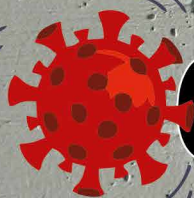


# **The Double Lockdown:**

# **Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19**



Edited by  
**Saeb Erakat**  
**Mitri Raheb**



**THE DOUBLE  
LOCKDOWN:  
PALESTINE  
UNDER OCCUPATION  
AND COVID-19**

Edited by  
Saeb Erakat and Mitri Raheb

First Edition

**The Double Lockdown:  
Palestine under Occupation and COVID-19**

Edited by:  
Saeb Erakat and Mitri Raheb

Copy right © 2020 Diyar Publisher  
ISBN: 978-9950-376-41-0

Design by: Taisir Masrieh/Turbo Design

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher.

1. Palestine - Political aspects
2. COVID-19(Disease)-Economic aspects-Palestine
3. Palestine - Religious aspects
4. COVID-19(Disease)-Palestine

DS119.76. D68 2020

[www.diyar.p s](http://www.diyar.p s)

In memory of a dear colleague **Jamil Rabah**

# Contents

Foreword	6
<i>Saeb Erakat &amp; Mitri Raheb</i>	
The Impact on International Relations During and Following the Coronavirus Pandemic	8
<i>Saeb Erakat</i>	
East Jerusalem and COVID-19	22
<i>Bernard Sabella</i>	
Violations of the Law during COVID-19: Israeli Annexation Plans in Western Bethlehem	29
<i>Xavier Abu Eid</i>	
Israeli Politics During COVID-19 and the Impact on Palestine	40
<i>Dalal Iriqat</i>	
Towards A Better Statistical Communication Strategy on COVID-19	50
<i>Faisal Awartani</i>	
St Joseph's Hospital Prepares to Receive COVID -19 Cases	57
<i>Maher Deeb</i>	
The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Tourism Industry in the Bethlehem Region	59
<i>Hani Abu Dayyeh</i>	
Violence against Women and COVID-19 in Palestine: A gendered perspective on measures to fight the pandemic and recommendations for a gender-sensitive approach	67
<i>Randa Siniora</i>	
The Church and Covid-19	78
<i>Issa Jamil Kassissieh</i>	
Religion in Times of COVID-19: Reflections from a Palestinian Christian Theologian	89
<i>Mitri Raheb</i>	
Occupation and Loss under COVID-19	95
<i>Varsen Aghabekian</i>	
Footnotes	104
Short bios	111





# Foreword

The idea to assemble a booklet on the impact of COVID-19 on Palestine was prompted by the need for information that provides an overview of the effects of COVID-19 in the realms of politics, economy, health, religion and gender. We are delighted to present this booklet with eleven contributions by prominent public figures in Palestine.

The first section of the booklet focuses on the political aspects with an opening paper by the Palestinian Chief Negotiator, Dr. Saeb Erakat, on the impact of COVID-19 on international relations and its potential impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The paper is followed by two case studies: Dr. Bernard Sabella, former member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, looks at Jerusalem, a city that Israel declared united under its sovereignty. However, during the pandemic, the city is revealed as divided into two different sets of medical and social infrastructure and services. The second case is presented by Xavier Abu Eid who examines the Israeli annexation plan promoted by President Trump that strangles the city of Bethlehem and confiscates two strategic areas west of the city: the Cremisan Valley and Makhroun.

These papers are followed by a paper by Dr. Dalal Iriqat who examines Israeli politics during COVID-19. The arrival of the virus coincided with a third Israeli election and the forming of a new 'unity government' that may have a significant impact on Palestinians.

The fifth paper by Dr. Faisal Awartani looks at the statistics related to COVID-19 and compares Palestine's data with that of the rest of the world, concluding with

relevant recommendations for international agencies and governments. Dr. Maher Deeb, the Medical Director of Saint Joseph Hospital in Jerusalem, gives then a firsthand account of his experience with the pandemic.

The second section of the booklet has five papers: The first is by Hani Abu Dayyeh, a leading figure in the Palestinian tourism industry. It analyses the devastating effects of the pandemic on the Palestinian tourism industry in general, particularly the city of Bethlehem which may need two to three years to recover. The second paper by Ms. Randa Siniora provides a gendered perspective on violence against woman. Palestinian women have been exposed to two different forms of violence, one by the Israeli occupation and a second from a Palestinian Arab patriarchal society, with the pandemic complicating domestic violence.

The third paper in this section by Ambassador Issa Kassissieh examines the performance of churches in Jerusalem in dealing with COVID-19, especially the pandemic measures implemented during the holiest week of Easter, and the dilemma of churches in relation to the civil authorities. A paper by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb gives a snapshot of new forms of religious practices that have developed in response to the shutdown of churches caused by the coronavirus. He explains short and long term impact that these changes might have on how religion is lived and experienced. The final paper by Dr. Varsen Aghabekian is a firsthand testimony reflecting the intersection of politics and health by a Jerusalemite who loses a father during the pandemic and within the larger context of occupation. The fight for life, dignity, identity and peace does not cease with death but remains a struggle carried on by one generation after the other.

We hope that these eleven papers will reveal different aspects of life in Palestine under COVID-19. This pandemic is changing both the global and the local scene in Palestine. As the world seeks an effective global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Palestinians hope for an effective international coalition to bring an end to occupation. Just as we continue our struggle to defeat the coronavirus, we will continue our work for justice, peace and a life with dignity.

We would like to dedicate this booklet to a dear colleague, Jamil Rabah, who was a great pollster and a regular contributor to literature on Palestine and senior Policy adviser to the Negotiations Affairs Department. May his memory be eternal.

Dr. Saeb Erakat

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb



# COVID-19

## The Impact on International Relations During and Following the Coronavirus Pandemic

Dr. Saeb Erakat

### Introduction

---

The world has repeatedly heard and read that the COVID-19 pandemic will change everything. Life will not be the same. International relations will be different. This paper is merely an introduction to further research on the impact of the pandemic on international politics now and later, with focus on the impact on the State of Palestine in light of global events.

When people pass through serious ordeals, it is normal that they want to believe that life will change for the better and they will be in a better shape than they were before the ordeal. Is this so? Will all changes be for the better? In sum, what change could the coronavirus bring to international relations?

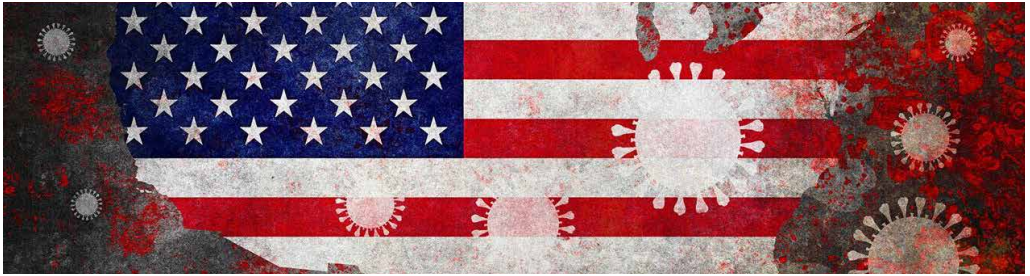
Two elements are needed to answer these questions: When will this situation of the pandemic end? And when will humanity discover a vaccine? We don't know the answers to these two questions and thus it is difficult to give definite answers as to how the pandemic may impact international relations. However, looking at the current realities in which we live, we can speculate on the consequences that may develop after the coronavirus in the US, China, the EU, Russia, the Middle East and others with their impact on Palestine. This will be the focus of this paper.



## Potential Transformations and Foreign Policies

In general terms, nation states will undergo significant structural transformations that will affect their foreign policies. Regional cooperation will become more relevant, while multilateralism and international cooperation will follow a similar path against the trends of those promoting international anarchy.

### The United States of America



The US is the world's biggest economy with a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$21.5 trillion.<sup>1</sup> Over the last five decades the US integrated itself within the global economy. As a result, the US has become the strongest economy and one of the best scientific establishments housing top- ranked universities. It has some of the world's most significant companies: Amazon, Apple and Boeing are proof of the US as a leader in innovation.

Nevertheless, coronavirus has exposed the structural weaknesses of the US, including the style and policies of the current administration. An inadequate health insurance system, lack of paid sick leave and other job protections, and an employment system that encourages companies to fire workers on the spot have been proven to be detrimental to the overall domestic system: 16 million jobs were lost in the month of March 2020.<sup>2</sup> The total number of unemployed reached 36.5 million in May.<sup>3</sup> No one can accurately forecast the exact figures of jobs lost when all this ends.

In November 2020 there will be presidential elections in the US and the results will determine how the country will rebuild, heal and recover. It will have to face some of the toughest questions in its history, mainly about whether to integrate or isolate itself. If President Donald Trump is reelected, he will focus internally.

If Joe Biden is elected, the focus will be on integrating the US to lead the world, and that in itself will have a positive effect on domestic recovery. The Trump administration had benefited from a positive economic recovery passed on by the Obama administration, but this is no longer the case.<sup>4</sup> The current crisis may have a significant impact on the November elections.

When 22 million employees in the USA lost their jobs in six weeks, 15% of the American labor force became unemployed, mainly due to the fact that the system allows companies to fire workers quickly. This also means that the economic recovery in the United States will be a very long one. At the same time, the absence of sick leave benefits undermines efforts to contain the coronavirus.<sup>5</sup> The responses of several European countries, including Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Ireland and Sweden, emphasized the importance of protecting wages for workers who remain employed. By allowing companies to retain employees, operations to resume recovery will be quicker. In the US, workers will not be rehired until the consumer economy picks up and companies regain confidence in the future.<sup>6</sup>

If Trump is reelected, he will not tolerate this situation under any circumstances. He will expand trade wars not only on China, but on every single country that under his subjective considerations he considers to be a threat. Such policies at a time of recovery will mean a continuation of the alliances between the US and like-minded governments, including systematic violators of human rights, autocracies and a number of international actors that work against a rules-based world order.

The European Union's strength after COVID-19 will depend on its ability to do exactly the opposite: to create international alliances based on its stated values in support of strong international organizations and cooperation. This may create new opportunities for collaboration that will change the calculations of its foreign policies, including with the Arab world. There will be more focus from the Europeans on other serious global threats such as climate change, which is now off-track. We all know that one of the first acts by President Trump in 2017 was to withdraw from the Paris Agreement: this policy will not change.

Initially President Trump did not take the pandemic seriously. He did not care about the thousands of infections in China, Europe and elsewhere. He dealt with the global pandemic as a war on other countries with the mentality that the US is far from China and Europe. This mentality will not change after the coronavirus: Trump will stick to the mantra 'May God protect America' and will not change it to 'May God protect everyone'.

The way that the Trump administration has dealt with its foreign relations in general, and its behavior during the pandemic, leads us to predict a somber future. Rather than scenarios of cooperation and peace, the focus may be on scenarios of war in all spheres (trade, politics, climate, etc), creating an environment that represents a threat to world peace and security. An example is how the US dealt with two of its closest allies in Europe most affected by the pandemic in Europe: Italy and Spain, both members of NATO, but which did not receive any assistance from President Trump. In contrast, Cuba, while continuing to suffer from an illegal blockade imposed by Washington, sent medical teams and medical supplies to both countries, as did Russia and China. This will be remembered.

In summary, the US in the days after coronavirus will be heavily influenced by the presidential elections to determine whether the US will lead international cooperation and alliances or will threaten multilateralism and international relations.

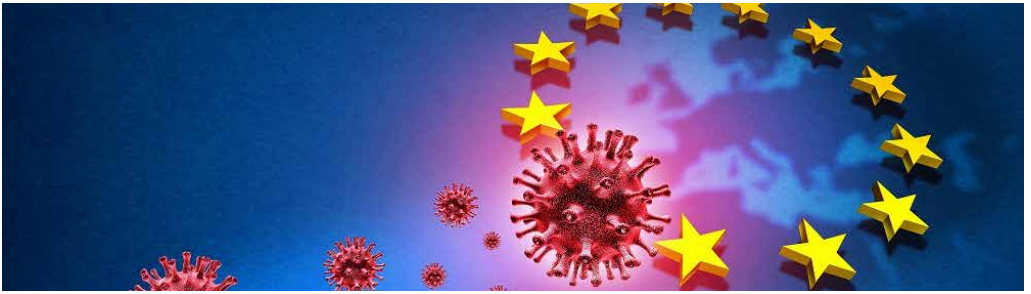
## The European Union



The 27 EU member states constitute the second largest world economy with a GDP of \$18.7 trillion.<sup>7</sup> The EU was reportedly caught by surprise as COVID-19 expanded, with Italy and Spain as prominent examples. During the first three weeks of the pandemic reaching Europe, the EU did not prove itself to be a union that could protect member countries and EU solidarity looked like an empty phrase.

The EU Foreign Ministers discussed the pandemic crisis on 23 March 2020 via video conference. After the meeting, Joseph Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Affairs, stated: “Only by pulling together and cooperating across borders can we beat the virus and contain its consequences. The EU has a central role to play”. He added: “COVID-19 will reshape the world. We do not yet know when the crisis will end. But we can be sure that by the time it does, our world will look very different. How different will depend on the choices we make today”.<sup>8</sup> High Representative Borrell has constantly reaffirmed the founding values of the EU in his calls for cooperation and joint action.

Some questioned, based on the first weeks of the pandemic, whether the EU would survive or not. After marathon discussions in Brussels, the EU got its act together when the Chairman of the Eurogroup, Mario Conteno, announced a 500 billion



euro rescue package as the most important economic plan in EU history.<sup>9</sup> This is how the EU started to deal with what looks like the most serious, although not the only, crisis of its history.

The EU does not have one foreign policy: it has 27 foreign policies and that will not change after the pandemic. Issues for consideration will include economics, recovery, trade relations with the US, China, Japan, Britain, the Arab world and the rest of the world. The EU may become more dependent on reliable energy supplies from Russia and other countries closer to its borders, rather than from its current suppliers, including notably the US.<sup>10</sup>

In the last 30 years, EU dependency on oil from Arab-producing countries dropped by 30%. Prior to the coronavirus, the US was the EU's main exporting destination, while China was the EU's main importing partner.

There are suggestions that after Brexit the UK may move closer to the US, but this is yet to be seen in the new scenario. What is becoming clear is that a large number of countries, including the EU member states, will evaluate their relationships with the US. "Transatlantic cooperation" seems to be a failed model under President Trump's presidency. This is a view that many will agree with, apart, perhaps, from like-minded European administrations to that of President Trump, particularly Hungary. In general, it can be assumed that recovery from the international recession created by the pandemic will not be a smooth process under President Trump.

An important new scenario will be the role developed by countries in the immediate proximity of Europe, and particularly those in Northern Africa, after COVID-19. Food security and access to natural resources will require countries, and the EU as a bloc, to prioritize regional relations. In this context, countries such as Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia may have a golden opportunity to re-design their relations

with the EU and its member states. Their comparative advantages versus other exporters not in close proximity to Europe such as the US, Latin America and other African countries, may become a significant new element of European foreign relations after COVID-19.

## China

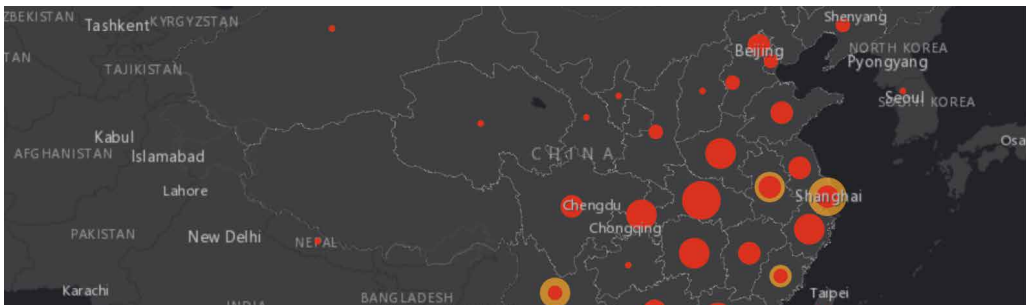
---

China is the second economic power after the US and has a GDP of \$14 trillion.<sup>11</sup> Before the spread of the coronavirus, the US and China were facing each other in a trade war, but the real battle between the two economic giants was a technological one. China had a positive trade balance of \$873 billion.<sup>12</sup> In 2018 China exported \$2.3 trillion<sup>13</sup> and had a \$350 billion surplus in its trade with the US, a key reason for President's Trump trade war with China.

During the epidemic, China was the main country that could provide the materials and equipment needed by the US in its war against the rapid spread of COVID-19. Strangely enough, the US faced serious shortages that could only be filled by China and this was an opportunity for a genuine truce between the two giants.

