# Pandemic lays bare Israel's systemic racism

Diana Buttu The Electronic Intifada 8 April 2020

People in Israel's Ultra-Orthodox communities have widely flouted government restrictions to combat the coronavirus pandemic, but it is the Palestinian population that feels the brunt of emergency legislation.

Ziv KorenPolaris

As I sit in my house in Haifa, quarantined, like others around the world, I cannot help but recall a previous experience under Israeli-imposed curfew.

Eighteen years ago, during March and April of 2002, the Israeli army re-invaded the West Bank, including the city in which I was residing at the time, Ramallah. For months, we remained under lockdown as Israeli tanks, jeeps and soldiers terrorized our streets and homes.

We spent the days hearing about the rising death toll and worried about what the future would hold. While the initial action was met with international condemnation, soon the lockdown – and the terror of Israel's army – became "normal." Few raised their voices at Israel's collective punishment of Palestinians and all of the accompanying land confiscations and home demolitions undertaken by the army.

Today is no different. While the world is rightfully focused on "flattening curves" and "physical distancing," with coping under a halted economy and worrying about loved ones, Israel's occupation and systemic racism continue to guide policy – just as they have throughout history

I live with my elderly parents, one of whom has a number of serious health issues, including respiratory problems. Like others, I worry about them, and, of course, my young son.

But I also have to think about my friends in the West Bank, at the mercy of the whims of the Israeli military as well as unrestrained and violent settlers living in occupied territory in violation of international law.

I have to worry about my friends in "hiding" because Israel has never allowed them to live normally in their country because they hold West Bank identity cards. I worry about whether they will be picked up while on the way to the grocery store and whether they will be allowed access to care, if needed.

And, of course, I cannot take my mind off Gaza, terrified that coronavirus will [infect thousands](#) and watch helplessly as the numbers rise.

## Lockdown under occupation

I take comfort in the initiatives that Palestinians have taken to support one another during this period – as we have during other periods of closure and lockdowns – knowing that despite everything, we will take care of one another, even when others want to see us disappear.

In the occupied West Bank, Palestinians have been quarantined for a month, at time of writing, with schools and businesses closed. The state of emergency declared by the Palestinian Authority has already been renewed for another month, Palestinians not only fearing what will happen to an already dependent and fragile economy but also that an outbreak cannot be contained.

These fears are not unwarranted: Israel has long held control over the Palestinian public health system. It prevents basic equipment like radiation machines not only from entering Gaza but also the occupied West Bank outside East Jerusalem.

And while restricting access to health facilities in Israel, occupation authorities also make it difficult or impossible for Palestinians to get permits to East Jerusalem's relatively better equipped hospitals.

But Palestinians do not only have to fear loss of life, a collapsed health care system and economy: They also have to fear Israel's daily actions in occupied territory.

Since the state of emergency was declared, Israel has carried out mass arrests (detaining 85 people, including 10 children) and demolished, forced people to self-demolish or seized more than 40 places of business and homes as the world is being told to "stay home."

Israeli settlers continue their attacks – on [both people and properties](#) – with impunity. Gaza remains blockaded, even as the health sector is on the [verge of collapse](#) as a result of Israel's 13-year closure.

Palestinian prisoners in Israeli detention are [among the most vulnerable](#).

Since 15 March, [emergency regulations](#) have granted almost unrestrained powers to the prison authorities. They bar prisoners from meeting with families or lawyers and allow telephone consultation only if a court case is imminent.

For those of us living inside Israel's 1948 boundaries, the picture is just as bleak.

Israeli racism guides policy on coronavirus. Since the start of the outbreak, Israel has both promoted an image of equality by showing Palestinian doctors on the frontlines of

treating coronavirus-infected patients to mask its bigotry. Simultaneously it has castigated only Palestinians for not "following the rules," at least at first, even while the majority of those who have tested positive to date hail from religious Jewish communities.

Israel has issued fines against imams for holding prayers while allowing synagogues to continue their services uninterrupted. Mikvahs – ritual baths – remained open until the end of March and yeshivas continued to operate long into the shutdown, though the continued flouting of rules by some ultra-orthdox communities may bring a comprehensive end to that soon.

## Systemic discrimination

Worse still is that Israel had tested a mere 4,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel for the virus up to 2 April. This is the same as the number of Jewish Israelis tested every day. Public health and safety orders were in the beginning provided in Hebrew and sometimes Russian and English, but nothing in Arabic.

Efforts to provide Arabic-language guidance have since been stepped up though such information is still not transmitted in real time.



With the exception of hospitals that existed before 1948, and in cities with mixed populations, there are no hospitals in Palestinian towns – certainly none capable of handling volumes of coronavirus patients – and disaster may be imminent.

But while testing remains elusive, tracking does not. Israel is attempting to use Shin Bet surveillance mechanisms to track coronavirus patients, a measure temporarily halted due to the intervention of rights group Adalah.

As always, it has only been the civil society of Palestinian citizens of Israel and their legislators who have pushed back against the actions of the state, including by pressing for increased testing in Palestinian towns, increased funding for Palestinian hospitals and demanding an end to state surveillance.

Some may believe that the coronavirus is an equalizer – that it affects Israelis and Palestinians alike. While the virus has the potential to affect everyone, treatment for it is hardly egalitarian.

Rather, owing to systemic discrimination, the approach taken by Israel has been to prioritize Israeli Jewish lives over Palestinian lives. Should this virus spread widely in Palestinian communities, the consequences will be disastrous.

In short, Israel's approach to the coronavirus is the culmination of historical racist and colonial policies – not separate from them.

In the aftermath of Israel's 2002 invasion, a number of things became "normal:" nightly Israeli raids, endless Israeli blockades, radical restrictions on movement due to "security" and the demolition of homes with barely a protest.

My fear is that once this coronavirus threat passes, some measures will also be normalized this time: from racism in health care, to holding Palestinians and their health care system hostage, to surveillance, to home demolitions and blockades – all in the name of "public security."

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