

Life and Health during the Israeli Invasion of the West Bank Ramallah and al-Bireh

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Following is a brief statistical report on the daily life, health and environmental conditions of families living under curfew and in fear and in danger, during the latest Israeli invasion of Ramallah and al- Bireh, two towns with separate municipalities but intertwined physically, socially and economically. This report is the first in a series of reports covering life events in Ramallah/Bireh, Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem and Bethlehem. Although we are dispatching each of the reports separately, ideally, they should be considered together. A final report will follow the individual town reports and will focus on the summary results for all the towns combined.

While journalists, researchers and institutions have written accounts of the general conditions in the towns during this period, our statistical reports focus on households and individuals, offering quantitative indicators generalizable to all of the population, and confirming or negating impressions and observations made in rapid appraisal and through interviews. The invasion of Ramallah/Bireh began on the evening of March 28th and ended in about two-thirds of the town on April 20th, with the remaining portion continuing to suffer the effects of curfew up until April 30th, 2002.

Survey Methodology

This house-to-house survey was conducted during the first week of May, 2002. A stratified random sample of households was chosen, primarily based on locale, and representative of all of the households in the town (Ramallah/Bireh) that is, a population of about 55,000 (PCBS, 1997).

Data Collection

A sample of 153 households was selected utilizing stratified cluster sampling techniques. The city was divided into 5 strata, whereby 2-3 random starting points were selected. From each starting point a systematic sample of every 10th household was selected. In this survey, the expected maximum margin of error at the city level is:

$$E= 1.96*DE*\sqrt{(P)*(Q)/(n)}.$$

P= the percentage of a certain attribute.

$$Q=1-P.$$

DE=Design Effect due to clustering.

The estimated value of DE=1.1.

$$E= 1.96*\sqrt{(0.5)(0.5)(1.1)/(150)}=8.8\%.$$

Data Entry

Data entry was completed using the ACCESS database. Proper control structure was defined on closed questions. Data was transferred to SPSS using "StatTransfer" software. Double entry

was conducted for a sample of the questionnaire to check for errors that could not be detected by the control structure defined in ACCESS. One out of 50 questionnaires experienced swapping values like 1 entered instead of 2 or visa versa.

The Results

One hundred and-fifty three household heads or adult family members were interviewed. The mean age of respondents was 41 years. Forty-nine percent of the respondents were females, and 51% males. Four percent were illiterate, 7% with elementary schooling, 19% with preparatory and 31% with secondary schooling, bringing the total to 61% who have high school educations or lower. Twelve percent reported having had higher diplomas, a high of 20% bachelor's degrees and 7% master's or other post-graduate education.. These results are s higher than PCBS reports on educational attainment in Ramallah/Bireh District for 1997 (Census, 1997), notably in the high levels of post-secondary education: in the census, 5% attained Bachelors degrees in the Ramallah District (comprising Ramallah/Bireh and district refugee camps and villages) compared to 20% in our sample, and 1% Masters level or higher education for the District, compared to 7% for this survey. These differences are probably due to Census figures pertaining to the population 12 years or over, when our respondents were all adults. But the differences may also reflect the inequity in educational attainment between urban and rural areas in the district, as well as a possible rise in educational levels in the town since the PCBS census was conducted.

The average household size was found to be 6.84 persons per household, with the smallest household composed of a single person living alone and the largest composed of 24 persons. Of the total households, 28% were composed of extended families and the rest were nuclear. The average household size found in this survey is higher than that quoted by the PCBS 1997 census of 5.9 persons per household for the district (PCBS, 1999), and 5.3 and 5 for al-Bireh and Ramallah towns respectively.

Family composition: change during exceptional circumstances

The higher than expected average household size found in this survey seems to be related to families housing other families during the siege, a phenomenon observed in many cities, where families moved out of very dangerous areas to perceived less dangerous ones for the duration of the Israeli invasion. Indeed, the results of this survey seem to confirm these observations at least in part. Almost a third (30%) of respondents reported taking in family or friends who moved out of dangerous areas into their household. Of those taking in other families into their homes, two-thirds reported them as relatives, about a quarter as friends, and the rest indicated that a mix of neighbors, friends and family moved into the household during this period. When asked why households received such guests during the period, over half of the respondents reported fear of danger, since their area was surrounded by soldiers, shelling and tanks, and as the main cause for the move of family or friends into their homes; about one tenth reported that the army has taken over the homes of families and or friends who moved in with them, and the rest responded in terms of feeling safer with family than on one's own during these trying times (a variation on misery loves company).