Restrictions on the movement of people, goods and services, and containment measures such as factory closures, have cut manufacturing and domestic demand sharply in China, US, EU, Japan, the Middle East and the rest of the world. This has had a negative impact on business, travel, tourism, supply chains and commodities.

China was able to contain COVID-19 with commitment, organization, rigor and levels of efforts that seriously threatened US dominance of the medical front. President Trump tried to monopolize vaccine research and offered billions of dollars to the German medical research company Cure Vac to move to the US.





The offer angered the EU and Germany, and led the German Health Minister Jens Spahn to say: “The takeover of Cure Vac by the Trump administration is off the table”.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of a vaccine and with COVID-19 spreading across the US, Trump has blamed China for the spread of the virus. This has and will pave the way for a further deterioration in US-China relations once the pandemic is over.

Since President Trump came to office in 2017, the US has been losing its position as a trusted partner with many countries, including its NATO allies. With China’s rise as a trusted partner, many countries, including close allies of the US for the past 75 years, will reposition after the pandemic is over: “This is our chance to change things in China”.

In any new scenario, China will be able to build on the close relations it has already built in the rest of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It has developed relations that have significantly expanded China’s diplomatic influence. Its responses against the racist statements made by populist right-wing leaders in the context of COVID-19 have won considerable support from most of the international community. This goes for the utterly failed attempts by President Trump to turn the pandemic into an attack against China.

## Russia



Russia’s GDP stood at \$1.65 trillion in 2019, the 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world. EU dependence on Russia for fuel and natural gas will grow during and after the pandemic. Relations will improve, especially as Russia sent medical supplies and staff to Italy and Serbia, and sold medical equipment to the US. Russia’s continued reach to assist other countries will depend on the spread of the pandemic in Russia. By mid-April 2020, 25.000 infections were registered throughout the Russian Federation. Many government hospitals in Moscow have reached full capacity.

In the economic sphere, the Russian government has projected a slump of 10% in Russia’s economy if the coronavirus continues to spread and the world lockdown continues until the end of 2020.<sup>15</sup>

In a major message to the international community, Russia agreed to cut its oil production by 2.5 million barrels a day. This decision is in line with oil-producing countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and is a gesture of conciliation with the



Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) during the international lockdown. This is a key move in preparation for Russia's international role in the post-pandemic era.

Growing economic crises, the refusal of Western nations to accept President's Putin proposal for a moratorium on sanctions related to essential goods, and high unemployment rates as a result of the coronavirus will form part of the Kremlin's foreign relations considerations.

The Middle East, namely Syria, Arab oil-producing countries and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, will top the list of Russia's Middle East foreign policy. Aware that the Trump-Netanyahu deal of the century will not fly, Russia may make serious efforts to bring Palestinians and Israelis back to the negotiating table.

### The Middle East: Palestine



Palestinians continue to suffer from a belligerent Israeli occupation, limited resources, an internal division with Hamas due to the latter's refusal to implement its obligations under national reconciliation agreements, financial problems and threats of further annexation of their land to Israel. They will certainly face serious problems as a result of the coronavirus.

When the first case of the coronavirus appeared in Bethlehem on 5 March 2020, there was efficient cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. The virus started to spread immediately after the third Israeli election on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March. A joint Israeli-Palestinian committee was formed and Israel shared some test kits, and released a fraction of the clearance revenues.

However, Israel's behavior towards Palestinians reverted to business as usual. Between 5 March and 5 April 2020, Israeli violations during COVID-19 included

the following:

- 3 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army.
- 52 Palestinians were injured by the Israeli army.
- 47 structures were demolished or confiscated.
- 238 incursions and raids were made by the Israeli occupation army into Palestinian areas.



Israeli forces detain 16-year-old boy in the West Bank city of Hebron.  
Photo by Wisam Hashlamoun.

- 267 Palestinians were arrested.
- 87 terrorist attacks were carried out by settlers.
- The main topic of discussion among Israeli politicians in the negotiations to form a national unity government was the annexation of Palestinian occupied territory.
- Israel forced Palestinian workers, including sick ones, to return to the occupied Palestinian areas without coordinating with the Palestinian

Authority, and without testing them or giving them medical attention against the coronavirus.

- Israeli occupation army destroyed an emergency field clinic of tents in the Jordan Valley.
- In East Jerusalem (EJ), Israel did not provide the medical care required for over 400,000 Palestinians. Additionally, they prevented the Palestinian Minister for Jerusalem, the Governor, a member of the PLO executive committee and the heads of political factions from providing services, disinfecting and food distribution. They also arrested the Minister and the Governor for trying to help prevent the spread of the virus. Israeli police closed a clinic in Silwan under accusations of collaborating with the PA and arrested Palestinian teams in EJ working to sterilize the streets.
- The Gaza Strip was kept under siege.
- Israel refused to release Palestinian prisoners.
- American and Israeli officials continued their work on maps to define the areas that will be annexed to Israel as per the Trump-Netanyahu plan (deal of the century).

The pandemic provided Netanyahu with the perfect cover to delay his corruption indictments and trial. He used the virus to achieve what three elections in one year failed to achieve: to become the Prime Minister of a national unity government for 18 months to fight the pandemic, especially as no one in Israel was in favor of a fourth election.



The majority of cases in the occupied West Bank are believed to have been contracted by Palestinian workers who crossed over to Israel to work in construction and agriculture. Anadolu Agency

With the spread of the coronavirus, Netanyahu succeeded in getting the Benny Gantz-led Blue and White party to rearrange its policies and accept to be part of a national unity government headed by Netanyahu, with the price being the destruction of Gantz's political party. This will pave the way for smooth sailing to victory for Netanyahu's Likud Party in any future elections in Israel.

The main objective of Netanyahu and his key partner, President Trump and his team, is to implement annexation plans. If Netanyahu moves on a fast-track annexation of the Jordan Valley, the settlements, the Dead Sea, plus the already annexed EJ and Latroun, he will render the Palestinian Authority non-sustainable and may lead to its destruction. All signed agreements with Israel will become irrelevant to Israeli-Palestinian relations.

In the wake of the annexation and the pandemic, Netanyahu does not want to see a Palestinian Authority so he can claim that he has no Palestinian partner to pursue peace with. He will have full control of the West Bank, including EJ, and will maintain the status quo in the Gaza Strip.<sup>16</sup> Annexation of occupied Palestinian territory means the destruction of the possibility of a negotiated agreement, and

will consolidate the status of Israel as "one state" effectively imposing "two systems" in all the territory of historic Palestine. The apartheid system that will result from this formula is what the Trump administration is pushing for: consolidation of the status quo.

President Mahmoud Abbas introduced a Palestinian vision of peace to the Security Council on 11 February 2020. He sent letters to members of the international community explaining the Palestinian vision of peace that would be under the umbrella of an international conference, with a resumption of bilateral negotiations based on the agreed terms of reference and agreements signed. Numerous phone calls were made to world leaders during the pandemic to recruit their assistance in stopping the implementation of the annexation plan.

The calculations made by PM Netanyahu regarding annexation surely include two main facts: first, that the world is overwhelmed fighting the pandemic



Photo courtesy of AFP



and second, that there exists a culture of impunity that the international community has granted to Israel's actions. It is telling that while Israel is openly expressing its intentions to annex occupied territory, countries such as Germany, Australia, Austria, Brazil and Canada sent communications to the International Criminal Court not to take action on documented crimes committed by Israel in the occupied State of Palestine. If this path of annexation is pursued, the day after the pandemic may also signify a day of no return to a negotiated solution.

Yet there may be a different perspective after COVID-19 whereby the world values the role of international law, international organizations, cooperation and the prevalence of a rules-based world order. In this context, Israeli actions and policies will not be seen merely as an "obstacle" to the peace process or an attack against Palestinian rights, but rather as a threat against the international order. If a significant number of international actors were to adopt that path and prevent the normalization of the acquisition of land through the use of force, it could represent a turning point in the direction of peace.

Countries in the region will be overloaded with complex problems as they attempt to recover from the devastating impact of the pandemic on all facets of life. Key issues will be economic ones, a rise in extremism as a result of Israeli annexation of occupied Palestinian territory and the lack of a genuine response by Arab countries.

In 2019 the total GDP of Arab countries was less than that of Germany (GDP of \$3.86 trillion) and equal to Britain (GDP of \$2.83 trillion). This places the Arab countries as a bloc in seventh place in the list of GDP per country. The deterioration in oil prices, the loss of millions of jobs due to closure of labor markets in Arab Gulf countries and the inability to provide basic needs to their populations may lead Arab leaders to introduce more authoritarian practices to maintain control. This may lead to discontent and upheaval.

The characteristics of Arab demography, particularly the high percentage of young population, will represent an increasing challenge to governments. Institutional restructuring will certainly be required in several countries in order to meet the growing demand for services.

If the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf region, intends to maintain its current foreign relations, including mainly with the US, it will face increasing difficulties. The new scenario emerging after the pandemic may be assessed as a call for collaboration with other regional players, including Iran that is in dire need of international support. Russia and China should seize this opportunity as economic

exchanges have been growing for the past few years. An evaluation of economic relations with European markets may result in a growing engagement that will provide mutual benefits.

In this scenario the role of Jordan, an important hub in our region, will become more relevant than before the crisis. Egypt will continue to play a leading role, but the need for broader alliances will be more demanding. The present and future of both countries are vital for Middle East peace and international collaboration with these countries should be considered as an investment in regional peace and security. As explained above, there may be new opportunities for Maghreb-European relations.

## Conclusion



At this stage of the coronavirus and its ongoing spread, and without any possibility of knowing when a vaccine will be introduced, it is premature to define the precise impact of the pandemic on future international relations.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects a global recession in 2020 as bad as the recession of 2008. However, the IMF expects that 2021 will be a year of international recovery.<sup>17</sup>

It is certain that conflicts and problems will not disappear after the pandemic. The Israeli government will not cancel its annexation plan for the occupied Palestinian territory, and will not resume negotiations with the PLO on the basis of existing signed agreements and agreed terms of reference.<sup>18</sup>

The PLO will not accept the annexation and apartheid plan of the Israeli government, which will likely be implemented with the lowest cost possible before the end of the coronavirus to exploit the pandemic and while the attention of the international community is diverted. Meanwhile, the PLO should exert utmost efforts towards ending the internal division and bringing about reconciliation.

The EU stand on Crimea will not change, neither will that of Russia. But the possibility of closer relations by the EU with Russia and China during the recovery period is a very realistic possibility. This may be a push to the advantage of the peace camp in the Middle East as Russia plays a bigger role

Recovery in the Middle East, Arab countries, Iran and Turkey will be difficult in the transitional period. The focus must be on rebuilding health systems, education,

infrastructure, women's rights and human rights. The focus will be on promoting better standards of living through improved services with a transparent budget striking a balance among sectoral needs. It should be noted that democracy based on real political parties can be the alternative to authoritarian regimes or rigid religious political party roles.

The US will remain the main global superpower and also the first economy. The impact of the coronavirus on US foreign policy will be determined after the November 2020 presidential election. If President Trump is reelected, it will be a policy of domestic-oriented recovery with a foreign policy based on trade wars, blame wars, climate war and dictatorship. Trump's foreign policy, if he is reelected, will continue to be based on the concept: "Nations are born to be strong or to find strong nations to protect them at the right price".

Authoritarian regimes will embrace Trump's policies, but others will not. Authoritarian, right-wing religious leaders will find President Trump a natural ally once the pandemic ends. Democratic countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Japan, Australia, Canada, and others will be unable to tolerate Trump's foreign policies. This will not mean cutting ties with the US, but will create seriously difficult relationships.

The post COVID-19 scenario may be challenging but if the values of international cooperation and a rules-based world order increase for a significant number of international players, as may be the case, it may signify a positive turning point for world peace and security, including for Palestine.





# East Jerusalem and COVID-19

Photo courtesy of crisisgroup.org

**Dr. Bernard Sabella**

## Introduction

---

Jerusalem is the city of the Resurrection with religious and communal traditions and associations representing the deep-rooted history of the three faiths that believe in the One God. Yet despite its religious diversity, charm and attractiveness, Jerusalem is a divided city. Perhaps the spread of the coronavirus that has plagued human kind lately is a poignant illustration of this division. This paper focuses on medical and other challenges faced by Palestinians in the city and how they cope with these challenges.

## Responsibility of an Occupying Power

---

Palestinians in East Jerusalem (EJ) feel that they have been abandoned by the Israeli Ministry of Health in the efforts to contain and combat the virus. Although in early March only a scant number of cases had been reported in Palestinian neighborhoods of the city, by mid-April the surge had reached over one hundred and thirteen cases, with one death (1). There was fear that the infection would spread further to hundreds of people, while the three of the six East Jerusalem hospitals designated to deal with cases cannot accommodate more than seventy-



Palestinian volunteers wear protective gear as they sanitize a mosque to help fight coronavirus jerusalem march 16 2020.Reuters

two patients (2). With a limited number of ventilators, not more than twenty in the six East Jerusalem hospitals, the more extreme cases require treatment in Israeli hospitals.

Aside from the limited number of medical professionals trained to deal with the virus, there is also a shortage of surgical masks, sanitizer, gloves and other self-protecting equipment in the three East Jerusalem hospitals. The problem with this universal threat of a virus is that the Israeli authorities have not assumed their responsibility as an occupying power to the Palestinian residents in the east of the city, while at the same time restricting any activities deemed to be conducted under the auspices of the Palestinian National Authority (3). Both the Palestinian Minister for Jerusalem Affairs and the Governor of the city have been arrested a couple of times and sternly warned not to undertake any virus-related activities within the city. The Governor was banned from visiting the West Bank for six months in order to prevent any coordination efforts on his part with the Palestinian government in Ramallah.

## Sovereignty: Israel's Political Ploy vs. Protection for All

---

The fight against the virus has become an Israeli political ploy to highlight that the city, including East Jerusalem, is under Israeli sovereignty and that any activity or initiative believed to be funded by the Palestinian Authority is a threat to that professed sovereignty. A stark and sad example of the extent to which the Israeli



authorities would go is the closure of a clinic in the Silwan neighborhood, set up by Palestinian medical teams to undertake tests in this densely populated area. The Israelis claimed that the clinic had received the testing kits from the Palestinian Authority. This posed a challenge to exclusive Israeli sovereignty and hence, the clinic was closed (4). Another unfortunate example of the Israeli obsession with sovereignty, despite the unlawfulness of Jerusalem's annexation under international law (5), has been the arrest of four Palestinians who were distributing leaflets on how to protect against the virus and its spread in the city. Fears that the spread of the



A priest walks amid coronavirus restrictions in a street in Jerusalem's Old City, April 9, 2020. Photo by Ammar Awad, courtesy of al-monitor.com.

virus in East Jerusalem would adversely affect the entire population, in addition to pressure that included a petition by Adalah to the High Court, resulted in the Israeli Ministry of Health eventually setting up four testing stations in East Jerusalem (6).

These testing stations illustrated that the virus was indeed spreading in East Jerusalem and eighty-one Palestinians, forty of them in the Silwan neighborhood, had tested positive by mid-April. Most Palestinians in East Jerusalem are health insured with the various medical funds. The Clalit medical fund, where the majority of the population is insured, decided that an insured person could contact their doctor when there is a need for a test and the doctor is authorized to direct the insured accordingly.

Frustrated by a sense of Israeli inaction and hibernation during the critical first weeks of the spread of the virus, eighty-one Palestinian NGOs set up the "Jerusalem Alliance" for medical and other volunteers to support communities and hospitals in East Jerusalem. The Alliance successfully negotiated the handing

over of two hotels (7), one for those requiring quarantine and the second for the medical personnel working to fight the disease in Jerusalem hospitals. Four medical screening tents were set up by the Alliance in the three East Jerusalem hospitals to ensure proper admittance of potential coronavirus patients. A hotline in Arabic was also set up because the Israeli hotline responds only in Hebrew.

## Home Confinement, Religious Obligations and Social Pressures

In Jerusalem, perhaps more than in some other cities, the significance of religious and national holidays has a special aura. After all, Jerusalem is a city of roots that refuses to succumb to the virus or to natural and man-made disasters. From February when the virus first arrived, many prayed and hoped that it would not disrupt the approaching religious traditions and ceremonies of Easter, the High Holidays and Ramadan.



ANSA

Most Palestinian residents of the city complied with the Palestinian government's instructions to stay at home and lockdown following the discovery of the first cases of COVID-19 in Bethlehem on Wednesday, 4 March. As per government instructions, churches and mosques were ordered to close across the Palestinian territories. The heads of churches in Jerusalem and the

Waqf Islamic authorities took the inevitable and sad step of closing churches and mosques, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Al Aqsa Mosque.

