
3. Between the Palestinian Authority's Social Policies and Israel's Occupation Policies: Palestinians during the Corona Pandemic

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This paper examines the impact of Coronavirus on the Palestinian people as they grapple with the social policies of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the occupation policies of the Israeli occupation through focusing on three main points:

- **First:** The paper tackles the role policies adopted by the Palestinian Authority played in accentuating inequality among Palestinians. These include issuing laws that enable senior officials to get more privileges and attempts at making up for the failure of its social and economic policies through resorting to security-oriented measures. Added to that are the measures taken by the PA to face the pandemic and the accompanying patriarchal discourse that held people accountable for the spread of the virus while overlooking the effect on the lockdown on their livelihoods. The paper will also examine how distance learning contributed to highlighting inequality in the Palestinian society and how the pandemic exposed the fragility of the healthcare system.
- **Second:** The paper examines the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups such as wage workers and small vendors and initiatives launched by the private sector and the PA to mitigate the financial crises. This part also tackles the demonization of Palestinian workers who work in Israeli settlements in the West Bank and how they are automatically treated as carriers of the virus, hence a threat to society.

- **Third:** The paper will look into the policies of the Israeli occupation during the pandemic and will focus on those who live under Israeli authority like in Jerusalem, workers, and prisoners. This section will also focus on how the Israeli occupation took advantage of the pandemic to annex 30% of the West Bank, continue the demolition of houses, and arrest more Palestinians.

The study adopts several methodologies including participant observation and analysis of data, laws and statistics.

Introduction

Writing about an ongoing issue involves a lot of challenges since the author is unable to look at all the ramifications of the issue subject of the study. The author, therefore, focused on the different aspects of the topic until the time of writing. There is no doubt that the Corona pandemic can be analyzed based on Émile Durkheim's theories as a social phenomenon that constitutes part of the complex crisis through which the Palestinian society is going. This crisis is linked to the three main points mentioned above.

The spread and impact of the virus

The first Coronavirus cases were recorded in February 2020 in Bethlehem after several Korean tourists tested positive following their return to their countries. Bethlehem was placed under

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lockdown and so were other neighboring cities Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. This was followed by the declaration of a state of emergency. Until the time of writing this paper, the number of deaths reached 317 and the total number of cases is around 48,000 (43,000 in the West Bank, 2,600 in the Gaza Strip, and 11,000 in occupied Jerusalem and its suburbs). The number of recovering cases is estimated at 35,000. The number deaths in the Palestinian diaspora reached 6,100. A substantial number of cases is concentrated south of the West Bank, particularly between Hebron and Bethlehem¹⁰⁶.

Declaring a state of emergency

On March 5, 2020, the Palestinian Authority declared a state of emergency on the West Bank. Based on PA president Mahmoud Abbas's speech that prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh gave on his behalf, the state of emergency was to last for 30 days and is subject to renewal. It was, in fact, renewed three times amid a heated debate about its constitutionality in the absence of the Palestinian Legislative Council whose activities were suspended owing to factional divisions. The authorities in the Gaza Strip did not declare a state of emergency and everything went normal there with the exception of establishing facilities for quarantine and a few recorded cases. This continued till August 2020 when the virus started spreading in the strip. Then a lockdown was imposed for two weeks and public institutions suspended their activities.

In order to make up for the failure of its social and healthcare policies since its creation in 1994, the Palestinian Authority adopted a security-oriented approach in dealing with the pandemic. Palestinians in the West Bank generally complied with the lockdown even if in different degrees. There were regions where lockdown was strictly

imposed such as Ramallah. As for areas outside the security reach of the Palestinian Authority such as Kafr Aqab, life went on normally to a great extent. Residents of areas under PA control observed the lockdown because of mistrust in the healthcare system in case they get the virus. Added to that is the fact that curfews are not new to Palestinians who are used to isolation and have been through experiences when they had to store food for emergencies.

