

The Palestinian Day of Return: from a short day of commemoration to a long day of mourning

On Friday, March 30, 2018, marking the 42nd anniversary of Land Day—when Israeli forces killed six Palestinians during protests against land confiscation in 1976—Palestinians in the Gaza Strip marched to the eastern border with Israel beginning a six-week protest—what they termed the Great March of Return. It was the bloodiest day in Gaza since the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict.¹

Thousands of Palestinian civilians including women and children participated in the protest, mostly staying 500–700 m from the perimeter fence between Israel and the Gaza Strip in five places—eastern Jabalia, eastern Gaza, eastern Bureij, eastern Khanyounis, and eastern Rafah.² The precise conduct of some participants in the march is disputed, but it is indisputable that the Israeli army responded with live ammunition from snipers, tank fire, plastic coated steel bullets, rubber bullets, and tear gas

grenades launched from armoured military vehicles.³

I have reviewed the latest official statistics and reports from the Ministry of Health in Gaza,⁴ official reports from the WHO office in Gaza,⁵ the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR),⁶ and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)⁷ to collate this report on the number and type of injuries sustained by marchers. I have also followed up the patients who were admitted to hospitals by contacting hospital directors and the official spokesman for the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MOH) and comparing the numbers with official reports released by the Palestinian Health Information center at the MOH Gaza office. During our follow-up, we checked on the numbers of those patients who subsequently died, were kept in hospital, or who were discharged after hospital treatment.

Fifteen deaths (aged between 19 and 42 years) and 1479 injuries were documented on March 30 through official admission reports or death certificates released by MOH. Of the 1479 injuries, 1074 cases were initially recorded as being admitted to hospitals.

However, this list was later found to contain 39 duplicates, which was caused by patients being transferred between hospitals and being registered at both hospitals, making the exact number admitted during that day 1035 patients. Most deaths occurred at eastern Jabalia (five deaths, 296 injuries) followed by eastern Gaza (four deaths, 368 injuries), eastern Bureij (two deaths, 212 injuries), Khanyounis (three deaths, 357 injuries), and Rafah (one death, 246 injuries). Two men died subsequently in hospital.⁴ The table lists the fatalities including the location, type of weapon, and type of injury. At least one killed person was documented by many reporters and television stations to have been hit in the back of the head.³ Many protestors were hit in the chest, back, or leg and some injuries were captured live on camera as victims tried to escape the gunfire.¹

Of the 1074 hospital episodes involving 1035 people, 1039 were labelled as moderate to severe, whereas 35 were categorised as very severe, meaning they needed intensive care according to the MOH triage system followed in Gaza. This is a system to do initial categorisation of all injuries that is followed by different MOH emergency departments. Once patients are admitted to a different department according to the type of injury they acquired, the severity of their injuries is either upgraded to a more severe or downgraded to a less severe category according to the final diagnosis and extent of injury. Of the 1074 moderate to very severe recorded injuries, 878 (82%) involved adults aged 18 years and over, 196 (18%) involved children aged under 18, 1017 (95%) were in male patients, and 57 (5.3%) were in female patients. For 774 (72%) of the recorded moderate injuries, patients were discharged from MOH hospitals after initial treatment. For example, one patient who was thought to have a simple gunshot wound was later found to have multiple internal organ damage due to the explosive



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Published Online

April 27, 2018

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30940-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30940-1)

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30940-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30940-1)

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	Age (years)	Sex	Injured part of the body	Type of injury or weapon used	Location of incident
1	25	Male	Abdomen	Explosive bullet	Eastern Jabalia
2	27	Male	Body shattered into pieces	Two tank shells hitting a farmer	Eastern Khanyounis (Qararah)
3	25	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Gaza
4	25	Male	Abdomen	Explosive bullet	Eastern Gaza
5	19	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Gaza
6	35	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Gaza
7	34	Male	Chest	Bullet	Eastern Gaza
8	19	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Jabalia
9	20	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Rafah
10	42	Male	Abdomen	Bullet	Eastern Bureij
11	28	Male	Whole body	Tank shell	Eastern Jabalia
12	24	Male	Whole body	Tank shell	Eastern Jabalia
13	30	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Khanyounis (Khuzah)
14	19	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Jabalia
15	25	Male	Abdomen	Bullet	Eastern Bureij
16	25	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Khanyounis
17	25	Male	Head	Bullet	Eastern Bureij

Table: Deaths based on data from the Gaza Ministry of Health official report⁴ and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights⁶

nature of some bullets used or due to subsequent deterioration. On April 2, 2018, 300 (28%) cases were still in hospitals, and of these 35 were in a very severe condition and still in intensive care.