Although the faithful need the spiritual and moral support of identifying with their holy places and of celebrating with their families and kin, the fear of the continuing spread of the virus necessitated drastic measures. In an age of social media, social distancing was mitigated by the abundance of channels, links and audio-visual means to connect the faithful with their respective services. Naturally, some felt irked by this situation but were forced to adapt as it saves lives and helps stop the spread of the virus. Some proud and pious souls in Jerusalem, as elsewhere, felt

that attendance at their religious services would protect and offer immunity by the sheer force of expressing their faith en masse. Those who dared to attend church or mosque often received stern warnings by the authorities of fines and prison if their behavior was repeated. Faith can contribute to a feeling of inner peace, particularly amid the coronavirus, but faith also requires that we use our sense of reason to refrain from hurting ourselves and others by taking part in unnecessary assemblies.

## Lack of Social Service Infrastructure



It is true that long periods of enforced home confinement can lead to despondency. Home confinement, particularly in densely populated quarters, could also lead to spates of anger and domestic violence. Thus, experts are warning that the situation, if it lasts any longer, could lead to infraction of the rights of women and children, to misery and depression in older parents, and to an unhealthy social environment in general.

In East Jerusalem, the lack of a well-developed infrastructure of social and professional caring services is a cause of concern. This is also true of the Palestinian Territory, Gaza included, as the authorities attempt to deal with the economic repercussions of the virus on poorer families and those left without a steady income. It appears that from Jerusalem to Jenin, from Tulkarm to Rafah, we are all suffering the consequences of this virus. It is particularly worrying when friends and virtual friends stigmatise those infected with the disease. This constitutes a primordial fear that cannot be justified and that puts added stress and pressure on those infected and their families.

As stated often in recent weeks, the disease does not distinguish between social status, religious affiliation or national identifications. It is a calamity faced by us all. Some are at the forefront of managing it and finding a solution, preferably with a vaccine. Some young Jerusalemites have posted on their internet pages that in hospitals across the city, Palestinian medics, nurses and other professionals are at the helm of fighting the disease and serving all those who need help irrespective of background. This makes one proud of being a Jerusalemite and a Palestinian.

Other Palestinians who served in care homes for the elderly in the Israeli part of the city and who were exposed to the disease, were themselves infected. They then infected their families and close kin. It is true that no one is immune from the disease, but some have the privilege of being protected more than others. Some

young bloggers stress the need to review our previous lifestyles in order to better prepare for the future, including in the city of our forefathers. Others suggested that this was a time to show solidarity and to forget about long-standing enmities and hostilities, whether personal, communal or international, and to think of a brave new world. This echoes the words of world and religious leaders who call on the world to cease hostilities and for nations to come to the aid of each other.

Yet others have been quick to remind their readers that specific countries have failed in carrying out their obligations towards Jerusalem, its hospitals and its people in their hour of need. Palestinians in general feel that the spread of the virus calls for humane and unconditional coordination instead of pitiful acts of political retribution by some countries.

## Conclusion - Jerusalem the Eternal: Source of Hope



Jerusalem remains eternal in the sense that it evokes in humankind the sense of how the past is linked to the present, and how topography and history have created the successive maps of the city with its hills, sanctuaries and significant sites. As one walks the empty streets of the city during coronavirus and sees the closed gates of the Church, the Mosque and other holy places, one is reminded that hope cannot be forsaken. This has been the message sent out repeatedly by the Palestinian government (8) and by all religious leaders of the city to their faithful. (9).

The thirteen heads of churches sent a message of hope and consolation amid the pandemic to remind the faithful that God is present and to invite us to look to the future with hope. All religious leaders were sad that the city was empty of its pilgrims, tourists and those visitors seeking spiritual enrichment; they were sad that the pandemic prevented the usual Easter celebrations and the preparations

to welcome the fasting month of Ramadan. Yet, despite the sadness at Jerusalem being empty during this season, the heads of churches reminded their faithful that we are called by our faith in the Resurrection to look to a future without “oppression, discrimination, hunger and injustice”.

May the future demonstrate cooperation by humankind whereby priorities are revisited and human relations are infused with the sense that we are all interdependent. Hopefully, respect for others and their rights and traditions, in Jerusalem as elsewhere, would lead us towards creating a brave new world where injustice and occupation are replaced by justice and freedom! We in Jerusalem remain hopeful that the time will come when we can exercise our political rights as part of an independent Palestinian state that caters for the health and welfare of all Palestinians.







# Violations of the Law during COVID-19: Israeli Annexation Plans in Western Bethlehem

Photo courtesy of Daniel Bevan

**Xavier Abu Eid**

## Introduction



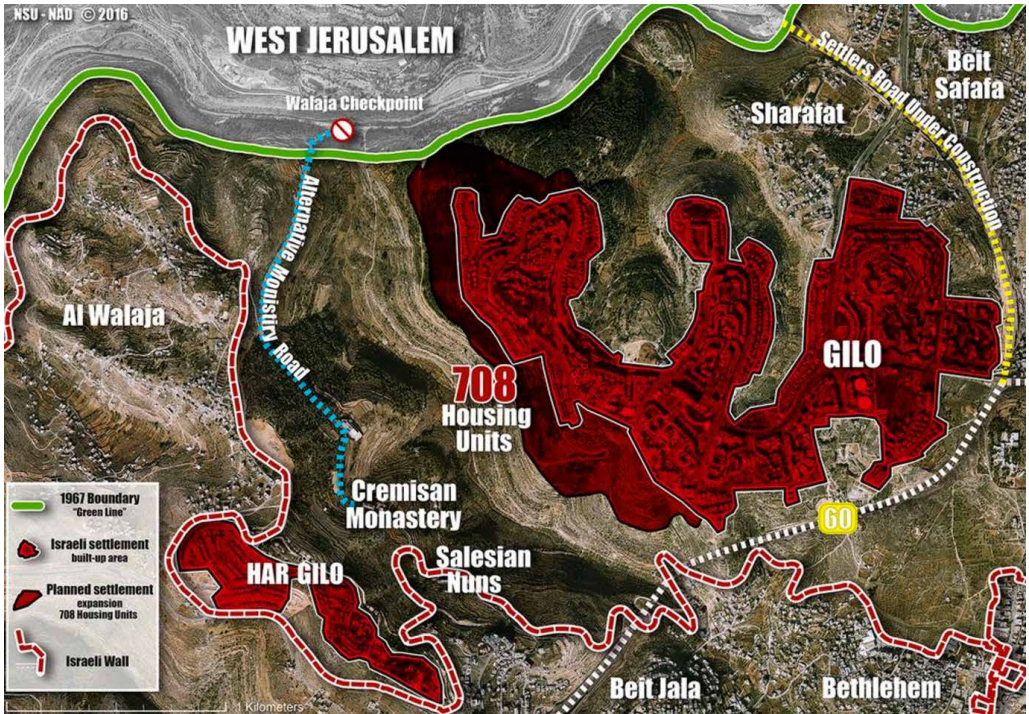
On 23 March 2020, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres issued an appeal for a global ceasefire due to the novel coronavirus. The appeal included a call to “open precious windows for diplomacy”.<sup>1</sup> While the call received numerous and prominent endorsements, the pandemic did not alter Israeli plans for the annexation of occupied Palestinian territory. As Israeli political parties continued negotiations for a new government, the issue of annexation became a determining factor in the formation of the new Israeli cabinet.<sup>2</sup>

Less than a month after the UN Secretary General’s appeal, Likud and the Blue and White factions concluded an agreement to form a government, including annexation of occupied Palestinian territory as part of the political agenda.<sup>3</sup> This comes in the context of the unveiling of the US Middle East plan, which represents an unprecedented endorsement for Israel’s colonial-settlement enterprise, including annexation. While the plan has been largely criticized for its departure from international law,<sup>4</sup> no significant diplomatic, political or legal initiatives have been taken by other international parties in order to prevent the further annexation of occupied Palestinian territory, in what may mean the end of the prospects of a negotiated Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement.<sup>5</sup>

This paper discusses the situation in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus Christ and a key location for Palestinian prospects for economic independence due to its important tourist industry, in the current scenario of annexation proposed by US and Israeli officials, and the global threat of COVID-19. In particular this paper describes the status of two of the most significant locations in the Bethlehem governorate: Cremisan and Makhrou, both of crucial strategic importance for the State of Palestine.

## Historical Background

Immediately after the occupation in 1967, Israel began its plans to annex newly occupied Arab land. For the Syrian Golan Heights and East Jerusalem (EJ), the Allon Plan of July 1967 made clear the areas Israel intended to annex.<sup>6</sup> The Labor-led government issued a map that included the Jordan Valley, areas in and around occupied East Jerusalem (OEJ) and Latroun, among others. One of the areas most affected by this plan was Bethlehem.



By 1980 another plan called ‘Drobles’ had been presented as a “master plan for settlements”<sup>7</sup> and went even further than the areas proposed for annexation under the Allon Plan. This time the government was run by the Likud party. Once again the Bethlehem area was one of the locations most affected, possibly due to its strategic location a mere 10 kilometers from the Old City of Jerusalem on the historic route to Hebron. Both Jerusalem and Hebron represent powerful symbols for the pro-colonization movement in Israel. While Israel’s illegal colonization in OEJ enjoys more consensus in Israel than colonization in Hebron, the political weight won by the right-wing has turned Hebron and the settlements around it into strong cards in the hands of the Israeli government.

The importance given to land around Bethlehem in both plans, Allon and Drobles, helps to explain why Bethlehem has become strangled by Israel’s illegal colonial-settlement enterprise. A network of settlements surround the urban areas of the governorate, including Beit Jala and Beit Sahour, and have absorbed land much needed for Bethlehem’s own natural growth and economic development. Despite Israeli awareness of its violations of international law, even in the case of EJ, the implementation of the plans proceeded. Israel’s Minister of Justice Yaakob Shapira in 1967 was explicit: “We set about Jerusalem with our eyes open and contravened the Geneva Conventions in the most blatant way”.<sup>8</sup> A legal opinion requested by the Israeli government from its foreign ministry later in 1967 reflected the same position: “From the point of view of international law, the key provision is the one that appears in the last paragraph of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Israel, of course, is a party to this convention. The paragraph stipulates as follows: ‘The occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territories it occupies (...)’. The prohibition therefore is categorical and not conditional upon the motives for the transfer or its objectives. Its purpose is to prevent settlement in occupied territory of citizens of the occupied state”.<sup>9</sup>

Israel’s first steps towards settlement were in the areas in and around OEJ. Moving towards the south, they had the option of annexing Bethlehem,<sup>10</sup> though this was ignored mainly because Israel’s annexation plans focused on gaining as much land as possible without the people. That is how the annexation of western Bethlehem became a matter of consensus for Israeli decision makers: a fertile area with good water resources that could serve as an alternative route from Jerusalem to Hebron (without using the traditional Jerusalem-Hebron Road through the middle of Bethlehem). The relatively small rural population facilitated the expansionist plans of the occupying power. The unilateral expansion of the boundaries of the Israeli Jerusalem municipality annexed around 22,000 dunums of land belonging

to the towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour.<sup>11</sup> A parallel process began in western Bethlehem with the Israeli design of the so called “Gush Etzion bloc”<sup>12</sup> that on its northern edge begins with the illegal colonial-settlement of Har Gilo.

Har Gilo is located on the top of Beit Jala and separates the Cremisan Valley, Al Wallajeh village, the Makhroul Valley and the built-up area of Beit Jala. It was a Jordanian military base occupied by Israel in 1967 and turned into a civilian colonial settlement in 1972. Its population was relatively small until plans to build Israel’s annexation wall included the Bethlehem area and the settlement was expanded to reach a current population of almost 2000 settlers.<sup>13</sup>

Although small in comparison with other Israeli settlements, Har Gilo represents a strategic asset in Israeli plans for annexation of occupied territory. It is less than two kilometers from the large settlement of Gilo (built in 1973 mainly over the quarries and agricultural terraces of the Al Slayeb area of Beit Jala as part of a ring of settlements that separates occupied EJ from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory). Israel’s annexation wall links both settlements and isolates the Cremisan Valley, which is located in between. It also overlooks the Makhroul Valley, turning this prominent Palestinian agricultural area into part of the Israeli defined “Gush Etzion bloc” as it is located in the area of expansion of Har Gilo settlement to the south, where the illegal settlements of Neve Daniel, Betar Illit and Efrat are located.

## The Makhroul Valley, Cremisan and Israel’s Annexation Plans



Since ancient times, the land of southern Jerusalem has been a fruit basket for the region and its rich water resources led the development of agriculture. The 2014 UNESCO inscription by the State of Palestine of “Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir” highlighted the rich cultural heritage of the area, including its agricultural terraces and irrigation systems dating back to the Roman period in Palestine.<sup>14</sup> The Makhroul Valley is included on the maps approved when the site was inscribed.

The site was inscribed on the list of “World Heritage in Danger” mainly due to Israeli settlement plans in the area, including the annexation wall. In 1996 a highway built for Israeli settlements (Road 60) destroyed some of the agricultural terraces and created a barrier for farmers attempting to reach their land. The same road includes two tunnels and a bridge over the Cremisan Valley that blight the landscape of





Photo courtesy of theholyland.org.uk

the area. While Israel usually argues that such infrastructure (bypass roads, walls, fences) is built merely for security reasons,<sup>15</sup> in practice it is a means to impose the de facto annexation of occupied Palestinian territory, limit Palestinian access and deny Palestine's right to self-determination as declared by the International Court of Justice in 2004.<sup>16</sup>

Israel's annexation plans, including those below for western Bethlehem, date back to the Allon Plan but were formalized in the maps for the annexation wall in 2002:

- "De jure" annexation: The area of Al Slayeb, where most of the illegal settlement of Gilo is located, and a significant part of the Cremisan Valley were officially annexed to Israel by the Israeli parliament's approval of the 1980 Jerusalem Law.<sup>17</sup> This ratified the unilateral expansion announced by the Jerusalem municipality following the occupation in 1967.
- "De facto" annexation: Limiting Palestinian access, restricting Palestinian development, taking control of Palestinian natural resources, and expanding Israeli settlements and their related infrastructure, including the wall, have all paved the way for "de jure" annexation. This is the case with the Makhroun Valley.

The issue of the Cremisan Valley rose to prominence thanks to the work of the local community, prominently led by the Latin parish which mobilized support internationally from churches and politicians against the construction of the annexation wall in the valley. Support included several high-level visits and communications with the Israeli authorities from the European Union, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France, Italy and Spain. The Holy See, the World Council of Churches and many church groups also raised the issue with the Israeli authorities. The United States, through its Jerusalem Consulate General<sup>18</sup> and a number of Congress members, also monitored the case.<sup>19</sup>

The expression of significant diplomatic concerns over Cremisan was not translated into any concrete measures and Israel finally began the construction of a new stage of its wall in August 2015. Dozens of trees were uprooted to build the wall at the entrance to the Cremisan Valley under the bridge built to connect settlements with Jerusalem (Road 60), in an area known as Bir Onah.<sup>20</sup> Although the current path of the wall still allows for access to the Cremisan monastery, school and winery, in addition to the property of some 50 Palestinian families from Beit Jala, Israel exerts full control over the area and fears remain that the whole valley will be closed in the event of a formal announcement of annexation.

The Makhroul Valley returned to media attention with the demolition of the traditional Makhroul Restaurant on August 2019.<sup>21</sup> Just a few days later, Israeli settlers moved onto a plot of land located a few meters from the demolished restaurant and created a new colonial-settlement outpost with support from the Jewish National Fund (JNF).<sup>22</sup> The JNF is an organization that enjoys charitable status in several western countries and engages in a number of Israeli settlement projects in occupied Palestinian territory.<sup>23</sup>



A Palestinian woman carries a metal structure after her family's restaurant was demolished by Israeli forces in the town of Beit Jala near Bethlehem. Photo by Ahmed Mezher, WAFA.



A bill has been introduced in the Israeli parliament to expand the boundaries of the Israeli Jerusalem municipality, including the area to the west of Bethlehem.<sup>24</sup> If approved, this law may be the basis for “de jure” annexation.