Palestinian healthcare policies

Four entities are involved in the healthcare system in Palestine: the Palestinian Ministry of Health, which is affiliated to the PA, The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), non-governmental organizations, and private sector institutions. Healthcare is offered through 735 centers, 587 in the West Bank and 152 in the Gaza Strip, and 63% of them is run by the Ministry of Health¹⁰⁷. There is one health center for every 4,599 citizens in the West Bank and one for 12,376 in the Gaza Strip. The total number of hospitals in Palestine is 81. This gap between the West Bank and Gaza is because of the population density in the latter as well as the 14-year-long Israeli blockade. Added to that are the ramifications of the disputes between Fatah and Hamas. Statistics reveal lack of planning as far as hospitals are involved and the discrepancy between different regions¹⁰⁸ through not taking into consideration how demographics play a major role in healthcare, the spread of diseases, discrimination, deprivation, and access to services. Around 42% of the healthcare sector is funded by the Palestinian people and the PA funds 38%¹⁰⁹. The number of families covered by health insurance is 190,000 which reveals how fragile healthcare policies are. Only 11% of the Palestinian budget is allocated to healthcare while 26% is allocated to security, 20%

¹⁰⁶ Statistics by the Palestinian Ministry of Health (accessed April 24, 2020): <https://corona.ps>

¹⁰⁷ Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2017 annual report (accessed August 23, 2020): <http://www.moh.gov.ps/portal/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/MOH-Annual-Report-2017-Final-9-9-2018.pdf>

¹⁰⁸ Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2018 annual report (accessed August 15, 2020): <https://www.moh.gov.ps/portal/category%D%8A%7D%84%9D%8A%3D%8AE%D%8A%8D%8A%7D%8B%/1D%8A%7D%8AD%D%8B%5D%8A%7D%8A%6D8%9A%D%8A%7D%8AA/>

¹⁰⁹ Samir Abdallah. "Gaps in the healthcare system [Arabic]." Ramallah: Palestinian Economic Policy Research Institute- MAS, 2018.

to education, and 8% to social development¹¹⁰. A year ago, the PA proposed a social protection law that triggered a massive wave of protests as people said the law only benefits businessmen and does not meet the most basic of needs. As a result, the PA decided to reformulate the law and present later for ratification.

Managing the Coronavirus crisis

Despite the fact that the sources of the PA budget are diverse, including taxes, local revenues, and foreign aid, it does not have full control over it because of subordination to the Israeli occupation and policies of donor countries. In fact, the occupation controls around 60% of the PA's financial resources¹¹¹.

Based on the statistics of the Ministry of Health¹¹² tests were done to 184,885 people since March 6, 2020 and until the time of writing, 23,204 were quarantined. The ministry targets having 500 people tested per day, yet this is contingent upon developments and the possible suspension of cooperation between the PA and the Israeli occupation. Reports show a shortage in different types of medical supplies such as ventilators and ICU equipment, which reflects the fragile status of the healthcare sector even before the crisis. According to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA), there is a shortage in daily protection supplies such face masks and sanitizers. The PA owns only 20 ventilators, 22 PCR detection systems, and 55 oxygen concentrators¹¹³. The PA asked people not to request a test unless they

mingled with someone who tested positive. In late September 2020, the PA accused occupation forces of destroying 100,000 tests by not allowing them into the labs and leaving them without protection¹¹⁴.

Most cases were asked to self-isolate at home not only because medical centers cannot admit all cases, but also because those centers have come to be stigmatized as sources of disease. Also, medical centers used for quarantine in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip turned into repressive spaces, which brings to mind Erving Goffman's theory about mental asylums' attempts at institutionalizing patients by force¹¹⁵. In addition, medical centers were too crowded to receive more patients. Several protests were staged against hospitals in Jericho and Rafah for not abiding by quarantine rules.

On the administrative level, the PA imposed a night curfew, restricted movement between different governorates, imposed lockdown from Thursday night till Sunday morning, banned gatherings, and imposed a fine on people who did not wear face masks or did not observe social distancing. Most stores and government facilities were closed and only banks were left open. From observation, it is obvious that most people did abide by the rules. This is not only attributed to people's fear for their lives and safety but also lack of trust in the medical system. During the first wave, there were relatively few cases, but that was reversed with the second wave. Many believe that this was due to the relaxation of restrictions and return to social gatherings such as weddings and funerals.

¹¹⁰ Aman Palestine 2019 report no. 15 (accessed August 15, 2020): https://www.amanpalestine.org/cached_uploads/download/2020/02/01/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-1580554365.pdf

¹¹¹ Palestinian Ministry of Health, 2018 annual report. Op. cit.

