

## A Glimpse into the COVID-19 Crisis in the Context of Palestine



Sanitizing Al Manara square, Ramallah, Occupied Palestinian Territories. Photo by Issam Rimawi

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It might seem obvious that COVID-19 hits all countries the same way. After all, a virus does not discriminate. Yet in the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the political reality affects how the consequences of the virus are distributed among the population.

Clearly, the pre-existing political determinants of Palestinians' health will not vanish in the Coronavirus context. If anything, the spread of the virus might end up laying bare what Palestinians in the fields of public health and health service provision have been arguing for years — that the Israeli occupation exacerbates, and in some cases gives rise to and perpetuates, any health crisis affecting Palestinians.

[The Palestinian Authority, in its effort to halt the spread of the virus starting from March 6, 2020, declared the state of emergency in the West Bank.](#) This step was a reaction to the confirmation of seven cases of Covid-19 infections among tourists who entered from Ben Gurion Airport and visited Bethlehem. [This instituted a gradual lockdown to ensure that most Palestinians would stay in their homes and not travel between cities and villages – except for urgent jobs or in emergency situations.](#) Meanwhile, the occupying forces took advantage of this crisis: Since the beginning of the lockdown, Israeli soldiers invaded homes and arrested several Palestinians.

[Such invasions are not only violent in nature, but they also expose Palestinian families to potential infections, or indeed infect Palestinian detainees.](#)

Despite the gravity of the situation due to the spread of COVID-19, [the Israeli forces proceeded to demolish homes of Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley, including a make-shift health service provision tent in Khirbet Ibziq.](#) Such actions highlight Israel's consistent efforts to further deprive marginalized communities of their basic human rights to health. [They also showcase Israel's oppressive use of power and \*de facto\* sovereignty over the occupied land.](#) With that said, it is important to highlight that Israel is not only in charge of the borders, but also controls mobility within the West Bank, and between the West Bank and Israel — both in times of calm and of crisis.

Most importantly, the COVID-19 crisis has had serious repercussions on the Palestinian laborers working in Israel. Since the beginning of the epidemic, Israel dictated that Palestinians who work in Israel are prohibited from going back to their cities and villages for two months. This initially was not opposed or challenged by the Palestinian Authority. As a result, approximately 40,000 Palestinian laborers who entered Israel in the past two weeks have suffered extremely difficult living conditions, not to mention the stress of being away from their families. [In general, Israel disregards \(if not exploits\) all types of workers' rights when it concerns Palestinian laborers. If any of them is potentially ill or suspected of carrying the Coronavirus, the Israeli police will throw them out onto the streets of the West Bank without any medical attention.](#)

Undoubtedly, this type of policy impacts not only the laborers themselves but the Palestinian communities at large. [After all, these workers who may be ill will need to go back to their homes. As such, they could potentially expose their families to the virus, and further increase the spread within the West Bank.](#) Seeing that the Israeli policy would simply expel laborers without providing adequate care or treatment has been especially worrisome for the Palestinian Authority. In response, the PA called unto all Palestinian laborers to return to their cities and villages as soon as possible, and required them to self-quarantine in their own homes in fear of further spread of the virus.

As for the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip, it is evident that the health system there is horrid enough as is. Living under an illegal siege and in a progressively-worsening economic embargo, people in Gaza can barely support basic health provisions under normal conditions, let alone a health crisis. The Gaza health care system is perhaps one of the worst-equipped in the world to deal with the outbreak of COVID-19. It is most concerning that upon the return of two travelers from abroad, the Gaza Strip has already been exposed to the Coronavirus. Until the writing of this piece, the number in Gaza has increased to ten confirmed cases. [Doctors are worried that, without lifting the blockade and receiving proper medical and health resources, these few cases may cause a devastating pandemic. The health care system is scarcely able to prevent further spread nor provide adequate care for those who fall ill.](#)

On the subject of health and safety amidst the Coronavirus context, it is important to note that the unjust Israeli policies exacerbate the effects of COVID-19 on the Palestinian population, especially the detained. [At a time when the rest of the world is releasing prisoners to relieve their health systems and prevent further spread of the virus, Israel continues to endanger Palestinian](#)

[prisoners. There were no measures neither to prevent the virus spread nor to protect the 5000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons \(including those under administrative detention who are held without charge or trial\). Hardly paying any attention to the interaction of prison personnel with the detainees, the Israeli authorities have exposed them to the virus. In fact, reports have shown that an Israeli interrogator himself tested positive for COVID-19 and may have transmitted the infection to four Palestinian detainees, although the status of their infection remains unknown.](#)

At the time of writing this article, news arrived that a prisoner released today, April 1, has actually tested positive for COVID-19 and expressed concerns that fellow prisoners may have also been exposed to the virus – with no measures taken by the Israeli authority to prevent its spread inside the prison. These cases demonstrate the lack of attention and prevention protocols, as well as reflects the disregard of safety and health regulations when it comes to Palestinian individuals – even during such a dire crisis.

Although this piece highlighted some of dimensions of the Corona crisis in the Palestinian context, yet it hardly reflects the complexities of the health situation in light of the political realities on the ground. The aim was to provide an overview of the manifold ways in which the Israeli Occupation exploits the current health crisis to further subjugate the Palestinian population (whether it be laborers or detainees). It also reveals how the Israeli *de facto* sovereignty over the land and borders heightens and intensifies the health crisis, and hampers the abilities to set up temporary health service provision clinics.

The argument that health within the Occupied Palestinian Territories is affected and shaped by political determinants and the negative role of the Israeli Occupation is one which has been made repeatedly over the years by health care providers, public health experts and academics, and human rights activists. [Once again, this is a call to pay attention to how health and healthcare cannot be separated from the political context in which they are provided within.](#)

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