## The US “Annexation Plan” and the Area to the West of Bethlehem

On 29 January 2020, the White House unveiled what was described as “President Trump’s vision for a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians”.<sup>25</sup> As anticipated from previous statements and actions taken by the Trump administration, including recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital,<sup>26</sup> support for annexation of occupied Palestinian territory,<sup>27</sup> legitimizing the presence of Israeli settlements,<sup>28</sup> and eliminating the term “occupation” from the legal status of the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967, this plan endorsed Israel’s narrative and policies with regard to the occupied territory of Palestine. Most notably, in a statement to the UN Security Council on 23 July 2019, the then US Envoy for International Negotiations, Jason Greenblatt, also set out the framework for the US position on the Middle East by dismissing international law, international consensus and UN resolutions.<sup>29</sup>

Photo courtesy of al-bushra.org



The US plan did not receive any significant endorsement, with the exception of Israel. PM Netanyahu stated that the plan would allow Israel to “apply Israeli law in all our communities in Judea and Samaria, the Jordan Valley, the northern Dead Sea, and additional large swathes”.<sup>30</sup> It served as a push for the process of annexation that had already begun under PM Netanyahu. In fact, it was after the unveiling of the US plan that Israel announced massive projects in areas of vital importance for the State of Palestine, including the so-called E-1 Area<sup>31</sup> linking the illegal colonial-settlement of Ma’aleh Adumin with Jerusalem, and the illegal colonial-settlement of Giv’at Hamatos<sup>32</sup> to the north of Bethlehem by the Mar Elias Monastery, both of them splitting the occupied West Bank.

For Bethlehem, the US plan not only signifies the ratification of annexation of all of the northern area of the city, but also the annexation of Cremisan and the Makhroun Valley. In fact, construction work has intensified on the expansion of Road 60, including the bridge over the Cremisan Valley, further damaging the landscape, agricultural terraces and private property.<sup>33</sup> Such activities are perfectly in harmony with the US plan.

## The Effects of Annexation

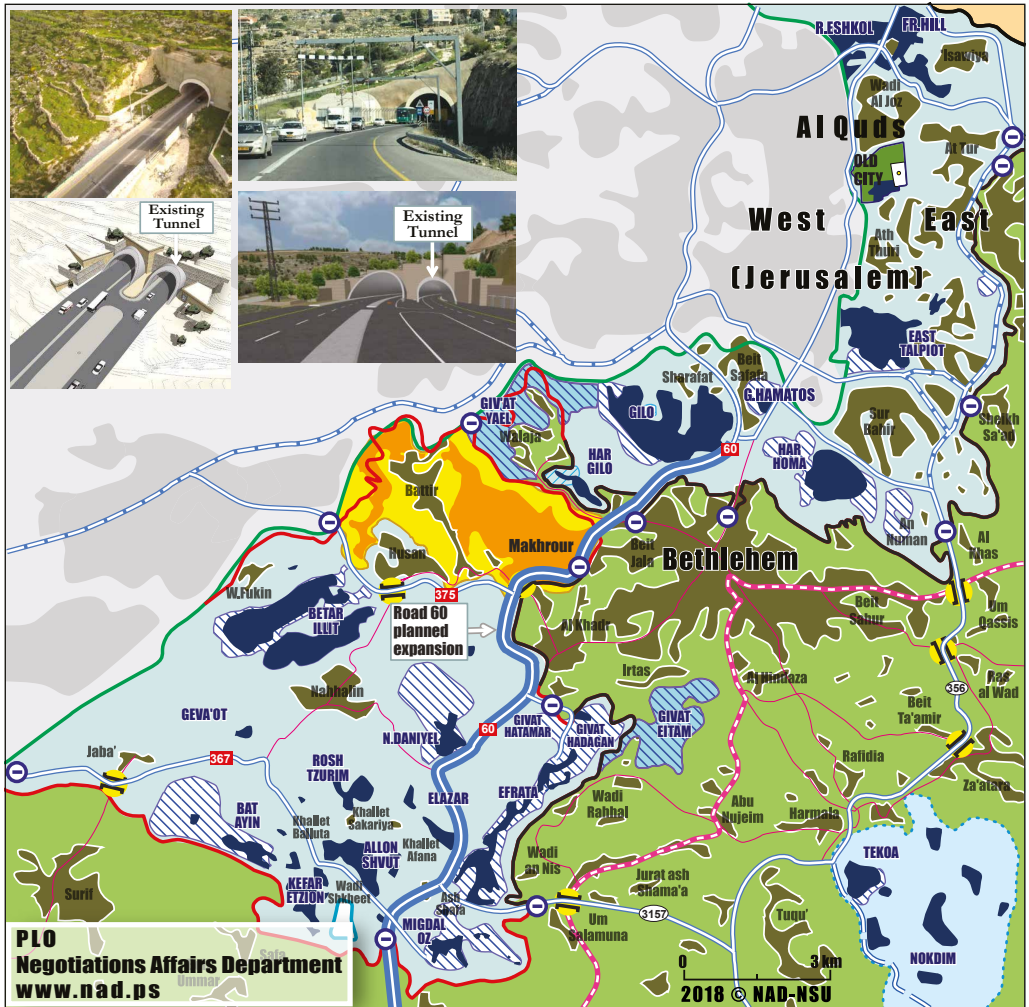


From a political and a diplomatic perspective, the annexation of occupied Palestinian territory implies the end of the prospects of a peace process between Israel and Palestine. For the Bethlehem area in particular, annexation of Cremisan and Makhroun means, among other aspects:

- Deprivation of access to the most fertile lands of the Bethlehem governorate.<sup>34</sup>
- Potential new threats to the World Heritage Site of Battir.
- Isolation of religious communities, including the Salesian School in Cremisan, from the communities they serve.
- Facilitation of the expansion of Israeli-colonial settlements into privately owned Palestinian land, church property, and other land and natural resources in the occupied Palestinian territory.
- The end of the last hopes for natural growth of Palestinians in Bethlehem/Beit Jala, particularly Palestinian Christians.<sup>35</sup>
- The consolidation of the separation of Bethlehem from Jerusalem.

# Palestine's Heritage under Occupation

## In Focus: Bethlehem's Denied Potential



## Conclusion

---

Israeli plans of annexation and colonial-settlement expansion are supported by the US Government and, if implemented, will set a precedent for the acquisition of land through the use of force rather than through a rules-based world order. While the current COVID-19 crisis may represent an opportunity to strengthen the role of international organizations, Israel's experience with the international community leaves it confident that no action will be undertaken against annexation regardless of condemnation of its plans. Among the most relevant parties that have expressed concern about the annexation plans is the European Union,<sup>36</sup> Israel's main trade partner.<sup>37</sup>

A new Israeli government that includes annexation as part of its coalition agreement has been announced while most of the international community are focused on issues related to COVID-19. The Israeli government may see this as an opportunity to keep moving ahead with its plans. Certainly, within the next few months, a few elements of the current context may change: the COVID-19 emergency may end, the US presidential election may bring another president and some European countries may consider annexation a threat to their own strategic interests. Israeli policy makers may take this into consideration but those pushing for annexation hope that it will set an irreversible path.

From the beginning of the 1967 occupation, Israel has been aware that settlements in occupied territory are illegal. The settlements have continued to expand at the expense of the inalienable Palestinian right to self-determination simply because no action has been taken against previous grave Israeli violations of international law. This impunity remains one of the most crucial factors driving the Israeli government.

For the Bethlehem area, the annexation of Cremisan and Makhroun represents more than just the end of centuries of connection between families and religious communities with their land. It is a mortal blow to the viability of a political solution, and to the Palestinian Christian community in particular. The separation of Bethlehem from Jerusalem will continue to be detrimental to the economic situation and religious celebrations. The consequences can already be seen in the severe damage to Palestine's social fabric, particularly the thousands of families separated by Israeli policies.

Bethlehem's future depends on its ability to retain its land and natural resources, while looking forward to a political solution in order to reopen its ties with Jerusalem. In the absence of these prospects, US-sponsored annexation will mean a bleak future for the birthplace of Jesus Christ. It seems that COVID-19 does not represent an opportunity for diplomacy in the Middle East as the UN Secretary General hoped, and certainly not for Palestine as the process of annexation continues to be advanced by the US and Israel. Bethlehem will be one of the areas worst affected.







# Israeli Politics During COVID-19 and the Impact on Palestine, shedding on Annexation

Dr. Dalal Iriqat

## Introduction



During COVID-19, countries found themselves fighting the virus on their own, trying to contain its spread and protect their citizens. This has led to more centralization internationally. For example, we witnessed how Italy and Spain in the EU struggled despite being part of a strategic alliance for decades. States adopted a more centralized, almost tribal, policy in countering COVID-19. We have seen how emergency teams in different states were divided into governorates, which were split into zones, then neighborhoods and so on.

If we look at Israel and Palestine, we have witnessed Palestine acting as an independent state and instituting countrywide measures. At the same time, since Israel controls the borders, Palestinians found themselves automatically in a collaborative situation in order to secure the entry of testing kits and medical supplies, in addition to a tax revenue refund and the return of Palestinian workers working in Israel.

This paper looks at Israeli policies during the pandemic and their impact on Palestine. It examines the cooperative style adopted by Israel during COVID-19, and demonstrates how Palestine, which lacks sovereignty and resources, has had to suffer not only from the spread of the pandemic but also from Israeli occupation policies.



## Palestinian Measures and COVID-19

---

In the last week of April 2020, Palestine had around 500 cases of infection while Israel exceeded 15000 cases! This is not only due to fewer tests on the Palestinian side but is also related to early measures: the Government of Palestine (GoP) declared a state of emergency and imposed total lockdown before Israel, which was busy with its third round of elections.

The Palestinian leadership initiated the practical application of the core concepts of leadership and strategic planning when it declared a state of emergency as soon as the first cases appeared in Palestine. It acted according to the provisions of Chapter Seven of the Palestinian Basic Law<sup>1</sup> that stipulates in Article 110 that, in the event of a threat to national security from war, invasion, armed insurrection, or natural disaster, a state of emergency may be declared by decree by the President of the State of Palestine for a period not exceeding thirty days. This was later extended for another thirty days.

Leadership is key to containing this pandemic in Palestine and elsewhere. The strategic goal at this time has been to prevent the spread of the virus. This is



A Palestinian sanitary worker sprays disinfectant to protect against coronavirus near Bethlehem, in front of Israel's separation wall. (Musa Al Shaer/AFP)



A woman walks down an alley in a closed market during government measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus in Jerusalem's Old City, April 13, 2020. (AP Photo)

being accomplished under the state of emergency that includes the quarantining of infected and suspected cases, and closure of all schools, daycare centers and universities, employing online education where possible. Furthermore, there has been a closure of all sports, cultural, leisure and art institutions, conferences postponed, gatherings banned, and restaurants no longer allowed to seat customers, although some have switched to providing takeaway food.

It has been noted that the COVID-19 crisis has brought the public closer to the Palestinian government and increased trust in the government and its measures – a phenomenon that has been lacking for some time.<sup>2</sup> The World Health Organization has praised the Palestinian performance and, as a result, the official and public experience of countering COVID-19 is bridging gaps between the GoP and the public.

Despite its efficient and rapid actions, the GoP had to tackle the issue of Palestinian workers in Israel, given that 79% of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Palestine are from Palestinian workers in Israel and individuals who were in close contact with them.<sup>3</sup> It is crucial to note that more than 150,000 Palestinian workers were still in Israel when the pandemic was spreading with no serious measures or lockdown imposed by the Israeli government. Facilitating the return of these workers has been the biggest challenge to Palestine, especially as Israel controls not only the borders with surrounding states, but also controls each and every entry point from the West Bank (WB) into Israel. This makes it impossible for Palestinians to contain the situation as they may wish.

Crises generate opportunities. Despite the COVID-19 crisis, Palestinians have many opportunities. One opportunity for example, is restoring trust between the political system and the people. This is an opportune time to deal with Palestinian internal problems independently from the Israeli occupation and exert further

efforts towards ending internal division with reconciliation, unity, democracy and transparency. This is also an opportune time to develop e-learning, e-government and other electronic services that Palestine has long desired to acquire and which will be propellers for development in the future. Unfortunately, so far these opportunities have not been well tapped.

## COVID -19 and Ongoing Israeli Violations

A briefing by Care International in Palestine noted that COVID-19 made the two societies: Israel and Palestine, act as one public health community. *Israel realizes that if Palestine gets fully embroiled by the disease, this would prevent Israel from following through on a prudent public health policy.*<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, Israel was expected to recognize its responsibility for one public health community and to cooperate with the Palestinian health authorities to counter COVID-19 and guarantee the safety of this community to mitigate the spread of the disease. Instead, the Israeli government was busy building coalitions. PM Netanyahu's priority was to secure his political legacy and legal escape, and COVID-19 provided this opportunity.

It could be argued that Israel did cooperate with Palestine by allowing the entry of testing kits to the WB and Gaza, or by allowing thousands of workers to stay in Israel for a two-week quarantine period if they wished to. Israel also allowed Palestinians returning to the WB to enter via Ben Gurion airport and released some of the Palestinian tax revenues withheld by Israel.

Despite these cooperative measures, Israel continued to violate international law even during the pandemic. Several actions by Israel confirm its violation of international law and failure to meet its obligations as an occupying state. For example, Israel did not institute health measures to Palestinian workers before their return to Palestine. Israel forced Palestinian workers, including those who were sick, to return to the occupied Palestinian areas without coordinating with the Palestinian government, and without testing them or giving them medical attention for the coronavirus.

Furthermore, Israel did not release any Palestinian prisoners from its jails, nor did it provide hygiene or protective measures, despite repeated calls by Palestinian officials to the international community to oblige Israel to respect the Fourth



Photo courtesy of m.aawsat.com

Geneva Conventions, specifically Article 91 under Chapter IV on hygiene and medical attention. This includes the provision of adequate healthcare under the direction of a qualified doctor, with treatment and an appropriate diet.<sup>5</sup> Israel also froze visits to prisoners without offering at least virtual meetings.

Israeli violations during the first month under COVID-19 included<sup>6</sup> the killing of three Palestinians by the Israeli army; 47 structures demolished or confiscated; raids on Palestinian cities with over 238 incursions and raids by the Israeli occupation army into Palestinian areas; the arrest of 267 Palestinians; and 87 settler terror attacks.

In the Jordan Valley, the Israeli occupation army destroyed an emergency field clinic of tents. Israeli outrages were also witnessed in East Jerusalem (EJ) where Israel acted inhumanely by not providing medical care for over 400,000 Palestinians. It also prevented the Palestinian Minister of Jerusalem, the Governor, members of the PLO executive committee and heads of political factions from providing services, disinfecting and food distribution. Furthermore, Israel arrested the Palestinian Minister and the Governor for trying to prevent the spread of the

virus. Israeli police closed a clinic in Silwan with accusations of collaborating with the GoP and arrested Palestinian teams in EJ Jerusalem working to sterilize the streets.<sup>7</sup>

Apartheid during COVID-19 has been practiced at its best: in Gaza, Israel maintained its siege over the Strip and continued to enforce the imprisonment of the two million Palestinian inhabitants in the largest open air prison in the world. In essence, Gazans have been forced by Israel to live in a forced quarantine for over 13 years.

As far as occupied EJ is concerned, Israel's apartheid has been increasingly reflected in its segregation and annexation wall that engulfs the city and separates it from its hinterland. This system of apartheid is nurtured by American recognition of the city as the Jewish capital. Israel refrains from giving the Palestinian government data about Palestinians living in Jerusalem. Israel does not provide EJ Palestinians with the same services and budgets provided to Israelis in West Jerusalem. This leaves the Palestinian government with no other option but to rely on community and civil society sources, although these sources are continuously harassed by the Israeli authorities and many have been forced to close or halt services.

## Virtual Reality of Two States vs Annexation

A virtual reality of two states is being witnessed in Israel-Palestine during the COVID-19 pandemic. In countering the virus, the Palestinian and Israeli governments acted independently to protect their citizens but the truth remains that there is no two state reality. Israel is sovereign in all of historical Palestine. Its soldiers and settlers are spread all over occupied Jerusalem and the WB, and Israeli soldiers continued to raid Palestinian homes during COVID-19.