Given the generalizability of the data to the population of Ramallah/al-Bireh, these results are significant in that they indicate a major shift, although temporarily, in household composition, and a substantial temporary internal migration of the population during the invasion from one area into another. These results raise interesting questions for future research, especially research on household management and coping mechanisms to absorb this very severe jolt, and the impact of this on the internal dynamics within the family, on food distribution and on power relationships, to name only a few important implications, especially on male and female members of the household. Anecdotal evidence indicates that women's lives may have been

affected by the sudden 24 hour a day presence of men at home, frustrated by events, not used to being at home, and feeling incapacitated and helpless.

Likewise, the incapacitation that is reported by men during these events and their frustration over their inability to respond to the aggression they face and also protect their families may well have influenced social relations within the family, especially in relation to male self esteem and psychological state. Our results are also interesting in that they may be indicative of family and household coping mechanisms set in place to deal with emergency, conditioned by strong family ties and communal support. While it is true that access to travel outside the country was very restricted during the period, if not impossible, this particular coping mechanism of internal migration contrasts to the 1948 and 1967 mass migrations of large numbers of Palestinians out of the country altogether.

Loss of Work

Of the female respondents, 75% were housewives. That is, a high of 25% of female respondents reported themselves as holding a paid job just before the beginning of the invasion, again, a rate that is higher than the national average reported by PCBS in the 1997 Census for Ramallah of 16%. This could be partially due to the bias towards adult educated working women respondents as being better candidates for interview. Of the male respondents, 16% engaged in private work, either owning a shop, or running a private operation, 13% were professionals (academics, teachers, nurses, doctors, and lawyers), a high of 32% were white collar workers (office workers, technicians, Palestinian Authority functionaries) and 27% were semi skilled or unskilled workers. Twelve percent reported themselves as having been unemployed just prior to the invasion.

Of those working just before the invasion, 23% reported that they are no longer working since the invasion began, that is, that the conditions have led to the loss of their jobs, whether temporarily or permanently. Of those reporting job losses, about one-third stated that the closure and siege was a cause, 40% blamed the collapse of the market, 5% explained unemployment as a result of injury, and one-seventh reported the destruction of work premises, resulting in the loss of work. Clearly, the loss of means of livelihood is an important concern that needs to be addressed promptly, especially that previous to the invasion, the country was already suffering the consequences of siege and closure in terms of the serious loss of income, estimated by PCBS as a drop of household income by at least 48% only six months after the beginning of the current Intifada.

Unavailability of basic services

Reports of frequent electrical cuts during the invasion were widespread in Ramallah, and affected not only Ramallah/Bireh residents but surrounding villages as well. According to the Chief Engineer of the Jerusalem District Electric Company, not less than 100,000 persons were affected by these electrical cuts, ranging from part of the period of the re-invasion to most of the period. In this survey, we find that around 20% of households were without electricity most or all of the period of invasion, 66% suffered the lack of electricity some of the time, and 14% had no problems in electrical current interruptions. A higher percentage, 37% reported tubed water supply cuts either most or all of the duration of the invasion, with 40% reporting shortages for some of the time and 23% no water shortage at all. There were several problems that led to these interruptions, ranging from electrical poles and wires being destroyed by the incoming and moving tanks and army, to the destruction of power feeders and pumps resulting from shelling and bombing, as well as accidental destruction resulting from the fact that tanks are not made to move in narrow streets, and were bound to destroy pavements, electrical poles and other infrastructure coming in their way, mixed with vandalism for the 'fun of it'. Some areas in

Ramallah were more severely affected than others, notably those that lie close to the Presidential Compound, where households were most severely affected not only by power cuts, but by strict curfew conditions for longer periods than the rest of the town as well. Water and especially electrical supply cuts did not merely affect families negatively, but businesses as well, where incidental reports indicate that a sizeable number of shops and supermarkets had lost part of their merchandise that requires refrigeration as a result.