¹¹² Ministry of Health statistics (accessed April 24, 2020): <https://corona.ps>

¹¹³ "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA) (accessed August 12, 2020): <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-13>

¹¹⁴ Minister of Health Mai Kieleh said the Israeli authorities destroyed 100,000 PCR tests through obstructing the entry of samples from Palestine to Jordan in coordination with the UN. *Al Hadath Newspaper* (accessed September 24, 2020): <https://www.alhadath.ps/article/128948/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A5%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-100%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9%D8%A8%D9%80%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7>

¹¹⁵ Erving Goffman, *Asiles. Etudes sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux*. Paris : Collection Le sens commun, Minuit 1986.

Protests were staged against lockdown measures in several cities including Hebron, the biggest city in the West Bank. People also protested against lack of consistency in imposing restrictions for the lockdown was strictly observed in Ramallah while this was not the case in other cities. After the protests, the government eased up restrictions through resuming transportation services and commercial activities. The authorities found it hard at times to impose restrictions, especially in areas outside the PA's control, also called Area C, such as Kafr Aqab in which life went on normally. This was also the case in some parts of Hebron as well as the northern parts of the West Bank. The virus also spread in several refugee camps such as Balata near Nablus and Jalazone and Amaari near Ramallah which are densely populated, especially in poorer areas, hence increasing the risk of catching the virus as well as makes observing restrictions much harder.

In the Gaza Strip, 13,202 people were tested and there are 338 patients in six quarantine hospitals. The number of cases in the strip remained relatively the same since few people come in or go out. The Rafah Crossing that links Gaza to Egypt remained closed all the time except in cases of emergency and for a very limited number of people, particularly returnees. On April 27, 2020, the Hamas administration allowed restaurants, hotels, and tourist facilities to open while calling upon people to observe social distancing. Later, mosques, marketplaces, wedding halls, and playgrounds reopened. The Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel is closed most of the time and only 80 people are allowed to cross per week¹¹⁶. In early August, it got worse and the authorities had to impose lockdown by force. This was accompanied by power outages that lasted for several hours each time, which made the situation harder for the people.

Economic impact

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the Palestinian economy is expected to lose around 2.5 billion US dollars and

the GDP is expected to drop by 14%. According to PCBS, the losses of the agriculture and fishing sectors are estimated at 200 million dollars, industries 362 million, construction 220 million, and services 1175 million. This means that the pandemic affected all sectors of the Palestinian economy. This led to an unprecedented rise in unemployment rates that reached 45% in the Gaza Strip and 40% in the West Bank. This is attributed to the closure of stores, schools and nurseries, universities, and some factories and facilities in addition to a drop in tax revenues and the impact of pandemic on trade with China. In addition, around 150,000 wage workers and drivers lost their jobs.

The pandemic had a grave impact on owners of small facilities, who constitute 86% of the total number of facilities in Palestine. In an attempt to mitigate this impact, the PA allowed those facilities to resume by a 50% capacity and also allowed workshops to open on particular days of the week while retail stores were opened on Fridays only. Agricultural activities were affected, which was demonstrated in the prices of fodder, fertilizers, and pesticides and the drop in demand due to the decline of purchasing power, the closure of local markets, and the suspension of exporting. The same applied to animal products. The Ministry of Social Development expected that 100,000 families would become poor by April 2020 and in the Gaza Strip, The Ministry of Labor expected that around 38,000 workers out of the registered 130,000 would need humanitarian aid owing to the deterioration of their social and economic conditions¹¹⁷.

Social impact

Many interviewees¹¹⁸ noted a remarkable increase in cases of domestic violence with all members of the family staying in small spaces for a long time and the impoverishment of many families in the aftermath of the pandemic. Several reports revealed that residents of Area C, which is controlled by occupation forces, is suffering

¹¹⁶ "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

¹¹⁷ "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

¹¹⁸ Interviews conducted by the author between April 15 and July 25, 2020 in Ramallah. It was not possible then to go out of the city.

from dire conditions because of their proximity to Israeli settlements and their isolation from other Palestinian areas. Social customs have generally changed, especially gatherings.