The situation is crystal clear now that PM Netanyahu has succeeded in forming an Israeli annexation government. Annexation bills submitted to the Knesset, and which may be first in line for implementation if annexation proceeds, include a bill for the annexation of the entire WB,<sup>8</sup> submitted in May 2018 and seeking to apply Israeli law and sovereignty to all settlements; a bill for the annexation of Greater Jerusalem,<sup>9</sup> submitted in October 2017, that seeks to expand Jerusalem to include areas of Ma'aleh Adumim east of Jerusalem, areas of Giv'at Ze'ev north west of Jerusalem and areas of the Etzion settlements south west of Jerusalem; and the Annexation of the Jordan Valley Bill,<sup>10</sup> submitted in May 2015 to apply Israeli law



and sovereignty to the Jordan Valley. There are other bills that are specific to the annexation of the Etzion bloc,<sup>11</sup> annexation of Ma'ale Adumim<sup>12</sup> or annexation of the Ariel bloc.<sup>13</sup>

The new government of Israel has declared the first of July 2020 as the day for initiating the implementation of annexation plans. Israel has a collection of annexation plans to choose from. It is speculated that the annexation will be gradual; settlements around Jerusalem may be included in the first wave of annexation, either individual areas of settlements or as one package as in the so-called Greater Jerusalem scenario. Another scenario may involve annexation of the Jordan Valley to secure the eastern area of the WB. A third scenario may be that



700,000 Israelis live in illegal settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. AFP

the annexation will start with annexation of selected settlements in the WB that will involve minimal areas.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear where, if and when the first annexation plans will be implemented, but it is clear that Israel will act in full agreement with the US after the latter indicated total endorsement.<sup>15</sup>

This translates to an end of the two-state solution and the dismantling of the rights of the people of Palestine as established under international law and various UN resolutions.<sup>16</sup> The Palestinian leadership then has two options: either to dismantle or to collaborate under heavy coercion from Israel and the US.

Annexation has always been a threat to all, including the international community. The recently formed annexation government in Israel is an additional wakeup call for the international community as it needs to act faster than ever in response to this new Israeli government's intentions of annexing more Palestinian occupied land.



For Palestinians, it is evident that Israel's intention is not to leave room for a contiguous and viable Palestinian state. During COVID-19, Israeli politicians cared for nothing more than the third elections in Israel, which came in parallel to the spread of the virus. The main topic of discussion among Israeli politicians in negotiations to form a national unity government was further annexation of Palestinian occupied territory.

Netanyahu's electorate will remember his promise ahead of Israel's general election on 2 March to promote the annexation of all WB settlements in coordination with US President Donald Trump. Gantz, Netanyahu's rival of the Blue and White party, said he would support annexation only if Israel's neighbors and allies in Europe agreed to the move. Before signing the coalition deal, Netanyahu and Gantz agreed to bring WB annexation to a Knesset vote in July. In Palestine people have been living with de facto annexation and witnessing an apartheid reality already through the long years of occupation.

The Netanyahu-Gantz coalition agreement guarantees annexation and is well maneuvered: Article 3 of the agreement stipulates that the government formed will not pursue primary or secondary legislation or senior appointments during an initial six-month period (apart from legislation directly related to mitigation of the COVID-19 epidemic and the annexation of the WB). Articles 28 and 29 of the coalition agreement outline in detail the legislative process for the application of Israeli sovereignty, laws, jurisdiction and administration to parts of occupied Palestinian territory. It is the only exception made to the otherwise limited legislative agenda during the initial six-month phase of the coalition government. The agreement states that in relation to President Trump's statement (taken to mean the Peace to Prosperity political framework presented in February 2020), the Prime Minister and alternate Prime Minister will act in full agreement with the US, including with regard to maps.<sup>17</sup>

The Israeli coalition government should be seen as an endorsement of the outcome documents and detailed maps produced by the joint US-Israeli committee on annexation. The agreement stipulates that Netanyahu will present a draft application of sovereignty bill on 1 July 2020. However, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reacted by saying that the annexation of parts of the WB is "ultimately Israel's decision to make".<sup>18</sup> His statement is not complete without mentioning that the US will support whatever decision Israel makes, paving the way for further annexation and entrenchment of apartheid.

## Conclusion



COVID-19 bombarded all states and nations without discrimination, while Israel continues to discriminate against a people it has occupied for too long. Israel faces a choice whether to be a democracy or an apartheid state. COVID -19 has further exposed the Israeli system of apartheid that exists now in its role as an occupier: Israel imposes two systems on two communities that are linked yet separated by legal/racial status distinctions.

The pandemic provided Netanyahu with a timely opportunity to delay his corruption indictment and trial. COVID-19 facilitated his victory to be the Prime Minister of a national unity government for 18 months to fight the pandemic, but with annexation of Palestinian land in mind.

With regard to annexation, the international community has two options: it can abandon its condemnation and act immediately or opt to announce the end of the two-state solution and accept the reality of the one state with its consequences.

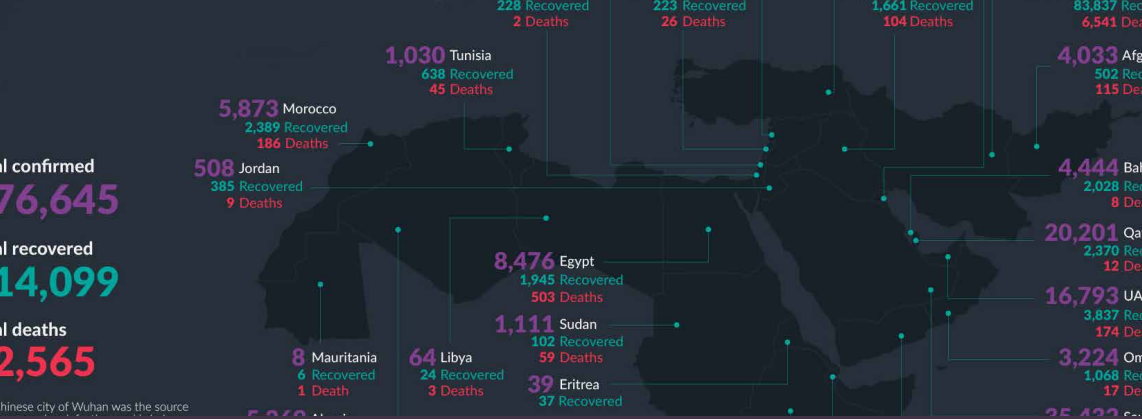
The irony under COVID-19 is that for the first time, Palestinian citizens lost interest in Israeli health services due to the spread of the virus, while Jewish citizens found themselves relying on Palestinian doctors, nurses and pharmacists because the medical sector in Israel is dominated by the non-Jewish community.<sup>19</sup>

Like the rest of the world, Palestine is facing an outbreak of COVID-19 that has been described as World War III, the new war of the twenty-first century. Its leadership is acting responsibly towards its citizens despite the country's compromised status under occupation and ongoing violations of Palestinian rights.

Today more than ever, people around the world experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic can relate to Palestinians living with fear, insecurity and uncertainty under Israeli policies and practices of colonization and apartheid. These include lockdowns, restrictive measures, inability to control one's life, restrictions on mobility rights, limitations on movement, denial of access to basic services, including healthcare, and family separation. These are daily challenges faced by Palestinians living under a belligerent occupation. The policies required for COVID-19 are just a fraction of those long imposed by Israel on Palestinians and etched into the Palestinian collective memory. Today, Palestinians are threatened by Israel's plans for further annexation of Palestinian land, more subjugation and the shattering of their dreams.

The coming weeks will be crucial not only for the unfolding of the COVID -19 crisis, but also for the future of the Palestinian national project and the status of apartheid Israel.





# Towards A Better Statistical Communication Strategy on COVID-19

## Dr. Faisal Awartani

“In God we trust, all others bring data.” W. Edward Deming.

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, data availability and reliability on the spread of the virus worldwide have been paramount for the various stakeholders: the general public and research centers working on data analysis to inform policymakers and others.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the public locally and worldwide have attempted to digest large quantities of information flowing from countless sources. With the current information revolution and the rise of a plethora of news websites, it is not easy for lay people to identify fake news from credible news. This is the case with those who have access to internet but lack the skills or specialized education to understand that not everything that appears on a webpage of some sort is credible information.

Since the start of the outbreak, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been the main source to which most research centers, universities and credible news agencies refer when reporting coronavirus statistics. In Palestine, the main source has been the Ministry of Health through the Minister of Health and government spokespersons.

This article will focus on general data availability and reporting on COVID-19 with some comparison of indicators in Palestine and other countries. Recommendations are proposed to strengthen data presentation for more credible estimates and policy related decision making.

## Data and Reporting

The WHO managed to establish a reporting system in cooperation with the official health authorities at each country level. They started producing aggregated data on the number of those who tested positive and the number of fatalities. These two indicators dominate the scene in terms of reporting the status of coronavirus by country.



These two indicators have been reported on a daily base in Palestine and highlighted in two press briefings by the government in the morning and in the evening, often with input from the Prime Minister and/or the Minister of Health or related Health Ministry staff alongside the government spokesperson.

To date there are several problems facing political leaders and public health analysts in terms of data sharing at the international level. As a statistician who has worked in health statistics and public health, I had a hard time accessing data at both the case level and the aggregated level, taking into account parameters that will enable data analysts to produce analysis useful to policy makers and politicians, and which may influence or alter some of the decisions taken about the well-being and livelihood of millions of people.

For example, what could one understand from the indicator “total number of confirmed corona cases” that many news agencies are reporting on their corona dashboards on a daily basis? When reviewing the total number of confirmed corona cases in any country, one can easily conclude that this number is a function of the number of corona tests conducted in that country and a function of reporting. From an epistemological viewpoint, learning about a certain event does not make it a new event. One has to distinguish between the time you learned about a certain event and the time that event happened.

When it comes to reporting the number of confirmed coronavirus infections, I would be wary of using the statement, “The number of cases jumped by so and so”. Journalists should distinguish between uncovering existing cases of coronavirus and the growth in corona cases due to the spread of the pathogen. As a result, I decided to review the relationship between the cumulative number of tests and the cumulative number of confirmed cases in the US. I found a strong linear relationship between the two variables ( $R\text{-square}=0.999$ ). Figure 1 below gives a graphical summary of this relationship.

This graph is based on the time series of the reported cumulative number of tests and the cumulative number of positive cases between 18 March 2020 and 28 March 2020.<sup>1</sup> The interesting thing about this chart is that it should get people thinking about the idea that the number of positive cases is growing because the number of tests is growing. Thus, journalists could mislead the public by reporting growth in the number of positive cases without reporting the corresponding growth in number of tests. Based on this relationship, if some governments, for example, decided to play politics and want to show a reduction in the number of positive corona cases in their country, they can simply reduce the number of daily tests.

One of the issues that could be a source of confusion for the public is the difference between the prevalence of the disease versus the ratio of positive cases relative to the number of rolling tests of mostly suspected cases. From a statistical and epidemiological point of view, the best way to measure the prevalence of positive cases of the coronavirus is by conducting a series of cross-sectional surveys using probability sampling among the general public. This methodology will enable governments to assess the size of the problem and whether or not the phenomenon is stable or growing over time. This methodology can also be used for monitoring and evaluation of government policies (lockdown, border closure, curfews, etc.). Such activities will have a serious impact on people’s livelihood and well-being, hence should be explored and require a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation.



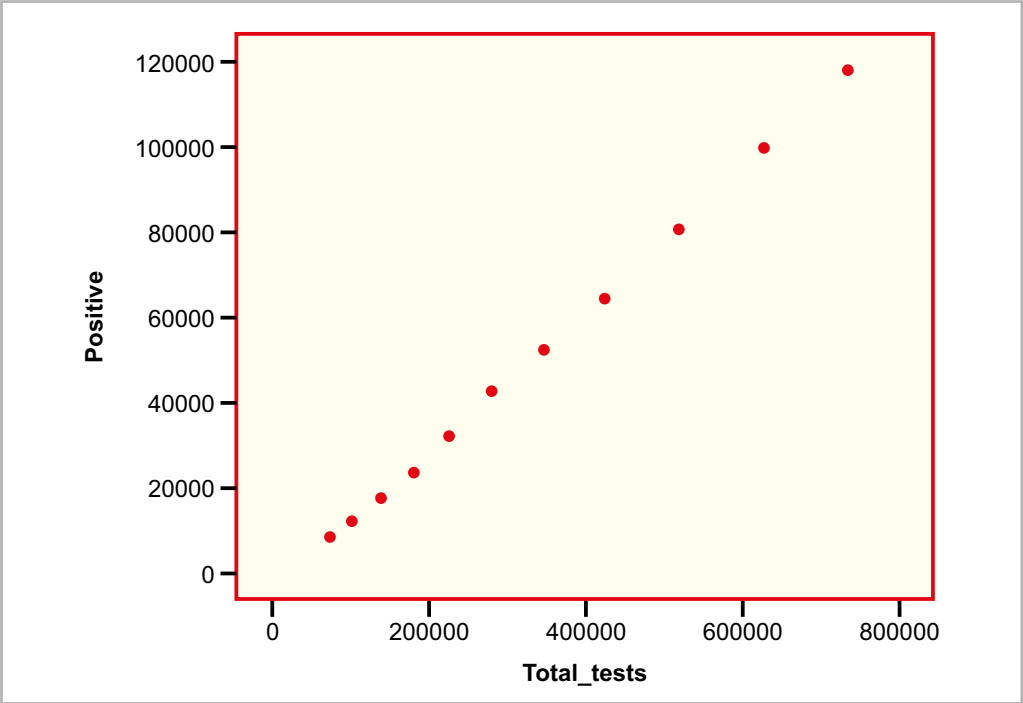


Figure 1: Total cumulative number of corona tests on a daily basis versus total cumulative positive cases in the US during the period 18-28 March 2020.

### What Do the Numbers in Palestine Reflect?

If we compare Palestine with other countries in terms of corona status, Palestine performed better in its containment policy for the virus. Since Palestine has limited resources, the government could not take the risk of letting the virus spread. The results of this policy are reflected in one of the most credible indicators that can be used to compare countries, i.e. the number of deaths due to corona per 100,000 of population. For example, Italy had 40.9 deaths per 100,000 population, France 31.09 deaths per 100 000 population, UK had 26.14 deaths per 100,000 population while Palestine had 0.09 deaths per 100,000 population. This may possibly be attributed to the early lockdown measures imposed by the Palestinian government when the first COVID-19 cases were discovered (See Figure 2).

### Coronavirus Deaths/100k pop.

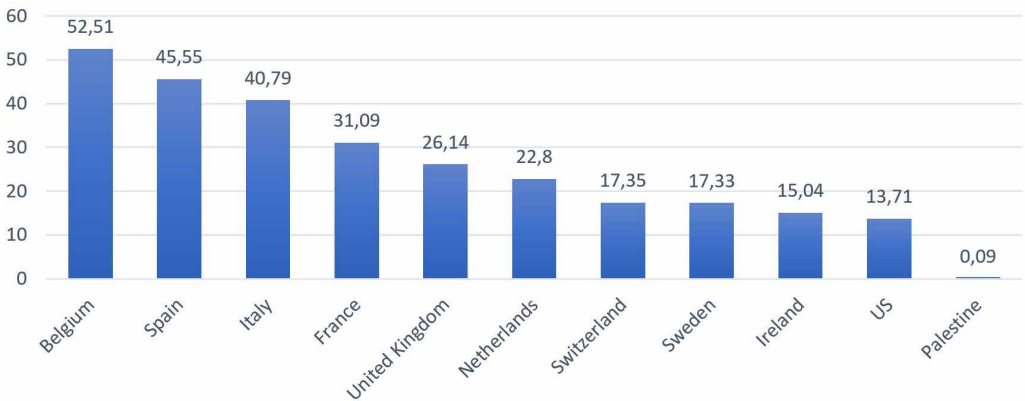


Figure 2: Corona (COVID-19) related deaths per 100,000 population for selected countries including Palestine.

Another important factor that may contribute to the low number of corona-related deaths in Palestine is the population age structure. The percentage of elderly population aged 65 years and older in Italy is 23% versus 2.5% in Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

### Recommendations



I advise our government, governments in the region and globally to conduct a series of cross-sectional sample surveys in each country over different periods of time to estimate the prevalence of positive corona cases and the prevalence of cases that have developed antibodies. This methodology is different than testing suspected cases for tracking and tracing. The suggested design will inform governments and public health officials via the following fronts:

- a- Gauging the prevalence of coronavirus spread among the general public. That is, it will help to estimate the current extent of the problem.
- b- Gauging the prevalence of active asymptomatic cases.
- c- Gauging the percentage of cases that have developed antibodies. These are cases of people who contracted the virus and recovered without being detected by the health authorities. An estimate of the number of people who

have developed antibodies is important for adjusting the current calculation of case-fatality ratio presented by many news agencies.

d- Examining the difference in prevalence across different periods of time will enable health officials to measure growth, i.e. if growth is dimensioning or remaining stable.

e- Comparison of the survey results over different periods of time will help governments to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies adopted such as social distancing, curfews, closing borders, closure of schools and universities, etc.

f- Obtain a more accurate estimate of cases-to-fatality ratio.

Such surveys should be conducted using proper probability sampling methodology and a proper sample size. It is highly recommend that the Palestinian government conduct this exercise. This recommendation assumes that the Palestinian government has excess kits for testing for active cases of corona and for antibodies.