With the majority of households (86%) reporting no problems faced in dealing with sewage during the re-invasion, 8% reported that sewage pipes were blown up, resulting in the pollution of the environment, and 7% reported that septic tanks were not emptied, resulting in the leakage of sewage in open areas. Garbage disposal, on the other hand, appears to have been a problem affecting almost all households, with 96% reporting serious problems and inability to get rid of household refuse. Most reported that household garbage had piled up in refuse containers, attracting flies and exuding odors as during the curfew, the municipal garbage collection system came to a halt. Some even reported that the curfew was so severe that they were unable to transport household garbage to the container located just outside their house, but in the street, and as a result, garbage simply piled up at home during the period.

Low on food and cash

Of the total respondents, a high of 43% reported facing a food availability problem during the period of curfew and re-invasion. During the initial days of the re-invasion, many basic food items, such as milk and milk products, bread, eggs, and fresh vegetables were unavailable. Between the curfew/siege conditions and the electrical cuts, consumers could not find these items in the market. Households with young children probably felt the impact most.

However, another problem emerged in the second half of the period, as the population began to suffer the problem of the unavailability of cash, with 54% of households reporting having gone through the period with little cash to buy available foods. This is not merely because of impoverishment but also because bank transactions were completely halted for a good part of the time. When banks began to open during the second half of the re-invasion period, the four hour curfew lifting was certainly insufficient to accommodate need, in addition to the fact that banks limited withdrawal to a maximum of 200 JD. At one point, a sudden availability of most food items as the IDF began to allow food truckloads to enter the area during the period of curfew lifting, revealed the underlying problem of cash unavailability, with people not being able to buy what they need, even though it was now available to the consumer.

In response, families coped in different ways: 50% simply tried to spend less, a high 34% went on austerity measures and reported that they simply ate less than normally; 20% substituted one type of food with another (such as eating more rice and lentils as well as a heavy reliance on canned foods) 32% borrowed money from friends and relatives, while 5% reported having borrowed food from neighbors; 18% bought food from stores they known on account (Ramallah witnessed a situation where many storekeepers, in solidarity with the community, recorded totals in small account books by the name of customer, hoping they would be paid back once the re-invasion was over), while 18% of households went back to baking bread at home; 14% used savings, 7% lived off what they had until the re-invasion was over, and 1% survived on food aid distributed in the town via ambulances and when the curfew was lifted (totals are more than 100% as families reported using more than one strategy to cope with the unavailability of cash). Clearly, families survived, but it was not easy, especially in households with younger children. Moreover, the impact of these events on the nutritional status of younger children is still to be ascertained.

Shooting, Explosions and Destruction of Property and Institutions

When asked about shooting, explosions, and destruction in their areas, 59% of respondents reported that they endured many incidents: 29% reported almost continuous incidents and only 12% reported little shooting and detonations. These results seem to be related to the area where these households are located, as a further examination of the data showed that the most severe reports came from the areas surrounding the presidential compound and down-town Ramallah, in addition to the Masyoun area. In response to how households managed, a high of 52% reported hiding in fear, lack of sleep and mental distress; 17% reported that the family hid in one room at times, speaking quietly so as not to draw the attention of the army surrounding the house to its presence; 11% reported having to pay attention to children who were in great fear, crying and urinating on themselves, and the rest provided scattered answers ranging from depression, cursing the Israeli army, wishing to die so this would all end, taking sedatives, waiting in anguish for the army to enter the house, and running away to the neighbor's or relatives homes.

Consistent with the above findings, a high of 52% also reported considerable destruction in their neighborhoods. Of those, 39% reported rampant destruction of retaining walls, telephone and electrical poles, shops, pavements, cars and even traffic signs; 23% reported the destruction of homes, doors, the breaking of furniture and windows as well water pipes; 14% reported the invasion and destruction, whether partial or total, of institutions around them such as schools, PA and NGO institutions, and police headquarters; 13% reported the destruction of nearby homes and commercial shops, and the rest provided scattered reports pertaining to the detonation of cars, bullets entering homes, and the using of people as human shields.