Education

Educational institutions were closed in early March 2020. According to statistics, around 1.43 million children from all the Palestinian territories lack access to distance learning. In poor and isolated areas, 360,000 children do not have internet access and 3,037 schools have to be cleaned and sanitized and there aren't enough funds to renovate utilities and the sewage systems in these schools. Disparities between different regions were particularly highlighted in the condition of schools in marginalized areas. Universities moved to distance learning, which accentuated inequality and widened the gap between classes since living conditions, the number of family members, and access to internet are all factors that determine the possibility of benefiting from distance learning. Other problems are expected to emerge such as students' inability to keep paying tuition fees and the PA defaulting on its due payment to Palestinian universities.

The adoption of a moralistic discourse

Added to the measures imposed to curb the spread of the virus, the authorities in Palestine adopted a different discourse. The PA held regular press conferences that were broadcast on TV and in which different officials addressed the people such as government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem, prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, and health minister Mai Keileh. Those press conferences included updates on the number of cases and new measures taken by the government to deal with the pandemic. The PA used a moralistic and patriarchal discourse in those briefings for it presented itself as an institution that knows what is in the people's best interest, which is obvious in the introduction to every briefing: "Our priority is protecting you, so help us help you." Melhem

used an extremely patronizing tone in one of the briefings as he argued that the virus is spreading because of "people's lack of awareness" and used statements like "help us make you aware," "help us protect you from your recklessness," and "we've always helped you and now it's time you assume responsibility with us." In several of his statements, Melhem addressed particular groups such as children or elderly women as a means of currying favor with the people. He also praised the government for its "wisdom" in dealing with the crises and its efficiency which equals that of the most developed of countries. He also praised representatives of clans for volunteering to help the authorities in imposing safety measures¹¹⁹. Dawoud El Zeer, a dignitary from south of the West Bank said he is willing to help the government exercise its authority and stated that different clans across Palestine agreed to take part in this initiative. El Zeer added that people are divided into three categories: those who are careless, those who do not believe the virus exists, and those who just want to go against the government.

A similar discourse was adopted by Abbas in his televised speech on June 24, 2020 when he said that he is not only addressing the people as president but also as a father and a brother then, quoting a saying by the prophet, said that each ruler is responsible for the people he rules. Like Melhem, Abbas said that the whole world was impressed by the efficiency of the PA in dealing with the pandemic, hence totally overlooking the serious defects of the Palestinian healthcare system and lack of social protection. There was also no mention of the crippling financial crisis the West Bank is going through as Israel stopped transferring tax revenues to the PA, which led to a 50% cut in salaries. Added to that is the fact that more than 40% of PA employees receive monthly salaries that are less USD 580, which means they live under poverty line¹²⁰. In the Gaza Strip, the Hamas administration's approach was not any different, which was demonstrated in the banner posted behind the government spokesmen in a press briefing and which read, "We stop your recklessness to protect you".

¹¹⁹ Report by *Al Jazeera*, July 7, 2020 (accessed September 14, 2020): <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/7/11>.

¹²⁰ Statement by the Minister of Finance, March 10, 2019: <https://nn.ps/news/Palestine/2019/03/10/209284>

While exercising authority has not been uncommon since the start of the pandemic, the problem in Palestine is that such discourse is not accompanied by compensations for vulnerable groups or actual measures on the ground to protect the people. This discourse, therefore, only became a tool in both administrations to absolve themselves of their responsibilities and to hold people accountable for any damage.

The situation is not any better in the private sector since the majority of Palestinians work in small private businesses that suspended their activities when the virus started spreading. These include small factories and workshops and all forms of businesses that employ small workers and craftsmen, many of whom are expected to be categorized as poor in the near future. Because the government was unable to take any constructive measures to face the crisis, lockdown was the only tool it could use. Through doing this, plus using the patronizing discourse and emotionally manipulating people, the government tries to cover up its fragility and its inability to address the ramifications of the crisis.