Corona virus tests for palestinian workers upon their return from Israel. Reuters

In order for governments to give more credibility to their lockdown measures, I recommend publishing data along the following lines:

- a- Number of tests conducted and how tests are conducted using both random and targeted approaches.
- b- Number of confirmed cases by age category.
- c- Number of hospitalized cases by age category.
- d- Number of critical cases by age category.
- e- Number of fatalities (mortality) by age category.
- f- Number of fatalities by age category due to other causes of death in the same period of time. This is particularly important since it will inform the public on the relative importance of the fatalities caused by the virus compared with other causes of death in the same period.

Since the onset of the outbreak, it was not clear how governments were dealing with the collection and reporting of corona-related data. I recommend that UN statistical agencies, in cooperation with WHO, produce an evaluation report that ranks countries according to their transparency in collecting and disseminating corona-related data.

Another important point is the variation in “case-fatality-ratio” and “fatality per 100,000 population” across countries. Here I wish to focus on the difference between Palestine and other countries. I recommend that graduate students in health informatics or biostatistics in Palestine and elsewhere work on this issue and try to collect more detailed information about each country in terms of number of physicians per 100,000 population, number of hospital beds per 100,000 population, time between discovering the first batch of corona cases and government response, type of measures taken by government, etc. Such data can be modeled using the number of deaths as a dependent variable and the other variables as independent variables. This type of model will rank each factor in terms of its ability to explain the variance in fatalities per 100,000 populations across countries.





## **St Joseph's Hospital Prepares to Receive COVID -19 Cases**

**Maher Deeb, M.D M.H.A.**

As soon as cases of COVID-19 infections were detected in Beit Jala, a state of emergency was declared and the Bethlehem Governorate was sealed off. This early lockdown with preventive measures countrywide spared Palestine from the rapid widespread of COVID-19 and gave the Palestinian Government and its Ministry of Health (MoH) time to prepare. The lockdown would not have been possible without the efforts of the Palestinian security forces, which have dealt with the precarious situation with utmost professionalism and humanity.

In East Jerusalem (EJ) there are six hospitals under the umbrella of the East Jerusalem Hospital Network which coordinates with the authorities in EJ and the donor community. These hospitals comprise: Makassed, St Joseph, Augusta Victoria (AVH), the Red Crescent maternity hospital,, St John's eye hospital and the Amirah Bassima Hospital. Two hospitals (Makassed and St Joseph) were prepared to receive COVID-19 cases while AVH set up a unit to receive infected cases from within the hospital

Prior to the pandemic, all the hospitals had been facing severe financial constraints that threatened their sustainability. It was impossible for these EJ hospitals to separate from the rest of the West Bank because they rely heavily on WB staff for around 80% of their physicians, nurses, etc. It was inconceivable to run the hospital without these human resources.

At St Joseph, 40 employees from the WB committed to stay in EJ away from their families. It was challenging to secure places for them to stay, along with the





additional financial and social burdens given that several mothers had live away from their children to stay in EJ.

In the early days of the crisis, caregivers had fears about preventing infection while giving care to patients. With training and further preparation, they gained confidence and as a team felt more responsible and capable of dealing with the pandemic.

Preparing the hospital to receive COVID-19 patients was very complicated. We had to prepare a whole unit with all the necessary equipment and ensure quarantine procedures. We created an observation room, a patient recovery area for initial assessment, made changes to the ventilation system, set up quarantine areas for patients and trained staff to receive patients. All these measures complied with guidelines from the MoH. The engagement of the Israeli MoH with EJ hospitals was much later than with the other Jerusalem hospitals and this necessitated that we work around the clock to ensure preparedness.

Throughout the preparations for the COVID-19 unit, which includes 28 beds and 10 respirators, I coordinated with the local community through local community leaders. Youth from EJ assisted in erecting tents at one of the hospital entrances for the initial assessment of patients. They also conducted awareness-raising sessions with local communities on COVID-19 prevention measures, sanitized streets and assisted the elderly at home. Later, we managed to obtain an EJ hotel whose owner agreed for it to be used as a quarantine center when home-based quarantine was not possible given the overcrowding that exists in many EJ dwellings.

We thank God that everything ran smoothly without us reaching a worst case scenario. It is now time to review and analyze the situation objectively to learn lessons for what may come next. We need to document the expertise gained in facing the challenge of the pandemic and continue to build stronger infrastructure and preparedness to meet the challenge of any second wave of this or any other disease.





# The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on the Tourism Industry in the Bethlehem Region

Photo by Mussa Qawasma, Reuters

Hani Abu Dayyeh

## Bethlehem in the Scriptures



*“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” (Luke 2:15).*

*So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem) (Genesis 35:19)*

*Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem, named Jesse, who had eight sons .... (1 Samuel 17:12)*

The earliest known mention of Bethlehem was in the Amarna correspondence of 1350–1330 BCE when the town was inhabited by the Canaanites. It is mentioned in several of the scriptures in the Old Testament and the New Testament. As indicated by the sample from three scriptures above, it is considered a sacred site for all three monotheistic religions. It is a key holy destination for tourists coming to Palestine due to its religious significance for followers of monotheistic religions, particularly Christian pilgrims.



## Synopsis

---

This paper focuses on tourism in Bethlehem and the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry in the Bethlehem region. It is very important to show the significance of the tourism industry to the Palestinian economy and the major contribution made by the Bethlehem region to the Palestinian economy.

### **The Palestinian Tourism Sector Lags Behind Neighboring Countries**

The direct contribution of the Palestinian tourism sector to GDP amounts to only 4% and lags behind those of economies in neighboring countries. This weakness also applies to the contribution of the tourism sector to total employment. Employment in the Palestinian tourism sector is barely 2%, the lowest in the regional economies (8% in Israel, 19% in Jordan, 11% in Egypt and about 4% in Lebanon). The wealth of Palestinian tourism capital lags behind other countries of the region mainly due to Israeli intransigence and very strict controls over the Palestinian economy, and the marketing and movement of tourists within the Holy Land. The growth potential in this promising sector could act as a main economic locomotive to the Palestinian economy and employment if these Israeli controls were lifted.

### **Impact of the Bethlehem Tourism Sector on the Palestinian Economy**

Tourism is Bethlehem's main industry and accounts for 64% of the total Palestinian tourism sector. Unlike other Palestinian localities prior to 2000, the majority of the employed residents did not have jobs in Israel. More than 15% of the working population is employed in tourism, which accounts for approximately 65% of the city's economy and contributes to 11% of the Palestinian economy.

Photo courtesy of [greenbelt.org.uk](http://greenbelt.org.uk)



## Health of the Bethlehem Tourism Sector

During 2019, Bethlehem witnessed a large growth in inbound visitors totaling 1,400,000 tourists. The number of inbound visitors increased by 17% during 2019 compared with the same period of the previous year. This was an increase of 23% compared with the first half of 2017. These tourist numbers constitute the total of same day visitors to Bethlehem and overnight stay visitors.



Photo courtesy of Palestine Image Bank

Palestinians residing in the 1948 territory accounted for the largest proportion of inbound visitors by 41% with 714 thousand visits, followed by arrivals from the USA by 7% with 117 thousand visits, Russian Federation by 6% with 99 thousand visits, Romania by 5% with 83 thousand visits, Poland by 4% with 72 thousand visits, while 37% were from other nationalities with 641 thousand visits.

The number of hotel guests in the Bethlehem region totaled 2,325,667 in the first half of 2019, spending 653,805 nights. The percentage of hotel guests in the first half of 2019 increased by 21% compared with the first half of 2018, while it increased by 40% compared with the first half of 2017. The table below shows the number of hotel guests in the Bethlehem region for the first half of the years 2017 to 2019.



## Number of Guests by Nationality, First Half of 2017-2019

Nationality	2017		2018		2019	
Palestine (WB & Gaza)	13,415	8.1%	10,956	5.7%	17,428	7.5%
Palestine Pre-1948	21,680	13.0%	19,552	10.1%	21,302	9.2%
Asia	34,834	20.9%	39,113	20.3%	47,245	20.3%
USA & Canada	15,519	9.3%	15,657	8.1%	18,595	8.0%
European Union	61,616	37.1%	88,982	46.1%	104,125	44.8%
Other EU Countries	9,090	5.5%	9,000	4.7%	8,729	3.8%
Other Countries	10,143	6.1%	9,653	5.0%	15,145	6.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>166,297</b>		<b>192,913</b>		<b>232,569</b>	

## Status of Employment in the Bethlehem Region

*“Tourism and Jobs: A Better Future for All” was the theme of World Tourism Day in 2018. It aimed to create and ensure equitable employment to increase social inclusion, peace and security.*

Taking into consideration the theme above, an examination of employment in 2018, for which we have statistics, gives an inkling of the situation in 2019 for which no statistics are yet available. In the Bethlehem region, 24 thousand plus workers were employed in the tourism industry during 2018. This constitutes more than 15% of total workers. As a rule of thumb, for every job created within the tourism economy, two jobs are created in the general economy. However, with Israel’s strict controls, the rule of thumb does not apply in the case of Palestine. The number of workers in activities related to the tourism sector and other ancillary services totalled 37,700. This contributes another 15% of the total employees in Bethlehem, totaling 30% of the workforce within the Bethlehem region through direct and indirect tourism industry contributions. These numbers also indicate that instead of the normal rule of thumb of two jobs created in the general economy, only one job is created due to the strict Israeli controls over the Palestinian economy.

In 2019, there were 54 hotels in the Bethlehem region comprising 4,197 available rooms with 4,995 beds. Of these, five hotels and guest houses were licensed and opened in 2019. There are also 11 religious guest houses with a total number of



422 rooms with approximately 515 beds. The total number of employees within these hotels and religious guest houses is approximately 2000 employees.

The souvenir and craft industry in Bethlehem is also a very important sector in tourism. There are 93 licensed souvenir shops employing 447 workers. This does not take into account the actual producers of these souvenir and craft products, which tend to be small family workshops.

There are also 267 licensed guides and 75 tourist licensed street peddlers. Finally, the Bethlehem region has a vast number of restaurants and coffee shops that serve locals and tourists and provide employment opportunities. The numbers are hard to assess but they are substantial. It is estimated that those working in food and beverage service activities comprise 62.9% of the total number of employees within the tourism industry.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the unemployment rate recorded in Bethlehem was one of the highest in the Palestinian Territories, along with Jenin and Gaza. Bethlehem and Jenin recorded a similar unemployment rate of 23 percent, while Gaza has about 53 percent unemployment rate. These unemployment rates were most affected by Israeli restrictions.

In 2020, Israeli restrictions and the pandemic had their greatest impact on the tourism industry as most tourism employees were laid off. The unemployment rate for the Bethlehem region could now be closer to that of Gaza.

## **The Financial Health of the Tourism Sector**

In spite of Israeli restrictions on Palestinian development, including tourism, the final findings of the Tourism Accounts for 2017 indicated that the total income generated from inbound tourism was US \$830.4 million, an increase of 17% over 2016. This income is generated from both overnight stay and same day visitors but the increase in income was due to the higher number of overnight stay visitors, up by 23%. If we extrapolate the income for 2019 from the increase of about 20% in overnight stays during the first 6 months of 2019, then the expected income generated from tourism for 2019 should be about \$996.48 million. With the addition of 10% more rooms, it was forecast to lead to an increase of at least 25% in overnight stays in 2020 and an estimated income of \$1.25 billion. Extrapolated to the whole of the Palestinian economy, this translates to \$1.95 billion.

If lockdowns and closures extend to the whole year, this forecasted income will be the total loss to the economy of the Bethlehem region. Combined with the loss of

potential value-added income, this constitutes a devastating loss to the economies of the Bethlehem region and of Palestine.

### **Aftermath of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

The hotels and guest houses will bear the brunt of the losses. With 54 hotels and a total of 4,197 rooms, one is looking at a total assessed minimum investment of approximately 2.1 billion dollars sitting idle. These investments came from major family savings and from bank loans. The Palestinian government asked the bank to defer payments on loans for four months, but the interest on the money is accumulating. It is not clear whether the pandemic will even be over by the end of June. To assess the real damage to the economy, investment in souvenir shops and restaurants should also be taken into consideration.



There is no doubt that traditional faith-based tourism inflows will return but it will take time to achieve the numbers witnessed in 2019. The recently developed and flourishing alternative tourism will suffer for longer. The whole tourism industry worldwide will look different post the COVID-19 pandemic. An estimated 200 million people are employed within various sectors of the tourism industry worldwide. During downturns in tourism due to the multiple political conflicts experienced by Palestine, potential tourists from abroad were not out of work.

## Political conflicts that most negatively impacted Palestinian tourism

Conflict	Year
Lebanese Conflict	1982
First Intifada	1987
First Gulf War	1991
Second Intifada	2000
Second Gulf War	2003
Gaza Conflict	2005
Operation Cast Lead	2009
3 <sup>rd</sup> Intifada of Individuals	Oct'15/to Jun'16

## CONCLUSION



Faith-based tourism in Palestine has proven to be very resilient over the years. History has shown that faith-based tourism returned after conflicts ended, including each of the conflicts shown above. However, one cannot assume the same immediate return of tourism with the numbers that the industry experienced pre-corona. Disposable income by tourists will not be as readily available due to the high unemployment rates worldwide. The result of this will be felt in a fall in the potential number of tourists after this pandemic. This will negatively affect the price structures of most tourism services. The Palestine tourism industry will certainly feel the aftershocks of this pandemic in the next two to three years. Moreover, new regulations to combat the spread of the disease will adversely affect the profitability of the industry as disinfecting and social distancing requirements will be imposed on the tourism chain, starting with travel agency interactions with potential travelers, stricter airline rules and heftier travel costs, local transit requirements and lodging in hotels.

## Planning Ahead Post-Coronavirus Pandemic

The Palestinian tourism industry should plan in cooperation with the religious authorities, the public sector, academic and tourism training centers and civil society to assess what can be done effectively in the aftermath of the coronavirus

pandemic. Tourism must be revived in an accelerated fashion while also ensuring that all tourism sectors provide services that comply with WHO recommendations.

Steps to be taken include:

1. A positive message from religious leaders to encourage pilgrims to return to their spiritual homeland can be very effective. This is because the Palestinian tourism industry is heavily reliant on faith-based tourism.
2. An awareness campaign for hotels and related industries to be WHO-compliant.
3. Open up to local tourism first; the immediate focus should be on internal tourism and Palestinians from the 1948 areas. This segment of tourism will be the fastest to return and is the largest contributor to the total number of visitors to Bethlehem. Hopefully the pandemic will be stopped in its tracks by the beginning of this summer. The Bethlehem region should be planning from now for a variety of activities and potential events, starting with the Lighting of the Trees in the three cities of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, along with a Christmas market that will appeal to the Palestinian community. These planned activities should continue through the Orthodox and Armenian Christmas.
4. Open up to faith-based tourism.
5. Open up to alternative tourism, focusing on nature-based tourism.
6. Improve the visibility of Bethlehem through media campaigns. The tourism industry will need the best media coverage possible pre and post-Christmas 2020. It will also need favourable reviews from clients that can be shared widely on social media and other information and communication technology.

Note: The statistics were derived from the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism records and from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Photo courtesy  
of Palestine  
Image Bank



# Violence against Women and COVID-19 in Palestine

**A gendered perspective on measures to fight the pandemic  
and recommendations for a gender-sensitive approach**

**Randa Siniora**

## Introduction

---

On 5 March 2020, the Government of Palestine (GoP) declared a state of emergency across the West Bank (WB), following the efforts taken by many countries globally to contain the spread of the novel COVID-19 virus from border to border. Not long after the state of emergency was declared, it became apparent there was not only one pandemic that Palestinian society has had to address. The second is domestic violence. Palestinian women have long faced the dual oppression of the Israeli military occupation and blockade alongside Palestinian patriarchal society. The lockdown and its impact on women's safety is now a third threat.

China, Spain, France and the UK are just some of the countries which have already documented a rise in domestic abuse cases since national lockdown measures were put into place. Looking at previous events that have affected global or national economies and societies, for example the 2008-2009 financial crisis or natural disasters, domestic violence cases have always spiked when strain is put on relationships, and concerns about money and personal safety increase with job insecurity and restrictions on movement.



Increasing armed conflict and regional wars following the Arab Spring resulted in a remarkable rise in records of Violence Against Women (VAW), particularly among refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria and Iraq. It was no coincidence that in 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 alongside eight other relevant resolutions addressing violence against women during armed conflict, war and occupation.

In response to the spread of COVID-19, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, called for an end to war and conflict across the globe and for countries to focus their efforts on combating the pandemic. His message on gender-based violence emphasized that “Violence is not confined to the battlefield. For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes”.