Of the total households, 28% reported that their home was directly exposed to shooting, bombing and destruction. Of those almost half reported shooting being directed to their home's walls, glass, home entrances and retaining walls; about a fifth reported that the army occupied their building, destroyed and broke windows, cupboards, furniture, threw food out of cupboards and all over the place and dirtied their homes; another fifth reported the destruction of water tanks on roofs, solar water heating panels and roof lighting, 4% reported theft of valuables by the Israeli army, and the rest reported other types of destruction to homes, such destruction in some rooms not others, destruction of sewage pipes and windows.

In total, 41% of the households reported that their homes were searched by the Israeli army, with a strikingly high 36% reporting at least one family member having been arrested or detained during this period (most probably young men, as the pattern went). Private cars were not spared either, with 19% of respondents reporting the destruction of their cars, either through shooting directly at the car, burning it, or by way of tanks running over cars and reducing them to almost biscuit height, sights that Ramallah/Bireh residents watched in shock the first time the curfew was lifted.

Asking about the workplaces of household members who were working just prior to the invasion, we found that 41% reported their work place as having been exposed to shooting, bombing, or destruction. Although the numbers are too small to discern a definitive pattern, it does seem that white-collar office workers reported the highest rate of destruction in their workplace at almost two thirds of respondents compared to considerably lower rates for others. In describing what happened we find that 54% of those report destruction of the institutional and cultural infrastructure variety that has been previously reported, undoing much of the effort expended during the past three decades in building the institutions of the state as well as civil society, and re-iterating the claim that this has been a war against everything Palestinian, as opposed to aimed at only Israeli security considerations.

Medications

A high of 49% of households reported a medication availability problem at home. Of those, 23% percent reported contacting the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, and 20% the Red Crescent Society who managed to reach those in need of medication with ambulances. It should be noted that these two organizations continued to operate under curfew and siege, and in great danger, often shot at, with staff used as human shields and even arrested temporarily. Eight percent managed to get medications from the neighbors, 4% used substitutes, 4% managed to reach a pharmacist and got the medication, presumably without prescription, and 23% waited until the siege was lifted, with questionable impact on health. The rest either got to hospital or used indigenous medical practices or moved out of the area to reach health services when the curfew was lifted. Of those who had difficulty accessing needed medications, a high of about two-fifths of respondents reported complications, such as out of control diabetes and hypertension, deteriorating health conditions, or complications related to heart conditions. The long term effects of the sudden interruption of needed medications can only be speculative, but one would imagine that one result would be an increase in the rate of complications due to lack of control, especially in the case of diabetes mellitus, heart disease and hypertension.

Mental Health

Respondents were asked to report on any problems they observed in the family related to mental health during the period. It was interesting that the results demonstrated that only 7% reported no mental health problems at all in the family, with the rest, a high of 93%, reporting various types of problems affecting different age groups. With children, crying, screaming, fear, enuresis, fever and nightmares were reported. In adults, headaches, stomachaches, diarrhea, heartaches, uncontrolled diabetes and fainting, and pains related to fear, and even disruptions in bodily functions were reported as well. Clearly, these are respondent proxy reports that cannot be analyzed beyond these general results. Suffice it to say here that this data confirms that the large majority of households have experienced the impact of the re-invasion in traumatic terms manifested by symptoms of psychological distress, both somatic and behavioral, and perhaps the exacerbation of their pre-existing disease conditions, notably those diseases that are negatively affected by stress.

Responses obtained on the management of symptoms of psychological distress are interesting in that perhaps they demonstrate different methods of coping, as well as the strong family and communal ties that come in as handy during these times, when people are locked up at home in danger, uncertainty and fear. Of the total reporting symptoms, 24% said they tried to cope by watching television, playing cards and computer games, reading and entertaining themselves with neighbors and cleaning house, basically, an intensification of the activities that usually happen in normal times; 25% focused on caring for fearful children, explaining to them what is happening around them, playing with them or caring for them in sickness; 22% reported that they tried to exercise self control, drew on their patience and ability to withstand, and cared for others; 6% resorted to praying as a means of coping and 4% did nothing. The rest reported a wide range of responses, such as all the family sleeping in one room, telephoning family members outside the household to check on them, and other such activities, all geared towards withstanding these enormous pressures on the household. These initial results beg for an analysis of coping mechanisms by the sex of respondents, as the clusters that seem to arise pertain to male versus females activities related to coping (caring for children, versus playing cards, for instance). However, the data at hand is too small to yield meaningful results at this stage. On the whole, this initial evidence strongly indicates a generally traumatized household, old and young, and calls for more attention to be paid to this aspect of family health.

