



## Protest Demonstrations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip because of Economic Distress

March 17, 2019

During the past few days the economic distress in the Gaza Strip has led to **protest demonstrations against Hamas**. The demonstrators protest **the high cost of living, unemployment and the taxes imposed by Hamas, with the slogan is "We want to live."** The demonstrations began a few days ago in the southern Gaza Strip but quickly spread throughout the Gaza Strip, including to Gaza City. So far it is unclear if the demonstrations were spontaneous or organized. **So far Hamas' security forces have suppressed the demonstrations using extreme violence:** operatives of the security forces, both in uniform and civilian dress, attacked the demonstrators, beat them and fired shots into the air to disperse the demonstrations. In addition, they also detained many demonstrators and media personnel. **Hamas blames the Palestinian Authority (PA) for the difficult economic situation in the Gaza Strip** and organized demonstrations against Mahmoud Abbas and the sanctions he imposed on the Gaza Strip.



Demonstrations in Deir al-Balah on March 15, 2019 ((Facebook page of journalist Usama al-Kahlut, who was detained by Hamas' security forces, March 15, 2019).

► **Hamas, disturbed by the events, is trying to minimize their scope and forbids the reporting of them.** So far, **Hamas is apparently in control of the events and has succeeded in suppressing the demonstrations.** The demonstrations are not directed against Hamas but rather against "groups in the administration." Criticism is directed at the high cost of living and percentage of unemployment, and the demonstrators ask to "live with respect." However, **because of the extreme economic difficulties and the general**

**insecurity, the events are liable to grow in scope and spin out of control.** In such a scenario  **Hamas may try to channel public anger against Israel and raise the level of violence it allows during the "return marches."**

### **The protest demonstrations**

According to the Gazan media, **behind the demonstrations is a group of young people who have organized themselves under the slogan, "We want to live."** So far the group preserves secrecy and has not made information public about itself. It issues reports about the locations and times of the demonstrations in various sites in the Gaza Strip, and calls on Palestinians to "take to the streets to demand a life of respect and freedom" (Palestinian TV, March 15, 2019). **So far the identity of the group is unknown and it is unclear if a large, established body (such as the PA or Fatah) is behind it.**

► **The following were events at some of the demonstrations:**

- ◆ **The Jabalia refugee camp (northern Gaza Strip):** On March 11, 2019, the al-Mezan Center for Human Rights issued an announcement, stating that on March 10, 2019, the security forces of Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip had dispersed a meeting of an **initiative called "The high cost of living must fall."** The meeting was held in the home of Jihad al-Arabeid in the Jabalia refugee camp. The Hamas security forces detained eight people who had come to the meeting (al-Mezan Center for Human Rights website, March 11, 2019).
- ◆ **The Jabalia refugee camp (northern Gaza Strip):** On the afternoon of March 14, 2019, Palestinians demonstrated in one of the town squares in the refugee camp (Palinfo Twitter account, March 14, 2019). Operatives of the Hamas security forces attacked the demonstrators. **Eye witnesses reported that they brutally beat them and opened fire to disperse the demonstration.** One of the demonstrators was wounded. They also detained a number of demonstrators and set up military roadblocks and barricades for vehicles (Wafa, March 14, 2019). On March 16, 2019, according to reports **a Palestinian was injured when he tried to set himself on fire in the al-Fallujah area of the Jabalia refugee camp because of his dire financial straits** (al-Quds, March 16, 2019).



**Demonstrations in Jabalia on March 14, 2019 (Bawabat al-Hadaf Twitter account, March 14, 2019).**

- ◆ **Deir al-Balah:** A demonstration was held in Deir al-Balah to protest the cost of living and the rise in taxes. The security forces in the Gaza Strip fired shots into the air to disperse the demonstration (Shabakat Quds Twitter account, March 15, 2019). Eye witnesses reported that **the security forces brought reinforcements to the area to suppress the demonstration. They destroyed houses and hurt residents** (Wafa, March 15, 2019). According to reports, more than 20 policemen were injured in the clashes in Deir al-Balah when residents attacked them (Paldf, March 14, 2019).



**Demonstrations in Deir al-Balah (Facebook page of journalist Usama al-Kahlut, who was detained by Hamas' security forces, March 14, 2019).**



A demonstrator injured during the suppression of the demonstrations (Facebook page of journalist Usama al-Kahlut, who was detained by Hamas' security forces, March 14, 2019).



**Demonstrations in Rafah on March 15, 2019**  
(msdrnews Facebook page, March 15, 2019).

- ◆ **Khan Yunis (central Gaza Strip):** Palestinians set fire to tires during a demonstration to protest their harsh living conditions (Shabakat Quds Twitter account, March 15, 2019). The security forces suppressed the demonstration. According to reports, operatives of the security forces arrived at the location armed with clubs and tasers. They fired shots into the air and injured a number of demonstrators (Wafa, March 15, 2019).

## Hamas' response to the demonstrations

Hamas, which initially tried to minimize the scope of the events, **responded aggressively and used great violence against the demonstrators. Operatives of its security forces both in uniform and civilian dress brutally attacked the demonstrators, beat them and fired shots into the air to disperse the demonstrations.** They also detained many demonstrators (Palestinian TV, March 15, 2019). A number of schools and commercial centers went on strike to protest the suppression of the demonstrations (Amad, March 15, 2018).