As part of its security-oriented approach, the PA imposed restrictions on movement, erected several barriers, divided the West Bank into militarized zones, and stopped passersby on random basis. Based on people's testimonies, favoritism was manifested even during the crisis since these measures were not applied to all people equally and security forces chose who to let pass and who to detain. Many interviewees see that the PA took advantage of the pandemic to tighten its grip on public space and attempt to regain its legitimacy through a set of strict measures that allegedly give it more strength and more control over the people. The state of emergency also benefited the government in the way it stopped protests by several groups such as trade unions, doctors, and teachers as well as protests against corruption, internal divisions, and the new social protection law. In addition, the government took advantage of the pandemic to curb personal freedoms including internet

access and several journalists were arrested under the pretext of spreading chaos and violating the state of emergency. Ten members of the Youths Against Corruption movement were arrested for illegal assembly then released following public pressure. Police forces tried to violently disperse a protest staged at the Balata refugee camp and killed Fatah's representative there. There were also several calls on social media to protest against the government, fines banks imposed on bouncing checks, and penalties on loan payment defaults. Other protests were staged against private schools for stopping the salaries of staff. In fact, Palestinians accused the PA of profiteering from the crisis.

Many interviewees¹²¹ argued that many of the measures the PA took aimed at protecting the interests of the private sector as well as some commercial and industrial businesses that pledge allegiance to senior officials. One of the interviewees said that the government closed particular businesses while allowing others to operate normally, which led to the eruption of several protests¹²². Trade unions staged a protests against the policies of banks supported by the PA and which, according to them, aim at humiliating the people through imposing hefty fines on bouncing checks while not taking into consideration that many people either stopped receiving their salaries..

The pandemic exposed lack of coordination among government ranks. For example, on April 7, 2020, government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem said lockdown will be extended for a few more days while several governors announced that their governorates are exempted from the decision such as Ramallah, Hebron, and Nablus. Many believed that the decision to resume economic activities in some parts of the West Bank is linked to lobbying by chambers of commerce and the private sector that wanted economic activities to resume. This confusion made the government announce that all governors' statements are nullified and confirmed the continuation of lockdown.

¹²¹ Interviews conducted by the author in Ramallah, June 12, 2010.

¹²² "Healthcare departments go on a strike [Arabic]." Maan (accessed April 28, 2020).

It is noteworthy that the pandemic did not in any way ease the tension between Fatah and Hamas. On the contrary, the two factions kept incriminating each other in relation to dealing with the pandemic. For example, Hamas accused Fatah of not offering the people enough support while Fatah accused Hamas of secretly coordinating with Israel to receive medical training. Sources close to the PA posted on April 12, 2020 news that Hamas had some of its doctors trained at the Erez crossing the separates the strip from the Israel. In the same vein, news website close to Hamas wrote that the PA had its doctors trained by Israeli doctors in Al Istiqlal University in Jericho.

Relief initiatives

The spread of Coronavirus saw the emergence of several non-governmental initiatives, whether by civil society or the private sector, to support people in facing its ramifications. These initiatives constitute a continuation of a long legacy of social solidarity, which has always been a means of resistance for the Palestinian people. However, developments in the Palestinian cause and internal divisions, coupled with governments' constant attempts at controlling public space and marginalizing community work led to the gradual decline of such initiatives. The pandemic, however, revived this type of solidarity work.

Several civil society groups launched initiatives that offered financial and in-kind aid to families. Initiatives launched in the Gaza Strip include One Body, an offshoot of the Ihsan Voluntary initiative, and Think of Others. These initiatives distributed 500 food packages among families in need and 800 medical kits across the strip. Maan Development Center prepared quarantine facilities in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Development. The initiative, which cost 81,000 US dollars, included purchasing beddings, detergents, and medical kits in addition to food coupons. Similar initiatives were launched by

civil society associations such as the National Islamic Commission for Development and Social Solidarity (Takaful) and Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees. An initiative called Produce your Food, Protect your Family was also launched in the Gaza Strip¹²³.

In the West Bank several civil society groups distributed food packages, medical kits, sanitizers and money while charity organizations sanitized the streets and also distributed food. Several municipalities, such as Ramallah, distributed seedlings and trees among households to encourage families to start gardening during lockdown. Many families responded to this initiative and resorted to gardening as a means of achieving relative food security as a step towards doing away with subordination to Israel.