A study by the Centre for Global Development made a connection to COVID-19 in that “the regional or global nature and associated fear and uncertainty associated with pandemics provide an enabling environment that may exacerbate or spark diverse forms of violence”. As early as 27 March, based on data on domestic violence emerging from numerous countries, Dubravka Simonovic, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and its causes, said: “It is very likely that rates of widespread domestic violence will increase, as already suggested by initial police and hotline reports. For too many women and children, home can be a place of fear and abuse”.



Photo courtesy of AFP.

If we look deeper into the relationship between the state of emergency and domestic violence, it is important to note the similarities between a lockdown and the tactics used by abusers on women. Commonly, we see social or psychological abuse in domestic violence cases which can materialise as control of behavior through imposing rules, restricting when and where the victim can go and who they meet, isolation from family and friends, and restricting or controlling access to basic necessities. Women find themselves confined to their homes with increased caregiving responsibilities, and traditional gendered roles are further imposed on women when their husbands or other male family members can establish rules and control what women do. Additionally, in lockdown women lack privacy and face complete isolation from the outside world; often women and girls find themselves locked in with their abusers.

Typical of many lockdowns around the world, Palestinians must also follow rules of social distancing, not visiting friends or family, avoiding non-essential travel and only leaving the house for necessities. Additionally, many people are either working from home or have found themselves without a job, leading to extreme financial strain. Schools have closed, resulting in whole families being stuck at home together, adding tensions to intimate relationships and caring responsibilities. Victims of domestic abuse are trapped under the same roof as their abusers while lockdown measures have bolstered their abuser's ability to control them.

The impact of gender-based violence during a pandemic can be more damaging and more threatening than during normal life. A 2015 UN report on the "The World's Women" found that less than 40% of women who experience violence seek any sort of help. Of those who do, most will seek it from a family member or friend, while less than 10% would go to the police.

Unable to leave their homes and meet someone they trust, women are unable to find support or a way out of their situation.

Demands for emergency shelter have risen in many countries, while the availability of beds has been dramatically reduced as distancing rules mean they cannot take in new women who may be carrying COVID-19. In some cases, refuges may be forced to close as they cannot ensure appropriate social distancing or quarantine measures. Other shelters have had to be repurposed for emergency medical means to alleviate the surge in demand for hospital beds amid the pandemic.

Emergency services are already stretched to their limit; stories have emerged of women attempting to report their abuse to police, only to be told no one was available to respond to their call. The diversion of limited resources to treat the

pandemic means reduced availability of psychological support and care for survivors of domestic abuse. Additionally, overburdened emergency services result in a lack of coordination and a survivor of domestic violence who submits a police report may not receive the medical, emotional, financial or psychological support she is entitled to.

## Palestine and Violence Against Women Under COVID-19

In the case of Palestine, a 2019 survey by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) showed that 61% of women who experienced violence from their husband chose not to report it to anyone. Only 40% of Palestinian women are aware of the existence of institutions for protection against violence such as emergency shelters.<sup>6</sup> Service providers in Palestine have had to adjust to the conditions of lockdown by moving the avenues of support they offer to online or over the phone.

For the first month of Palestine's lockdown, The Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC)<sup>7</sup> recorded the number of cases received by its 24-hour emergency helpline and e-counselling services, set up in response to the state of emergency, and the types of abuse that were reported. These services allow women to directly contact social workers and receive a consultation or have a long-term case opened. In the first month of operation from 6 March to 6 April, 228 phone calls and seven online consultations

"The situation is very difficult. I have suffered from violence since the beginning of my marriage. During COVID-19 my husband has been very violent. I couldn't handle any more. One night he hit me and my daughters very hard and forced me to leave home. Before he could come back, I called the helpline as I had tried one time before, and the social worker listened and reassured me. I went to the hospital then the helpline social worker contacted the Protection Unit at the police. A WCLAC social worker and lawyer supported me step by step. Now my kids and I are in a safe place. This would not have happened if I hadn't found a professional organisation to help me to safety."

**- A 45-year-old GBV survivor supported by WCLAC during the week April 16-23.**



were made: 80% of these cases were either psychological/social abuse, for example belittling or making the woman feel worthless or unloved, or economic/social abuse such as withholding finances from the woman or forcing her to remain in the home as she had no money to leave. Also, 19% of cases involved physical or sexual abuse and 1% was a threat of abuse. Of these numbers, 109 required a one-time legal or social consultation, while 119 have had a long-term legal or social case opened. One woman made contact with the emergency sheltering service. While these numbers are high in terms of population size (there are less than 1.5 million women living in the West Bank), this number will not reflect the true extent of women experiencing domestic abuse and urgently requiring help.

These numbers do not differ greatly from the usual cases received by WCLAC in a reporting month. However, when we look at the data from the first part of April, there is a drastic increase in the number of cases of domestic violence coming in. WCLAC recorded a 69% increase in consultations made over the phone or online from March to April. In the week 16-23 April alone, there were 100 phone calls to the emergency helpline. In the last week, one more woman was transferred to an emergency shelter while there were five calls from women who had received threats against their lives. This indicates an increased need for protection during this time even though transferring women to anti-violence shelters is particularly challenging at the moment due to the current regulations issued by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD). These state that a woman cannot enter an anti-violence shelter without first having been quarantined for 14 days.

Reasons for the rise in cases are linked to increasing stress and tension within households as people experience lockdown fatigue after more than a month confined to their houses. Also, women suffering domestic violence at home may have initially been focussing on the well-being of their families and placing caring duties above their own safety. As time goes on, women come to find themselves locked-in, not locked down, and begin to reach out to services for help. Women's organisations are also advertising their services more widely and offering psychological support online in response to the situation.



Unemployment-Doesn't-Justify-Violence-against-Women-COVID19-scaled.

In other countries, service providers have reported a fall in calls to their domestic violence helplines and e-counselling services as women find it difficult to ask for help when they are trapped in the same house as their abuser and lack privacy. Some women may not have access to the internet or a phone of their own to reach out to these services; it can be presumed that Palestinian women face the same obstacles. According to data from the 2019 Household Survey on Information and Communications Technology, only 69% of Palestinian women use the internet.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the average family size is 5.1 persons (5.6 in the GS and 4.8 in the WB)<sup>9</sup> and many live in housing with limited space where women may lack the privacy to contact services via phone or internet.

Reproductive and sexual health is also impacted by lockdown as women in abusive relationships may lose autonomy over their bodies and find themselves unable to access medical support. WCLAC conducted interviews and discussions with policy and decision makers, service providers and other women's rights organisations, and discovered that many women opt not to attend check-ups, maternity tests or other health appointments at the current time due to fears they will contract COVID-19.



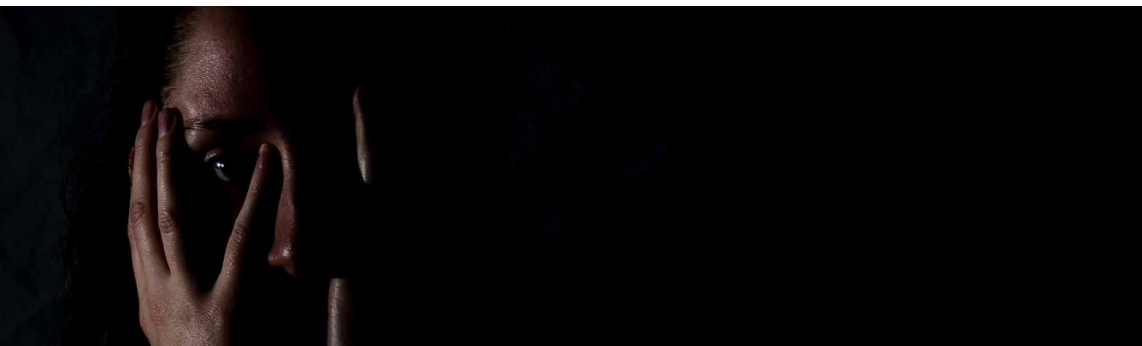
Another pivotal aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on domestic violence is its economic impact across society. The closure of a majority of businesses and services has resulted in widespread job loss, financial insecurity and emotional strain. Economic crises disproportionately affect women more than men, leaving them particularly vulnerable to the economic impact of COVID-19. UN Women's data show that female global labour force participation is only 48.5%, women are more likely to work in insecure or informal positions, women are paid less than men, and women are three times more likely to do unpaid care work than men.<sup>10</sup>

In Palestine, the rate of women in the labour force is significantly lower at only 18%, while 25% of the female employees hired in the private sector work without an employment contract. Also, 35% of female employees are paid less than the minimum average wage in Palestine.<sup>11</sup> Since national measures were introduced in response to COVID-19, many informally employed women were dismissed from their jobs and women running small income-generating projects lost their main source of income. Around 11% of Palestinian households are headed by women<sup>12</sup> and they are particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty when income is lost.

The MoSD estimates that at least 53,000 Palestinian families have fallen into poverty in recent weeks after losing their source of income, a number which is expected to double.<sup>13</sup> Almost 80% of cases reported to WCLAC's emergency helpline were from women aged 19-39 and who are likely to be married and have children. WCLAC's interviews found that a majority of domestic violence cases in Palestine during the lockdown period have had financial problems at home. The additional responsibilities of childcare increase the burden on women and married women have to be financially dependent on their spouses, making it harder for them to leave an abusive situation.

To address this, WCLAC has been posting information accessible on Facebook and on radio stations to spread awareness and adapt to the unique conditions of lockdown. In order to reach a broader public, WCLAC and Al-Muntada Palestinian Forum to Combat VAW organized a talk show aired on Palestinian national television to address response measures for the prevention and protection of girls and women victims of GBV. Other local media outlets like radios and social media were also used to publicize available services or conduct interviews and talk shows with the official duty-bearers to further reach women in remote areas.

Women are disproportionately more at risk of contracting COVID-19 as the primary caregivers to sick, disabled or elderly family members, especially in Palestine where traditional gender roles and inequalities are deeply rooted in society. Additionally,



women comprise 79% of nurses in the Eastern Mediterranean region<sup>14</sup> and are therefore more vulnerable to exposure. In Palestine, women nurses constitute 48% of nursing staff (55% in the WB and 47.8% in the GS).<sup>15</sup> Despite women being at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19, they are still neglected by decision-making processes. Gender is pivotal in the formation of COVID-19 policies and should not be considered merely a side issue. This could be the first global pandemic where we can have comprehensive and succinct information on gender and sex differences, beyond the medical, if we engage women in decision-making and response policy formulating positions. The UN Secretary General tweeted the importance of valuing women in light of the current situation: “I urge all governments to put women’s safety first as they respond to the pandemic”.<sup>16</sup> Control measures for this pandemic which do not acknowledge the gender-specific needs of women and their particular vulnerability increase the risk of domestic violence, whether physically, sexually, economically, psychologically or socially.

One case received by WCLAC in April was from a woman who was suffering physical and psychological violence from her husband of 20 years and had finally decided to ask for help. The woman reported the abuse to the police who registered her case, but advised her to return to her own home to adhere to current COVID-19 measures. The woman decided not to return home and with WCLAC’s assistance was able to find shelter for herself and her four children. Despite the current overstretched resources, the work of women’s organisations is more vital than ever and needs to be a central element in the proper response to the threat of domestic violence.<sup>17</sup>

However, Palestinian women not only face the restrictions imposed by the state of emergency; every day they live under occupation or blockade and are subjected to violations of rights and inequalities at the hands of the Israeli occupying power

who has legal obligations under international law. As an occupying power, Israel has the duty to provide essential health services for Palestinians as enshrined in the Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilians in Times of War or under occupation. In addition to physical medical care, this should include psychological and care services for women survivors of violence. Israel, as a contracting state party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), is responsible to take necessary measures to protect Palestinian women. Yet despite these legal and moral obligations, the occupying power has turned its back on the Palestinian civilian population in the occupied Palestinian territory, especially in Jerusalem. It has even discriminated in medical services and in the preventive measures needed to protect civilians from the virus, demonstrating negligence towards the rights of all Palestinians.

Women in Gaza face similar problems to those in the West Bank and East Jerusalem but with even more limited services. The lack of resources and restrictions from the Hamas government and the Israeli blockade have led to challenges and underfunding for the provision of support and services to women. This is of particular concern considering that 35% of women in Gaza have experienced domestic violence, 13% more than in the West Bank.<sup>18</sup>

In Gaza, the threat of domestic violence is added to the numerous daily challenges of living under Israeli blockade. In the week 16-23 April, WCLAC's field researchers received reports from 11 women about chemical spraying of agricultural land in Gaza by Israeli planes, making it impossible for farmers to use their land for nearly 10 days. This is particularly devastating to the many women who rely on agriculture to support themselves and their families. It exacerbates the economic stress that already exists from blockade and the effects of COVID-19 on the economy and trade. There are also concerns in Gaza that women cannot receive adequate healthcare. WCLAC recorded that two female patients who have been receiving cancer treatment in Jerusalem were denied COVID-19 testing and proper examination before being transported back to Gaza. They were transported in crowded buses without protection, placing them at great risk of contracting COVID-19. One of the women was later informed that her next scheduled trip for treatment was canceled, citing COVID-19 regulations as the excuse.

Despite lockdown measures being enforced in both Palestine and Israel, which has recorded much higher numbers of COVID-19 infections, the Israeli authorities continue unabated with the systematic violation of human rights against Palestinians

in contravention of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law. Israel must immediately halt all practices that make the lives of Palestinians precarious and ensure the unimpeded flow of goods, medical supplies and medical workers into GS and WB, as well as facilitating the work of humanitarian agencies that continue to provide essential humanitarian services.

## Moving On and Recommendations



The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders stated there is currently no systematized source of information about the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and its impact on peace and security. Globally, peacebuilding efforts have experienced a negative impact where freedom of movement is restricted, surveillance and police powers have been increased, and humanitarian support is depleted while aid-giving states funnel resources into their own suffering economies. Humanitarian support for Palestinian women survivors is also needed and must be enabled by the State of Israel rather than hindered by any tools of the occupation or blockade.

WCLAC and other Palestinian women's rights organisations are taking steps to combat the threat faced by women during lockdown in their own homes. The e-counselling and emergency helplines are open 24 hours and court cases are still being pursued online so that lawyers can continue to support their clients. Above all, women must be seen not only as victims in this situation but engaged in providing services to other women and enabling a gender-sensitive response policy to the pandemic.

In line with the UNSC Resolution 1325 recommendations, it is vital that the Palestinian Authority enacts measures to increase women's participation in gender-specific actions and political processes, including actions and initiatives related to the current lockdown and efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. CARE Palestine has laid out a series of additional recommendations for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to ensure a gender and human rights focussed response, such as training first responders on how to manage GBV cases and collaborate with healthcare services to support GBV survivors.<sup>19</sup> CARE also recommended that official Palestinian duty-bearers, donors and the international community should take steps to strengthen and support the work of all service providers. They include GBV within protection response efforts to combat COVID-19 by ensuring that funding is made available to organizations providing psycho-social support to victims of



A painting by Haya Kaabneh, who depicts the hardships of women under occupation.  
Palestine Museum US

GBV, and to guarantee the expansion and sustainability of these services.<sup>20</sup>

In their response to COVID-19, the GoP must adopt measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence as a major priority. Official institutions responsible for the protection of women from domestic violence, such as law enforcement officials, must adapt current lockdown measures to ensure survivors are protected from harm and their right to confidentiality is observed. This includes easing the admission of women into emergency shelters or alternative housing. Other countries have made exceptions for survivors of domestic violence to break lockdown measures in order to seek help and Palestine should be no different.

Finally, there must be appropriate mitigation measures in place to address the specific humanitarian and economic obstacles faced by Palestinian women in lockdown. These should be formulated with women's organisations and services while holding official institutions to account for their responsibility of ensuring the safety of women and girl victims of GBV.





# The Church and COVID-19

**Issa Jamil Kassissieh**

## Introduction



The local church and its related institutions are part of the national identity of the Palestinian people. In times of crisis, the church has always played a vital role.<sup>1</sup> The church doors are always open for those who seek it as a shelter. We have seen in the Gaza Strip and during Israeli wars on Gaza that the churches became a refuge for those seeking shelter from the Israeli bombardment. Food and basic needs were also provided to families.

It is not our intention to highlight the past activities of the church in crisis. The focus of this article is on the church in the context of Covid-19, which is a different kind of challenge for the church against an invisible enemy that has infected nations and paralyzed traditional daily life across the globe. The article will examine the performance of the church in dealing with this crisis from the outset, and the church's response to such an unprecedented challenge to society and to the church's message.