**Security force operatives deploy to disperse demonstrations in Deir al-Balah (Facebook page of journalist Muhammad Uthman, March 14, 2019).**



**The Hamas security forces detain Fatah activists in the Gaza Strip (official Fatah Facebook page, March 17, 2019).**

### **Hamas blames the Palestinian Authority (PA)**

► In public statements senior Hamas figures tried to calm the situation, justify the violent reactions of its security forces, and **blamed the PA for responsibility for the difficult economic situation in the Gaza Strip. Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem** said that the PA continued its policy of "starving" the residents of the Gaza Strip alongside the "siege" imposed by Israel (Hazem Qassem's Twitter account, March 15, 2019).

► **In an attempt to deflect attention, Hamas organized demonstrations of its own to protest the PA**, Mahmoud Abbas and the sanctions imposed by the PA on the Gaza Strip. Hamas used loudspeakers to call on the Palestinian public to take to the streets to demonstrate (Palestinian TV, March 16, 2019). The demonstrations were held in Gaza City, the

Jabalia refugee camp, Nuseirat (central Gaza Strip) and Rafah. Demonstrators waved signs and called on Mahmoud Abbas to resign (Palinfo Twitter account, March 16, 2019).



**Demonstrations organized by Hamas against Mahmoud Abbas. Right: Demonstration in Nuseirat (central Gaza Strip). The banner reads, "Resign, resign [Mahmoud] Abbas" (Palinfo Twitter account, March 16, 2019). Left: Demonstration in Jabalia (Palinfo Twitter account, March 16, 2019).**

## Statements from senior Hamas figures

► The following are statements from senior Hamas figures:

- ◆ **Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum** said that the events in the Gaza Strip had exposed the ugliness of the PA. He said the PA's tactics to strangle the Gaza Strip and exploit its difficulties for the sake of achieving its own objectives, had failed (Dunia al-Watan, March 16, 2019).
- ◆ **Senior Hamas figure Yahya Musa** said every person had the right to demonstrate and express his opinion, and it was the duty of the security forces to protect them. He said Hamas had repeatedly suggested to the national public to form a collective leadership for the Gaza Strip but had been met with refusal (Yahya Musa's Facebook page, March 15, 2019).
- ◆ **Senior Hamas figure Ahmed Yusuf** said he was on the side of the group of young people, who would achieve what they wanted, and therefore those who were responsible for the Gaza Strip had to respond to all requests. He said he had met with a number of young people from the Gaza Strip who had clarified that they were not protesting the "resistance," but that Hamas had to understand that some of its policies related to the taxes imposed on civilians were mistaken (Dunia al-Watan, March 16, 2019).

## Responses from the Palestinian organizations

► **Palestinian organizations and groups in the Gaza Strip denounced Hamas' suppression of the demonstrations** and called on senior figures in the Gaza Strip to take the security forces off the streets, to release all the detainees and to bring to trial all those involved in attacking the demonstrators. They called on Hamas to apologize for the violence it has used and said they supported the young Palestinians (Dunia al-Watan, March 16, 2019).

► **Particularly prominent was the response of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which denounced the attack carried out by the security forces**, calling it a violation of the Palestinians' freedom and their right to demonstrate (Filastin al-Yawm, March 15, 2018). **PIJ spokesman Musab al-Brim** said his organization opposed the suppression of the demonstrations and called for a comprehensive national discussion to be held to resolve the crisis (Dunia al-Watan, March 16, 2019).

► **Senior PA and Fatah figures supported the demonstrators and denounced the suppression of the demonstrations:**

- ◆ **Saeb Erekat, secretary of the PLO's Executive Committee**, strongly criticized the violent attacks carried out by Hamas' security forces against the demonstrators, saying they violated the demonstrators' right to live a life of respect (Saeb Erekat's Twitter account, March 16, 2019).

- ◆ **Hussein al-Sheikh, chairman of the civilian affairs authority in the PA**, said the Palestinian leadership was in contact with a number of "influential countries" to have them intervene urgently and exert pressure on Hamas to have it stop using violent measures against demonstrators (Hussein al-Sheikh's Twitter account, March 15, 2019).

- ◆ **Fatah** expressed support for the demonstrations and calling on international groups to exert pressure on Hamas to make it possible for protests to be held without being met by force. **Fatah spokesman 'Atef Abu Sayif** denounced the attacks of the Hamas security forces on the demonstrators, saying that they were a gross violation of all laws and contradicted national principles. He called on human rights organizations to investigate the violations (Wafa, March 14, 2019).

- ◆ **Fatah spokesman Usama al-Qawasmeh** said Fatah was investing efforts to protect the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and to support the "revolution of the hungry," both economically and in the media (Sawa, March 16, 2019).



Right: The Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip exploits the rise in prices to empty the pockets of the Gazan civilian (Isma'il al-Bazam's Facebook page, March 14, 2019). Left: "Taxes," "No to the [high] cost [of living]" (Isma'il al-Bazam's Facebook page, March 16, 2019)



Cartoons in the PA's al-Hayat al-Jadeeda following the suppression of the protests in the Gaza Strip. Right: The "Gaza Strip:" "I suppressed [the riots]...I was calm and secure...I went to sleep" (Saba'neh Facebook page, March 16, 2019). Left: The Hamas insignia, with the Dome of the Rock exchanged for the face of an operative of Hamas' internal security forces, and the swords exchanged for clubs (Saba'neh Facebook page, March 17, 2019).



The ground under Hamas' feet is burning because of the protests against the high cost of living (official Fatah Facebook page, March 16, 2019).