Most of the 1074 recorded injuries that were assessed by medical staff in a hospital were caused by ordinary and explosive bullets (805 [75%] individuals). 154 (14%) of the injured were hit with rubber bullets and 20 (1.8%) patients experienced severe breathing problems due to tear gas. Another 95 (8.8%) were other physical injuries (such as skin cuts and lacerations). The 1074 injuries were recorded in different hospitals in Gaza, namely, Beit Hanoun Hospital (two dead, seven injured); Indonesian Hospital (three dead, 151 injured); Al-shifa Hospital (four dead, 299 injured); Al-Aqsa Hospital (two dead, 181 injured); Nasser Hospital (138 injured); European Gaza Hospital (three dead, 119 injured); Al-najjar Hospital (one dead, 92 injured); Kamal Edwan Hospital (22 injured); and Al-awda Hospital (65 injured).

Among the 1035 patients, most bullet wounds affected the lower body (n=738, 71%), followed by injuries to the upper body (n=97, 9.3%). Among injuries to the upper body, 50 (4.8%) involved bullet wounds to the head or neck (the very severe cases requiring intensive care) and 24 (2.3%) involved the back or chest. In addition, 38 (3.7%) injuries involved the abdomen or pelvis, and the injuries of 15 (1.4%) cases involved more than one body part. The site of injury was not documented in 73 (7.1%) cases.

405 less serious cases, including those with cut-wounds and tear gas-induced inhalational injuries to the respiratory tract, eyes, and mucous membranes, were treated at five field clinics.

The exact size of the march is not clear but march organisers put the numbers between 15 000 and 30 000 Palestinians. The estimate of the

Israeli army is that 17 000 Palestinians took part. The estimated number of injuries that were sustained, therefore, is between 5% and 10% of those participating. The number of injuries sustained in 12 hours exceeded by 6-fold to 7-fold the average injury rate of the conflict in 2014, which lasted 51 days and caused 2251 deaths and more than 11 231 injuries.⁸ The lower proportion of fatalities on this occasion reflects the targeted nature of rifle fire compared with intense missile attacks during the 2014 attacks.

Compared with 15 deaths on March 30, 2018, there were 20 times that number admitted to hospital with injuries to the head, neck, chest, and abdomen; and 50 times that number with injuries to their lower limbs, creating a huge burden on already stretched and resource-depleted hospitals. Doctors and surgeons at different hospitals have reported 15–20 cases of knee injury with major implications for long-term disability and independence. Some will be wheelchair-bound for the rest of their lives. A spokesman for the MOH in Gaza stated that one survivor had already undergone amputation of the lower leg due to the severity of his injury.

Gaza's hospitals are experiencing an acute shortage of lower limb fixation and other devices needed to treat severe lower limb injuries. There are also major shortages of drugs, anaesthetics and antibiotics. In March, 2018, the WHO Director General stated that more than 40% of essential drugs are depleted in Gaza's Central Drug Store, including drugs used in emergency departments and other critical care units.⁹ Electricity fluctuations and limited fuel for backup generators have also led to services in hospitals and clinics being severely reduced. Electricity fluctuations have damaged sensitive medical equipment.

Israel claimed that some of those killed and injured were militants from Palestinian factions such as Hamas, a claim which is denied by the injured

and the families of those killed. Before the march, Israeli planes dropped leaflets on Gaza to deter people from joining the peaceful rallies and warning anyone from approaching the border fence. No breaches of the border took place on the day of the march.

The deaths and injuries arising from the Israeli army action against civilian demonstrators are beyond what might be expected from mere efforts at crowd control. They raise serious concerns regarding the risks of escalation as the demonstrations continue until May 15, 2018. Already, the health and trauma facilities of Gaza have been overwhelmed in taking care of those severely injured on March 30, 2018. The people of Gaza are under heavy economic and social pressure from the blockade and the ongoing siege, dating from 2006. These demonstrations, conceived as non-violent, were designed to show the world that Gazans still have the spirit to resist what they see as their oppression, and that they continue to call for lifting the siege on the Gaza Strip, and the resolution of the Palestine Question.

I declare no competing interests.

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