

Palestine: Killed for Demanding the Right of Return

Thousands of unarmed Palestinians under fire from Israeli troops

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Global Research, May 19, 2011

[Socialist Project](#) 19 May 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

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Thousands of unarmed Palestinian demonstrators came under fire from Israeli troops on May 15 as they marched on Israel's borders from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Gaza as part of a coordinated protest to demand the right to return to homes Palestinians were driven from when Israel was founded in 1948. Israeli forces killed at least a dozen Palestinians and injured several dozens more.

May 15 marks the anniversary of the [Nakba](#), or catastrophe, as Palestinians refer to the expulsion campaign that Israel launched to drive hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land and homes 63 years ago. The day has long been commemorated with protests, but this year is different.



"Surely we will return, Palestine."

Inspired by the "Arab spring" of revolutions and rebellions across Northern Africa and the Middle East, thousands of Palestinians responded to a Facebook call for a May 15 march, taking Israeli troops and politicians by surprise – as well as the organizers themselves.

For the first time since the popular uprisings began shaking the region earlier this year, Israel became the target of the simmering anger shared by millions of Palestinians at their mistreatment over the course of generations.

Palestinians Demand Rights

At the town of Maroun al-Ras on the border between Lebanon and Israel, hundreds of Lebanese protesters and Palestinians from nine refugee camps defied Lebanese army attempts to keep them from approaching the border. When they got to the border fence, they placed Palestinian flags there. After Israeli troops opened fire, killing 10, the protesters began hurling stones.

Along the border between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, thousands of marchers assembled, and hundreds trampled the border fence and crossed over, making their way to the central square of the nearby village of Majdal Shams, where they waved Palestinian flags.

Echoing the spirit of resistance to authoritarian regimes that has been seen across the Arab world, Muhammad Umran, a resident of a refugee camp in Damascus, told a reporter, "We cannot put up with this anymore. We are demanding our right of return...We have no fear." Umran's family is originally from Safed, a city in northern Israel.

Palestinians marching on Israel's border from Gaza were also met with lethal gunfire by Israeli troops, and in the West Bank city of Ramallah, thousands of people gathered in a demonstration called by the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Predictably, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the marches by unarmed, peaceful demonstrators attempting to exercise the internationally recognized right to return as "violent demonstrations" that pose "a challenge to the existence of the state of Israel."

Arab Spring of Resistance

Whether these protests will continue to gather momentum in the coming days is hard to say, but one thing is certain: The Arab spring of resistance has not bypassed the Palestinians. "The Palestinians are not less rebellious than other Arab peoples," said Ali Baraka, a Hamas official in Lebanon.

Already, growing impatience at the ongoing siege of Gaza and the expansion of settlements in the West Bank drove thousands of Palestinians into the streets on March 15 to demand unity between the rival political forces in the Occupied Territories – on the one hand, the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, led by Fatah; and on the other, Hamas, the winner of the last elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, with its base in Gaza.

Then, on May 4, Hamas and Fatah emerged from secret meetings with Egyptian officials to announce that they had brokered an agreement that would lead to a unity government, the coordination of security forces and elections within the year.

The next day, Egypt announced its intention to reopen the Rafah border crossing into Gaza permanently, and Egypt's foreign minister called on the U.S. to recognize a Palestinian state, referring to the PA President Mahmoud Abbas's plan to seek UN recognition of a Palestinian state in September.

Again, Netanyahu was quick to denounce the agreement as "a tremendous blow to peace and a great victory for terrorism." But for millions of Palestinians and Arabs generally, the prospect of unity between the rival Palestinian factions, brokered by Egypt, stands as a beacon of hope.

[In the words of Palestinian journalist Ramzy Baroud:](#)

"Now Egypt is back – not merely in terms of a return to the 'Arab fold' – but as the party that will increasingly define the new Arab reality. The signing of the Hamas-Fatah deal may have come as a surprise in terms of media coverage, but it was really a predictable consequence in a chain of events that signaled the remaking of a region. Now the Middle East is spearheaded by a powerful Arab country, secure enough to reach out to multiple partners – other Arab countries, as well as Iran, Turkey and others..."

"The Israeli vision for the region was to keep it politically divided at any cost. Without such a division, Israel is likely to be on the defensive, and the U.S. will be consumed in crisis management."

What Kind of Unity?

But the issue of unity begs the question: Unity on what basis and for what purpose?

After Hamas won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006 [Ed.: see [The End of a Political Fiction?](#)], Israel and the U.S. declared war on the new government by imposing a murderous siege on Gaza, Hamas' base – and the PA collaborated every step of the way. Fatah's complicity in the war on Hamas came publicly and behind the scenes – with [an attempted coup in 2007](#), [abject silence when Israel waged war](#) on Gaza in December 2008-January 2009 and [support for Israel's attempt to quash](#) the highly critical [Goldstone report](#) after the invasion, to name but a few examples of the PA's craven behavior.

So the question that must be asked is whether the PA, dominated by Fatah, is ready to end its strategic collaboration with Israel, including its coordination with Israeli military forces, in order to negotiate a joint platform to achieve Palestinian liberation – or whether the PA intends to proceed with business as usual in the hopes that surface 'unity' with Hamas will shore up its flagging reputation.

So far, the prospects don't look good. Not only has the PA continued its [harassment of Hamas activists](#) in the West Bank, but it has refused to consider ending its security coordination with Israel – which has declared Fatah's unity partner, Hamas, a terrorist regime.

As Gaza-based journalist Saleh Al-Naami describes:

"Hamed Al-Bitawi, head of the Palestinian Scholars Society and a Hamas MP, described security coordination and reconciliation [between Hamas and Fatah] as 'polar opposites.' But the PA responded unequivocally that it would continue cooperating with Israel on security issues.

"Hussein Al-Sheikh, minister of civilian affairs in Salam Fayyad's cabinet and a member of Fatah's Central Committee, said that security coordination with Israel 'will continue under all circumstances.' Indeed, Haaretz newspaper reported that routine meetings between PA security officials and Israel continued without interruption."

Journalist Ali Abunimah, cofounder of the *Electronic Intifada* website, [described the absurdity](#) of unity in even more harsh terms:

"Abbas...told pro-Israel lobbyists visiting from the U.S. on May 8, according to the New York Times: 'I hear rumors that Hamas will be in the West Bank, or that it will share authority here. This will not happen.' Abbas was urging the Israel lobbyists to help convince the U.S. Congress not to cut off the financial aid on which Abbas depends.

"What this means, in effect, is that Hamas has agreed to join a Palestinian Authority which is actively engaged in a war against Hamas in conjunction with Israel – and that both Hamas and Fatah have decided to maintain division as a policy, but to rename it 'unity,' merely for public consumption."

But perhaps most importantly, both Fatah and Hamas still look with suspicion at the growing tide of Palestinian protest.

On May 15, the PA called for a mass protest in Ramallah, a significant distance from any Israeli border, while “ Hamas police stopped buses carrying protesters near the main crossing into Israel, but dozens of demonstrators walked on foot and reached a point closer to the Israeli border than they had reached in years,” [according to the New York Times](#).

For Abunimah, [the conclusion is straightforward](#):

“All this goes to show that a more sensible slogan for Palestinians is not ‘End the division,’ but ‘End the unity’ – between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Israeli occupation. That must be the first step to rebuilding a true Palestinian national consensus.” •

Eric Ruder writes for the [Socialist Worker](#) where this article first appeared. See Ruder at [Socialism 2010](#) and [Socialism 2011](#) in Chicago.

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