

The IDF and the Marches on Israel's Borders

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Brief Analysis

This weekend may witness another Palestinian attempt to breach the frontier with Israel in a repeat of May 15's "Nakba (Catastrophe) Day," when thousands marched on border fences and crossing points during the annual Arab commemoration of events following Israel's 1948 founding. June 5 is being labeled "Naksa (Setback) Day," marking Israel's defeat of Arab forces in the 1967 war. Both marches share two main goals: to remind the world that the occupation remains in place and to keep the Palestinian people actively engaged in the conflict.

The scope and scale of the demonstrations is unclear, but Israel is preparing for a significant challenge on Sunday, with the Israel Defense Forces treating the event as a full-scale military operation. In particular, the IDF wants to avoid a repeat of problems that occurred during the May 15 marches, including fatalities among the demonstrators and a border breach on the Golan Heights.

Sunday's Marches

The Preparation Committee for the Marches of Return, the umbrella group organizing the protests, has called for three days of demonstrations, from June 5 to June 7. According to media reports, potentially very large demonstrations -- upward of 70,000 people -- planned for the Lebanon border reportedly have been canceled under pressure from the Lebanese government. The Lebanese army had previously declared the border a military zone and likely intended to prevent marchers from reaching the boundary itself, as it did on May 15.

In the West Bank and Gaza, marchers will take two directions: one group will head toward Jerusalem, and another toward the main offices of the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Their main goals are to highlight Israel's occupation of east Jerusalem and its detention of Palestinian prisoners. Several thousand people may participate; whatever the tally, the Palestinian security forces will probably attempt to prevent them from reaching contact lines with Israeli soldiers.

Meanwhile, Syria may once again permit thousands of Palestinians to reach the Golan border with Israel. Damascus faces intense pressure -- stemming from eleven weeks of anti-regime protests and international condemnation for the deaths of nearly 1,100 demonstrators and the arrest of 10,000 more -- and no doubt hopes to deflect media attention toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is standard practice for Bashar al-Asad, who similarly used the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war to sidestep international pressure regarding the assassination of former Lebanese prime

minister Rafiq al-Hariri. The regime will likely facilitate -- or, at least, not impede -- marches aimed at reaching the border. Accordingly, the Golan may witness the most serious confrontations with the IDF.

Thousands of protestors will participate in Jordanian and Egyptian marches as well. As on May 15, however, Cairo and Amman plan to prevent the marchers from reaching the borders. Israeli embassies in Egypt and Jordan could also be targets for the demonstrators.

A New Challenge

Nakba Day was a four-front confrontation for the IDF, encompassing the Lebanese, Syrian, West Bank, and Gaza borders. The most serious clashes occurred on the first two fronts. In Lebanon, large numbers of demonstrators approached the security fence, and ten were killed by shots from either the Lebanese army, the IDF, or both. On the Syrian border, four demonstrators were reportedly killed by IDF gunfire as crowds breached the fence at Majdal Shams. Events in the West Bank and Gaza were less serious.

Such marches constitute a new challenge for the IDF. Although Israel has considerable experience dealing with Palestinian border protests, including ones featuring low-level violence, the phenomenon of large numbers of unarmed marchers attempting to breach the frontier is a new one. The basic parameters of the threat are both real and perceptual: in addition to the concrete security threat of breaching Israel's borders, the marchers seem intent on symbolically retaking occupied land and creating images of unarmed protestors being met by lethal force, all in an intense media environment.

As described previously, the reaction of local authorities is also critical to the scope and nature of any clashes. On May 15, the Lebanese army, Palestinian Authority, and Hamas acted to contain the demonstrators and helped to prevent breaches, while the Syrian government expedited the marches. These varied responses produced very different results in terms of pressure on IDF forces and successes in breaching the border.

Israel's Planned Response

The IDF learned several lessons from the May 15 marches, including:

- the critical need for intelligence to provide warning of planned border demonstrations and specifics regarding precisely where they will occur, how many people will be involved, and what the marchers' intentions and affiliations are; after Nakba Day, the IDF suffered widespread criticism in Israel for its failure to adequately monitor Arab social media, which had been key to mobilization of the demonstrators;
- the importance of having proper troop numbers at the point of an attempted breach, with the right equipment, appropriate tactics, strict discipline, and established rules of engagement;
- the importance of robust physical barriers to channel demonstrators, delay penetration, and contain incidents
- the need to minimize casualties among demonstrators;
- the need to be tactically flexible in response to changing demonstrations.

These lessons have been incorporated into Israel's current preparations. In addition to warning that no border breach will be tolerated and that those responsible will be held accountable, the IDF is:

- preparing to reinforce units on the Lebanese and Syrian borders and in the West Bank;
- providing additional riot control equipment;
- placing forces in all three regional commands (Northern, Central, and Southern) on alert; and
- reinforcing physical barriers on the Lebanese and Syrian borders.

More generally, the IDF has issued the following rules of engagement to troops: first, verbally warn demonstrators

not to attempt to breach the security fence; if that fails, fire warning shots in the air; and if that does not work, fire at the lower extremities of those involved in the breaching attempt.

Implications

The marches are tactical events with potentially strategic consequences. If the IDF handles Sunday's protests well, as it mostly did on May 15, it will minimize the negative consequences for Israel. If serious casualty-producing incidents occur, however, the consequences may be much more severe -- in addition to the loss of life, such a development could inflame border tensions and damage Israel's image. The best outcome for Israel is no marches at all, or protests that are stopped short of the border by local security forces.

Looking ahead, border marches are a new challenge for the IDF, comparable to last year's Gaza flotilla. They do not constitute an evolution in the threat facing Israel: although marches divert resources from the IDF's primary mission, they are likely to be episodic, in contrast to the daily challenges faced by the IDF in preventing terrorism or dealing with incidents along the Gaza border. The scale of the demonstrations also makes them susceptible to intelligence collection, giving Israel the opportunity for warning and time to prepare.

Nevertheless, border marches do serve as one more tool of pressure on Israel. Each one presents an opportunity for serious violence, whether due to the dynamics of the situation itself, intentional action by the demonstrators, or failure of discipline within IDF units. There are no guarantees that Sunday's marches will be free of such problems.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. ❖

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