Views on Current Conditions

Finally, respondents were also asked to express their view and how they feel about the current situation. A very high 71% reported views pointing to their feeling of despair and misery over what is happening to their lives, 8% reported serious worries regarding financial conditions, and 6% just did not know what to say. The rest provided answers ranging from 'conditions very serious' to 'occupation is the serious problem' to 'a crisis in politics' to even 'excellent as this has exposed the masked face of occupation, the Oslo Accords'. Given these initial results, combined with observational and personal notes, the issue of despair appears to be key to the understanding of people's attitudes to prevailing conditions now, greatly surpassing even the more obvious financial difficulties, perhaps influencing their current approach to managing their daily affairs, and future course of action and events that can only be understood in this particular context of seemingly generalized despair.

Conclusion

This report shares insights and observations of the events in Ramallah and al Bireh, Palestine, during the Israeli Army Invasion of the area with existing and useful qualitative and interview based reports. However, this statistical survey allows for the quantification of observed events and tragic conditions that ordinary people, men, women and children, endured during the period in ways that reinforce and confirm previous reports. What this population experienced in this unilateral war cannot be justified simply by the prerogative of Israeli security, and can only point to a more insidious purpose for the re-invasion, a purpose that in the Palestinian experience, could only have been the destruction of the structures and framework for the survival and the social development of the Palestinian nation.

This study also assists us in estimating the numbers of households and people that were affected by specific serious difficulties in dealing with daily life as a consequence of this re-invasion. Given the generalizability of our results, and based on PCBS's census reports of about 55,000 people living in Ramallah and al-Bireh and an average family size of 5.1 persons per household, we can note the following figures for affected households and individuals:

Total Households in Ramallah and al-Bireh: 55,000 population /5.1 household size= 10784 households.

Households and Individuals Negatively Affected by the Re-Invasion:

1- Family composition change during exceptional circumstances * 30% of respondents reported the taking in of family or friends who moved out of dangerous areas into their household. That is, 3235 households and 16,500 people were in this way affected.

2- Unavailability of basic services

* 20% of households were without electricity most or all of the period of invasion, that is, 2157 households or 11,000 people.

* 66% suffered the lack of electricity some of the time, or 7117 households and 36,300 persons.

* 37% reported tubed water supply cuts either most or all of the duration of the invasion, that is, 3990 households or 20,350 persons.

* 8% reported that sewage pipes were blown off, that is, 862 households or 4400 persons.

* 96% reported serious problems and inability to get rid of household refuse, that is, 10,352 households and 52,800 persons.

3- Low on food and cash

*43% reported facing a food availability problem, that is, 4637 households or 23,650 persons.

* 54% of households reported having gone through the period with little cash to buy available foods, that is, 5823 households or 29,700 persons.

4- Shooting, Explosions and Destruction of Property and Institutions Close By

* 59% of respondents reported that they lived a lot of that and practically all of the time, that is 6363 households and 32,450 persons.

* 29% reported a lot of shooting most of the time, that is 3127 households or 15,950 persons.

* 52% reported hiding in fear, lack of sleep and mental distress, that is, 5607 households or 28,600 persons.

* 52% also reported considerable destruction in their neighborhoods, that is 5607 households or 28,600 persons.

* 28% reported that their home was directly exposed to shooting, bombing and destruction that is, 3020 households or 15,400 persons.

* 41% of the households reported that their homes were searched by the IDF, that is , 4421 households or 22,550 persons.

5- Medications

* 49% of households reported a medication availability problem at home, that is, 5284 households or 26,949 persons.

6- Mental Health

* 93% reported various types of mental health problems that is, 10,29 households with 51,148 persons.

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