The private sector also launched several initiatives including Wakfet Izz Fund, which is run by Palestinian businessmen and includes 30 of Palestine's most prominent business owners and members of chambers of commerce under the slogan "The people protect the homeland." However, the fact that the fund is run by private sector led many Palestinians to abstain from donating to it¹²⁴. The fund's chairman explained its main objectives: "Such giving and bestowal will contribute in providing the necessities for a decent life for our brothers and sisters whom were mainly affected in these circumstances, and specifically the families who could barely provide their main needs before this pandemic, and other small and daily and seasonal workers that have done their utmost every single day just to provide what their families needed." The fund announced offering 250 dollars to each worker who lost his/her income. The fund managed to collect 17 million dollars in donations, but its original objective was at least 30 million¹²⁵. Donations were mainly collected from 138 companies and businessmen and are considered modest compared to what was expected.

¹²³ Ali Abdel Wahab. "Relief campaigns and initiatives in the Gaza Strip during the pandemic [Arabic]." Institute for Palestinian Studies (accessed September 21, 2020): <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1650093>

¹²⁴ Asaad Ahmed. "People protect the homeland: Wakfet Izz Fund [Arabic]." Institute for Palestinian Studies (accessed May 18, 2020): <https://www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1650092>

¹²⁵ Ibid

The PA received external aid in the form of grants, loans, and logistic assistance whether from the Arab region or the European Union. The World Bank also announced granting 30 million dollars to all those harmed by the pandemic across the Palestinian territories. This aid is expected to help around 90 thousand families¹²⁶.

The biopolitics of the Israeli occupation

Since occupying the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1976, Israel has been relying on cheap labor from the Palestinian territories. When the pandemic started, Israel besieged the governorate of Bethlehem to stop Palestinian workers from going to work in Israel. However, due to pressure by Israeli business owners, construction workers, estimated at 65,000, were allowed to enter Israel. However, Israel forced those workers to stay in Israel and restricted their movement provided that employers provide them with housing and the adequate health precautions. Israeli authorities issued permits for 55,000 workers and, based on different sources, this was done in coordination with the PA. The number of Palestinian workers in Israel and West Bank settlements was 133,300 at the end of 2019 and they constitute 14% of the total workers in Palestine and 19% of workers in the West Bank. Around 23,000 of them work in illegal settlements while 11,000 work inside Israel and their average daily wage is 254 shekels, compared to 243 in 2018, while 71% have work permits, 21% work without permits and have to spend long times in Israel¹²⁷.

When the pandemic started, Israeli authorities left a sick Palestinian worker at the Beit Sira crossing. The 29-year-old worker, Malek Ghanem, comes from the town of Sarra west of Nablus. According to him, the Israeli hospital refused to take him, and the military police took him to the crossing. After that, Israeli authorities asked all workers to quarantine for 14 days. Prime minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said workers had three

days to find a place to stay in Israel. Workers who do not have permits enter Israel illegally and suffer from worse conditions and more exploitation. According to the head of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, Israel did not return workers without permit back to the Palestinian territories and, in fact, made it easier for them to cross through leaving unsupervised checkpoints at the separation wall so that work would not be interrupted in Israel. Upon coming back, the government demonized those workers and stressed that it did not have any cases until they got back from Israel. The PA also accused Israel of not offering Palestinian workers adequate healthcare, erected checkpoints to have them examined, and formed emergency committees to make sure the virus does not spread. Palestinian security forces confiscated the permits of many workers.

The PA also demonized Arab-Israelis and bans them from going to the West Bank even though it only controls very few areas and does not have control over external borders or borders with territories under Israeli control. This shows that the PA is always keen on manifesting an illusory power. This was particularly demonstrated in how reluctant the PA was in repatriating Palestinians from abroad and only doing that at a much later time following a series of protests.

