamental right for refugees, Palestinians have been denied this right.

Palestinian refugees continue to be displaced throughout the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, continuous military attacks like the three recent ones on Gaza Strip (2008, 2012, and 2014) as well as the horrendous situation in Syria. After seventy years, Palestinian refugees remain cramped in overcrowded camps; suffering poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural decay<sup>3</sup>. In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees are denied basic civil rights such as property ownership, access to government services, and the right to work in over 30 professions. In Syria, Palestinians can neither vote nor hold high political offices<sup>4</sup>.

Palestinian refugees have thus been compelled to call for their inalienable rights. On the 15th of May in 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring, Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and along the borders between Lebanon and Israel (Maroun al-Ras) as well as Syria and Israel (Golan Heights,) set out peaceful protests to commemorate the Nakba and demand the right of return<sup>5</sup>. Like the other demonstrations that took place in multiple countries of the MENA region (namely Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya), Palestinians took to the streets urging for their rights. After 63 years from the Nakba, thousands of people,



including women and men, young and old, secular and religious, all united together, heading towards the borders and calling for the right of return as affirmed in the UN resolution 194 para 11<sup>6</sup>. These non-violent demonstrations were met with brutal Israeli forces that killed ten persons near the Syrian border, another ten near the Lebanese border, and one person in Gaza. A total of 172 were injured (60 injured in Gaza, and 112 in Lebanon)<sup>7</sup>.

Six years after these protests, on the 70th commemoration of the Nakba, Palestinians in the

besieged Gaza Strip called to revive the peaceful demonstrations. Ahmed Abu Artema, a writer from Gaza, gave rise to the idea while walking one evening with his friends in the East of Gaza near the Israeli separation fence<sup>8</sup>. Looking upwards, Abu Artema was moved by the sight of birds flying freely above the border with no regard to the physical barriers or political constraints. These thoughts that he expressed on his Facebook page sparked many responses and interactions, and soon the concept for mass non-violent refugee protests began to develop among a group of independent individuals with Ahmed Abu Artema, aimed at returning refugees to their homes across the borders. Those who embraced the idea began harnessing support from the civil society and reached out to political factions. They needed to have unity, and participation from the entire community.

“ A couple of weeks later [following Trump’s declaration on announcing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel] I wrote another thought, inspired once again from the reality we live in: what if 100,000 Palestinians protested peacefully near the border fence to demand life and nothing more? Are people not allowed to surpass their prison walls when they are imprisoned unfairly? What would happen if this scenario came to life? Will the occupation kill us? In reality it is already killing us slowly by preventing treatment referrals<sup>9</sup>, electricity and closing the crossings. So what will we lose if we decided to make our voice heard by the rest of the world? Writing this post received a high level of engagement, which I believe was because it came at a time when everyone is asking for a step to overcome this reality<sup>10</sup>. ”

While the previous protests of 2011 were inspired by the Arab Spring, the current protests were instigated from 50 years of occupation, 11 years of siege and internal political division, not to mention the three military attacks (2008, 2012, and 2014) that led to the deterioration of the economic and social situation in Gaza. According to a UN report, the Gaza Strip would be uninhabitable by 2020 due to the high population density and lack of infrastructure or basic such as education and health<sup>11</sup>. Around 70% of Gaza’s population are refugees living in overcrowded camps with poor infrastructure and services<sup>12</sup>. The unemployment rate in Gaza Strip is estimated at 43%, which is one of the highest in the world, and the poverty rate is 39%<sup>13</sup>.

In the face of this, the Trump administration introduced the decision to recognize Jerusalem as

Israel’s capital and to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to there, which is a massive departure from international consensus. It undermines not only future negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, but also the credibility of the United States as a neutral mediator. All of these factors combined, in addition to the decision to reduce US support to UNRWA<sup>14</sup> and the fear of what has become known as the deal of the century, have triggered the sense of urgency among people to take action at a larger scale. After all, people in Gaza regard those decisions as a direct threat to the Palestinian refugees’ right of return, which is a cornerstone in peace talks in the past and for the future.

All of those developments meant that action was long due, but it was also clear that resorting to violence would be fruitless. The aftermath of the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza resulted in severe destruction to the infrastructure and economy, and led to great losses of human lives while there has been no accountability for the crimes committed and the ongoing siege<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the imbalance between Israel and Palestine is incomparable, not solely in arms and military power but also in international and regional support since there has been rapprochement between Israel and the Arab states against Iran. Therefore, peaceful resistance was deemed by the organisers as the best option to pursue.



Accordingly, the organisers of the Great March of Return emphasised its peaceful nature. They resolved to include tents along the borders, about 1km away from the Israeli fence. The 30th of March, marked by Palestinians as Land Day<sup>16</sup>, was chosen as the first day of the protests, and tents were set across the Gaza Strip along the Israeli fence (in East Rafah; Khan Yunis, Khuza’a; East Bureij; Malaka roundabout; and East Jabalia, Abu Safiya). Cultural and entertainment

activities such as the Dabke folk dance, reading, cooking traditional food, and other arts and sports were conducted. The organisers approached the main factions in Gaza (mainly Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) to facilitate the process and ensure security while ascertaining that no violence would erupt near the fence. Committed to its peaceful objectives and with the intention to garner worldwide support, the organisers established the independent international committee of coordination. A national committee was also formed, which includes the different factions and oversees the organisation in the camps set up in the aforementioned areas. The factions signed and agreed to have the peaceful nature of the march as a prerequisite for participation, and everyone agreed that only Palestinian flags would be held at the camps to signify Palestinian unity.