In addition to exploiting Palestinian workers, Israeli authorities took advantage of the pandemic to expand settlements in the West Bank so that it can go ahead with the annexation plan agreed upon with US president Donald Trump. At the start of the crisis, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the annexation map will be ratified soon. This map includes 30% of the West Bank including all settlements and the Jordan Valley, based on “the deal of the century.” Occupation forces started annexing land and demolishing houses in Area C and evicted eight buildings owned by Palestinians under the pretext that the owners did not have permits¹²⁸. Seven

¹²⁶ World Bank statement, July 28, 2020, *Wafa News*: <https://www.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/6781>

¹²⁷ “Preliminary results for workers’ tests [Arabic].” Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (accessed July 15, 2020): <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/postar.aspx?lang=ar&ItemID=3747>

¹²⁸ “COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020).” Op. cit.

of these buildings were given to Palestinians in humanitarian aid including a mobile home near Jericho in which a family of eight lived. Annexation plans particularly target areas located behind the separation wall such as Kafr Aqab, Shuafat refugee camp, and Qalandiya, which are not under Palestinian control and are formally Israeli, but they are located on the West Bank side of the wall. Israeli authorities were forced to provide residents of these areas with healthcare following a lawsuit filed by a Palestinian rights organization¹²⁹.

Assaults by Israeli settlers against Palestinians have increased with the pandemic by almost 80% by mid-April 2020, based on OCHA reports¹³⁰. Around 85 assaults were reported between March 5 and April 17, 2020. Assaults by settlers against Palestinians have been on the rise even before the pandemic. In 2017, assaults against Palestinian people and property took place three days a week and in 2018, they increased to five days a week. In 2018, 358 assaults were reported, 219 of which targeted property and 79 resulted in injuries. In 2019, 341 assaults were reported, 266 of which damaged property and 75 led to injuries.

Israel tightened security around checkpoints (593 checkpoints in the West Bank) citing concerns about the spread of Coronavirus. Israeli authorities imposed a series of measures that restrict the movement of Palestinians and make it extremely hard for them to go back to their hometowns. Israel also started constructing a network of highways to be used by Palestinians. Those roads are controlled by toll stations that increased from 73 to 108 between April 2019 and May 2020 so that the movement of Palestinians can be closely monitored. Several field reports revealed that occupation forces suspended most valid permits in Jenin, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, and Salfit, whose contribution to Palestinian agriculture vital.

Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails have been a concern since the start of the pandemic. Based on Red Cross statistics, since 1967 there have been around one million Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, which means that one quarter of the

Palestinian people went through the detention experience. On April 1, Israeli authorities released Nour El Din Sarsour and he tested positive right after. According to the Commission for Detainees Affairs, Sarsour mingled with his fellow-inmates before his release, which puts them all at risk. Several rights organizations accused Israel of not taking the necessary measures to protect the rest of the prisoners and cited several examples of Palestinian prisoners coming in contact with Israeli doctors or wardens that later tested positive. Based on a statement by the director of the Palestinian Society Prisoner's Club Qadoura Fares four prisoners tested positive in the Megiddo Prison and two died. In addition, Israeli prison authorities confiscated sanitizers, did not sanitize cells, stopped providing prisoners with cleaning supplies, and banned family visits even though Israeli prisons place glass barriers between prisoners and visitors. There are 700 prisoners who suffer from different diseases, 200 of whom have chronic diseases, which makes them more vulnerable. However, Israeli authorities keep overlooking the danger and imposing more repressive measures.

Conclusion

The pandemic exposed the fragility of healthcare systems in several countries around the world. While this was the case in Palestine, the situation was made worse by the fact the government used repressive measures and adopted a patriarchal discourse to cover up its inability to provide the people with adequate medical services. The government even took advantage of the crisis to clamp down on all forms of opposition and hold the people responsible for the spread of the virus. The pandemic particularly affected vulnerable social groups in Palestine and impoverished large numbers of families despite efforts by civil society organizations. Israel also took advantage of the pandemic to go ahead with its annexation plans and impose more restrictions on the movement of Palestinians.

¹²⁹ Report by the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (Adalah) (accessed July 27, 2020): <https://www.adalah.org/en>

¹³⁰ "COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report 13 (1 – 14 July 2020)." Op. cit.

The pandemic revealed the necessity of reforming the Palestinian healthcare system so that it stops fully depending on momentary external relief. This requires drafting a social solidarity law following a dialogue between relevant parties such as ministries, trade unions, civil society organizations, and the private sector in order to make sure that medical services would cover as many segments of society as possible. The pandemic also underlined the role social solidarity and voluntary work can play in facing crises, which also demonstrates the importance of keeping that legacy, which constitutes a major part of Palestinian history.