Indeed, this was the case. The organisers succeeded to bring civil society organisations, community members, and all political factions including Fatah to join this movement. The Great March of Return was no longer restricted to its original organisers but encompassed the Palestinian society at large. After the 30th of March, several individuals and groups began to take the lead by going ahead and starting their own initiatives and activities. Civil society organisations also implemented activities in the camps without being controlled by a centralised decision-making body.

“ *We had a particular vision, which when interacted with the reality changed. Today, the idea is more popular and not controlled by particular individuals or any centralized direction that would hinder spontaneous popular movements. Our role is to confirm and ensure the peaceful nature of March of Return (MoR) and not to divert away from its goal. Today, people themselves are leading the way, which is good. They plan for cultural events, sports and folklore*<sup>17</sup>. ”

Factions, particularly Hamas, have tried to use the success of the march to credit themselves through media outlets, which resulted in attributing the protests to Hamas. But the fact is that Hamas’s involvement in the march was much like the other members of society; it did not lead it nor did it come up with its concept. It is hoped that such demonstrations would convince Hamas to pursue more peaceful tactics rather than solely rely on using armed resistance. Organisers actually hope that all Palestinians would embrace this

form of resistance as a long-term strategy.

“ *MoR was started by a group of youth, then CSO and factions. Now the idea is collective of all the Palestinian society. Hamas is part of the society that we live in so they also participate. MoR includes the participation of everyone including Fatah, Hamas and PFLP. The original idea, planning and principles were made independently. So if Hamas is to participate according to these principles, it cannot be prevented. This is also an opportunity to enhance peaceful resistance in Hamas and bring forth a new culture wherein it participates as part of the community*<sup>18</sup>. ”

Despite the measures taken to establish a completely peaceful march, some protesters came close to the separation fence, threw rocks, and burned tiers. Nevertheless, these acts did not pose an imminent threat to the Israelis<sup>19</sup>, and there were no reported injuries from the Israeli side. With that being said, protestors, including the unarmed and peaceful individuals, were met with brutal force and live ammunition, which is a breach of IHL<sup>20</sup>. The UN Security General and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have called for an independent investigation on that use of excessive force, and stressed on the demonstrators’ right to protest their conditions and call for their rights<sup>21</sup>.

Organisers resolved to stretch the period of the protests toward the 15th of May (Nakba day) in order to gather further support, with the hope to pressure Trump to reconsider his decisions. Initially set to take place between the 30th of March 15th of May, 2018, with the main protests happening on each Friday during this period, the march is not expected to end after the 15th of May. As stated earlier, there is aspiration that the MoR would become a main peaceful method employed by Palestinians in calling for their rights. The end for this movement will therefore not be the date (15th of May) but rather when the rights that the protestors are calling for have been attained.

“ *The gradual plans from the 30th of March to the 15th of May, which is not the deadline, is to prepare and build up the support of the international community. 15th of May was chosen as it coincides with Trump’s date of moving the embassy and is also the 70th anniversary of the Nakba, to show the world we are against his decisions and gather support to stop it. We will continue to mobilise for the 15th and beyond*<sup>22</sup>. ”

Preparations for the mass protests started early in the month to protest the 14th of May (date of moving the US embassy) and the 15th of May (Nakba day). On the 14th, people set out to the camps and attempted to cross the fence, which resulted in the killing of 62 people of which are six children, and around 2270 were injured<sup>23</sup>. The demonstrations on the 15th were not as large as the prior day due to the state of mourning and confusion. The national committee called to extend the march until the 5th of June, which marks the Naksa (Six-Day War) day, when the rest of the Palestinian territory (East Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza Strip) was occupied. However, it is unlikely that these demonstrations will be as intense as the previous ones. People will most probably carry out prayers and Ramadan-related activities such as breaking their fast near the borders.

So far, the high level of engagement in the protests conveys the success of the march in mobilising the people as well as reasserting the importance of resolving the Palestinian struggle and right of return, which had been dismissed amidst the regional, as well as local, turmoil and division. The march also helped commemorate the Palestinian Nakba worldwide by drawing media attention. However, there has been an absence of a strong and united leadership that could set forth genuine outcomes. In the aftermath of the 14th of May, division between the factions and the organisers increased and became clearer, and people became unsure of what is next. This, in consequence, questions the capacity of the march to make a significant breakthrough and achieve its set-goals.

The Great March of Return is reminiscent of the Nakba wherein innocent people attempting to return to their original towns and villages were brutally killed, and of the ways in which Israeli policies have fragmented Palestinian society through restrictions of movement via permit systems, the construction of checkpoints and the separation wall, as well the military laws applied in the West Bank, not to mention the continuing siege on Gaza Strip, despite Israeli disengagement in 2005. These harsh policies and barriers have largely split up Palestinians who, if they continue to be denied from visiting their towns and families, will have all connection with their original homes erased, which will in turn reduce the sense of solidarity and belonging to one shared identity. This to an extent was apparent in the lack of one joint solidarity act among Palestinians: In the Gaza Strip, people predominantly demonstrated for their right



of return against the economic hardship suffered as a result of 11 years of siege, whereas in Jerusalem the protests were primarily against the move of the embassy. Meanwhile in different parts of West Bank the main motive was to commemorate the Nakba. It is apparent, under all those circumstances that the Palestinian Nakba is not merely about the 15th of May in 1948. It is rather an ongoing occurrence injected in the Palestinian daily life as a result of Israelis policies that seeks to separate Palestinians from their land and collective identity, both in the territories as well as in diaspora, and it will not cease until a just political solution is reached. This was well-articulated in Saeb Erekat's statement:

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*We are not marking 70 years since the Nakba, but rather we mark 70 years of Nakba. Rather than a particular moment, the Nakba has been an ongoing process of systematically denying individual Palestinians the right to live on their land, and the Palestinian people the right to national and political identity<sup>24</sup>.*

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## NOTES

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