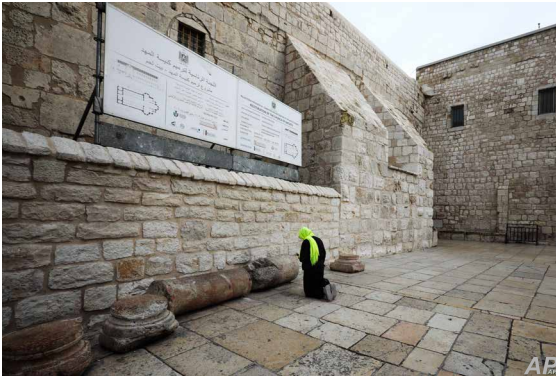
Today, the church's mission is to find a safe way in which to convey the word of God to the faithful in crisis, alleviate the suffering of victims and the most vulnerable, and present the Sacraments when all the churches are shut. This unprecedented global virus posed a serious challenge to the heads of churches.<sup>2</sup>



## The Spiritual Role of the Church



The main mission of the church continues to be the spiritual teachings of the Gospel and to hold prayers, especially on Sundays. In the last decade, we have witnessed outreach efforts by the church in preaching campaigns, initiating social activities and religious celebrations. These efforts aim to encourage mainly youngsters to keep their faith at a time when Christian emigration is on the rise due to a variety of factors, particularly the political instability in Palestine. Efforts were put in place to counter this phenomenon and to solidify the engagement between the clergy and lay people.



Covid-19 unexpectedly intruded into one of the most important cities for Christianity, the birthplace of Jesus Christ. On 5 March 2020, the Palestinian Government held a press conference to announce that seven citizens were infected with the disease in the Bethlehem area. The disease had been transmitted by tourists visiting the area. Accordingly, the Palestinian Government took immediate and

drastic measures, including the lockdown, before Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh announced the emergency presidential decree on that same night.<sup>3</sup>

At one point, Mrs. Rula Ma'aayah, Minister of Tourism, requested that the Nativity Church be closed in accordance with the presidential decree with the consent of the three churches responsible for the status quo (the Orthodox, Franciscans and Armenians). Initially, the heads of churches resisted this request, namely due to the memory of the dark 39-day siege of the church by Israeli military forces during the second *Intifada* in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

The news announcing an increase in Covid-19 cases, along with an official request from the Palestinian Government, convinced the three churches to agree to close down the Church of the Nativity, limiting prayers to the few priests housed inside. No one imagined the idea of closure during the high season for tourism with pilgrims patiently waiting in a long queue to enter the Grotto and pray. All the

other churches in the governorate were also closed. It was no easy mission for the church to ask the faithful to pray from home and to watch Sunday mass via electronic platforms.

The parishes adjusted themselves to the new reality via social media, keeping in their mind the importance of the connection with their communities while maintaining the social distance required by Palestinian Ministry of Health regulations. Within the context of this new bitter reality, the church's biggest challenge is how to strengthen spirituality, if not to maintain faith in the minds and hearts of the faithful who have a deep conviction of the power of God to defeat the devil represented by the coronavirus pandemic. To convince the faithful to stay safe at home while following and living the liturgies is a formidable challenge for the church, especially the duties of hearing confession, anointing the sick outside the church and providing sacraments in the priest's absence.



Photo by Issanis Kassissieh

## Easter

Holy Week was different this year. For the Christian world, the Holy Sepulcher in East Jerusalem represents the center of this celebration as it is from the Holy Tomb that the resurrection of Jesus Christ occurred. This year, the exceptional coronavirus situation and the strict health precautions ordered by Israel and the Palestinian civil authority closed down churches, synagogues and mosques. The public were banned from celebrating in churches including the Holy Sepulcher. The heads of churches succumbed to the danger of the spread of the virus and the main door of the Holy Sepulcher Church was closed on 25 March 2020, on the eve of the most sacred week for Christians everywhere.

For the faithful of the Holy Land and the rest of the Christian world, it was very painful to see the doors of the Holy Sepulcher church

suddenly closed. It was agreed that the heads of churches could remain inside to conduct mass while the faithful would watch on live streaming and other social media tools. It is worth mentioning here that the churches resisted the complete closure of the Holy Sepulcher church, especially during the Holy Week and Easter Sunday. It was strange to read in the local newspaper a statement by one senior clergy announcing that the doors of the Holy Sepulcher would be open during Easter, then suddenly the next day the doors of the church were closed.<sup>5</sup> Fear of the pandemic coupled with the decision of the Jordanian Hashemite Kingdom as custodian of the holy shrines to shut down Al-Aqsa Mosque contributed to the decision. Additional pressure exerted by the *de facto* Israeli authorities resulted in the closure of the church as part of efforts to contain the virus.<sup>6</sup> In collective efforts to address the faithful at such a sensitive time, the thirteen patriarchs and heads of churches published an Easter message<sup>7</sup> of hope, consolation and victory over all forms of death and destruction amid the pandemic.

### The Dilemma of the Local Church in Dealing with the Civil Authorities



Despite negotiations and arguments among the churches and with the Israeli authorities to ensure the historic and legal right of each church to conduct mass during Holy Week, it was clear that the Israeli police were determined to shut down the church in line with Israeli Ministry of Health requirements to fight COVID-19. Amid the shuttle talks, the three heads of churches sent a letter<sup>8</sup> to the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urging them to allow the clergy to carry out their spiritual duties during Holy Week. The letter was leaked and Palestinian officials expressed great concern about its content because the letter could be interpreted as implying that Israel holds *de jure* sovereignty over Jerusalem in contradiction to all the UNSC resolutions and UNGA resolutions related to the city, as well as to the historic and legal status of the holy sites (the status quo).

An official letter<sup>9</sup> signed by the Secretary General of the PLO and the Chief Negotiator Dr. Saeb Erakat was sent to the three churches stressing basic international principles related to Jerusalem, and referring to the *status quo* and the role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as the custodian of the holy sites. The letter stressed that in seeking to maintain the liturgies and mass, the church should not give legitimacy to the occupying power, violate international resolutions and

validate the Trump administration's unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as the united capital of Israel. The unofficial response was that the churches needed to deal with an "emergency situation" and hence, they had to deal with the "de facto power" on the ground. To this day, Palestinian officials have not received an official response.

On the other hand, and in preemption to the Israeli plans to annex lands of the West Bank; the Council of Patriarchs and Heads of the Holy Land churches issued a statement on 7 May 2020, expressing their deep concern and calling on Israel to respect the international legitimacy and to refrain from any unilateral illegal acts, which would result in grave consequences for the Middle East Peace process<sup>10</sup>.

## Holy Saturday



Churches celebrated Holy Saturday according to the Gregorian calendar on 18 April 2020. These communities, namely the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Assyrian and Coptic Christians, celebrate the Holy Fire: Christ's triumph over death that He is risen and death has been conquered. As part of the new reality, the celebrations took place with empty chairs and each clergyman asked his community to follow the mass from their homes via live streaming. In Jerusalem, the Latin Church opted to pray in the Patriarchate and live streaming was broadcast by the Christian Media Center. Palestinian TV and other media centers were given access to recordings. As the faithful could not light their candles with the Holy Fire, a number of Catholic



Scouts visited houses to pass the Holy Fire to the faithful. I was personally confined at home with my family and was happy to receive a knock on our apartment door in the Old City of Jerusalem by two scout members holding candles and presenting the Holy Light to us. For a moment, we cheered, but then I realized that the coronavirus epidemic is truly changing our lives and had prohibited me for the first time in my life from going to the Holy Sepulcher, three minutes from where I live. The Patriarchate brought the Holy Light to the faithful to bring hope and determination to maintain traditions, customs and liturgies despite COVID-19.

Other processions and liturgies were also dropped. The most important of these is the annual Palm Sunday procession that starts from the Mount of Olives and continues to Saint Anne's Monastery in the Old City. Hundreds of believers participate in this special procession. In fact, Palm Sunday is the only day in the year when hundreds if not thousands of Christians from the West Bank may obtain a permit from the Israeli military authorities to visit the Holy City. The event was rendered impossible this year.

In some areas in the West Bank, drive-in masses were conducted to strengthen the faith of believers and lift their spirits at a time when fear and helplessness are overcoming the hearts and minds of people confined to their homes. For this reason, Archbishop Pizzaballa, the Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate, emphasized in his Sunday Easter sermon<sup>11</sup> that we should not allow fear of the virus to defeat us or shake our faith as the resurrection of Jesus Christ defeated death and he rose victorious from the tomb. In other words, we are requested to keep our faith strong, support each other and pray for all people. I was honored to take part in the Easter Sunday mass as the only lay person there.

The arrangements for churches celebrating Holy Saturday according to the Julian calendar were no different from those of the sister Catholic Church. With coronavirus fears, mass was limited to a few priests and the faithful were absent physically. The washing of feet liturgy, led by His Beatitude Theophilos III of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, was not conducted according to tradition in the premises of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, also known as the Church of the Resurrection.

On Good Friday, the annual procession in Saint Jacob's Cathedral was also canceled for the first time in hundreds of years. The prayers were conducted inside the cathedral in the presence of a few members of the choir and were shorter in length. Physical distancing was well observed by all attendants. In Saint Elie's monastery on the way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the faithful attending the



Good Friday liturgy exceeded ten persons, breaking the regulations and resulting in a fine of NIS 500.00 each and NIS 5,000 for the monastery rector.

The Holy Saturday procession inside the Holy Sepulcher was broadcast by different TV networks as the church was completely empty. On that special sacred day, the church is usually overflowing with thousands of worshipers, seated or standing in every corner and on its roof. The narrow streets of the Old City are also full, despite the Israeli police erecting barriers around the Holy Sepulcher, and crowds enjoy the celebrations of the Holy Fire and watch the scout groups parading in the Christian Quarter with drums, tambourines and bagpipes.

The streets were deserted this year. The Jerusalem Orthodox Scout members, rather than performing as every year, took the flame to homes in and outside of the Old City, reaching out to the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The historic main door of the Holy Sepulcher was open for a while that morning as permitted to allow for the Holy Fire appearing from Christ's tomb to be taken to different corners of the Orthodox Church across the world as is the tradition.

## The Church and its Material Support to People



The Church runs health, educational and social institutions to reach out to people in Palestine. The ongoing lockdown obliged each church to check on its congregation and extend both spiritual and material support to poor families or those who had become unemployed.

Many churches have contributed financially or sent food parcels to those in need. Church institutions have been working further on priorities during the spread of the disease or adjusting to the new realities. Such efforts have been exhibited by Caritas, while the Pontifical Mission<sup>12</sup> in Jerusalem has been fundraising to secure financial support for health institutions, in particular for the purchase of ventilators and other medical equipment. Also, the Latin Patriarchate with the Grand Magisterium of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem have launched a special “COVID-1- Humanitarian Support Fund” dedicated to Palestine.

The Vatican announced that the annual collection for the Holy Land from all over the world by the generosity of the faithful has been rescheduled for 13 September 2020.<sup>13</sup>



Photo courtesy of Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90

Private schools run by the local church in East Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza Strip are facing real challenges with the closure of their educational institutions, including colleges, universities and schools, in accordance with the orders of the Palestinian authorities. Online classes are a new experimental method endorsed by local churches to keep the semester running and avoid further disruptions to the educational sector. Despite all the difficulties, online teaching continues, but a financial crisis is expected regarding the salaries of the teachers and employees.<sup>14</sup> This will add to the burdens faced by the church to keep its institutions running during the times of the coronavirus.<sup>15</sup>

To mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19, and following the initiative<sup>16</sup> of King Abdullah II of Jordan, the Hashemite Custodian of the Islamic and Christian Holy Sites in the Holy Land, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Theophilos III, exempted all tenants of properties of the Orthodox Church within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem from the rent for 2020 as the city is undergoing exceptional circumstances.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the Patriarchate and other churches are distributing thousands of food parcels and donating to hospitals in different areas as part of the Church's social responsibility.<sup>18</sup> The donations are part of continuous efforts to alleviate the current sufferings of people and the churches in the Holy Land have no other choice but to deal with the negative repercussions of the disease.

## The Holy See and the Pandemic



As in other states, the Holy See was taken by surprise by the spread of COVID-19 but it did not take long before His Holiness Pope Francis took unprecedented decisions and drastic steps to counter the disease and protect Vatican City. No one imagined that the mass conducted by His Holiness in the presence of the believers would be put on hold, that Saint Peter's Square would become a ghost town, and that the Vatican museums and courts would shut their doors on the eve of Lent.<sup>19</sup>

The most striking image in my mind was watching His Holiness on 17 March 2020 as he walked alone through St. Peter's Basilica in a special prayer for Almighty God to save humanity from this virus. How painful it was for millions to watch the Holy Week prayers in the Vatican with empty chairs as His Holiness led the mass and liturgies on Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, alone with only his minimal entourage. The spiritual words of the Holy Father continue to inspire the faithful. In his Easter Sunday message, Pope Francis as head of the Catholic church fully endorsed the call of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for a ceasefire in all hot spots, to open safety corridors for those who suffer in the conflicts and to use diplomatic tracks to solve disputes.<sup>20</sup> Within this context, the Holy Father called upon Israelis and Palestinians to grasp the opportunity and resume talks to achieve a comprehensive and durable peace in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> President Mahmoud Abbas sent an Easter greeting message to the Holy Father echoing the Pope's efforts for a unified international stand to defeat the pandemic.<sup>22</sup>

In further solidarity with the Third World and states in financial debt, His Holiness asked that international financial organizations and states either cancel these debts or at least re-schedule them to allow poor countries to better confront this international health emergency.<sup>23</sup> Thus, he issued a strong and bold appeal.



Photo courtesy of euronews

Such an appeal in these circumstances should be received positively. As the Holy Father put it: “*We have realized that we are on the same boat... all of us called to row together*”.<sup>24</sup> In these few words, the Vatican defined the challenge faced by humanity. Furthermore, the Pope added: “*We are one human community*”.<sup>25</sup> The Holy Father is seeking a collective and united effort by the international community as the path for the survival of humanity, a path based on justice, peace and fairness of wealth distribution. There is no doubt that the Catholic church is doing its utmost to ensure its presence to every person afflicted by Covid-19, including researchers searching for a remedy for this disease. The Holy See, like others, considers that the world order has been affected by this crisis, which is expected to last for some time with further deaths and suffering leading to socio-economic disequilibrium and further inequalities. In other words, the Catholic church joins with other churches in expressing their serious concern for the *day after* we vanquish the virus. As laboratories have not found an effective vaccine, the crisis will deepen globally. Disagreements about reviving the economy or saving lives will be the main issue the church will face in different countries and diocese.

As normal daily life gradually returns under the continued spread of the virus, the question of the churches opening their doors to the public will emerge. This is a liability, given that many of the faithful are sick or elderly. In this context, and as the priesthood is for preaching the Gospel and serving people, I should note here that in Italy, Spain and in other areas, more than eighty priests have passed away. They died from the virus while serving the sick and the elderly in care homes for the elderly. The mission of the priesthood involves preaching about the importance of spiritual self-reflection, revisiting the meaning of the sacred family and reviving, if not strengthening, family bonds at a time when everyone is confined to their homes.

In parallel with the aforementioned efforts conducted by Vatican City, Pope Francis has contributed financially on different occasions to hospitals dealing with COVID-19 or to purchase medical equipment to close gaps within the health sector. At a later stage, as the disease reached its peak in various countries, especially Italy, and Spain, the Holy Father decided to establish an emergency fund at the Pontifical Mission Societies to assist people and communities tragically impacted by the spread of the virus.<sup>26</sup> The fund will be directed to ‘mission countries’ through the church’s ‘structures and institution’ for those suffering from the consequences of the epidemic. The Holy Father launched the fund with US \$750,000 and appealed to all “church entities” and others to contribute to the fund. In less than a few days, the Fund reached more than EUR 200 million.

## Conclusion

---

During the Easter Vigil, Pope Francis quoted Jesus on the resurrection: “Do not be afraid, do not yield to fear”.<sup>27</sup> This is a message of hope. To echo this message, the heads of churches issued a statement during Holy Week<sup>28</sup> to tell the faithful: “The mighty power and grace of the Resurrection offer us hope, healing, and victory over this pandemic and all dark situations”. They concluded by announcing boldly that: “The Church is the Body of Christ, our Risen Lord, and we are the people of his pasture”.<sup>29</sup> With this statement, the church’s biggest challenge in facing COVID-19 is to maintain the light of hope at a time when the faithful everywhere look to the church for salvation and to help humanity to overcome death from the virus. The image remains in our minds of Pope Francis *solo* holding a special mass in the deserted Basilica of St. Peter’s Square.

Reflecting on that same image, the world saw the live streaming of the celebration of the ancient Holy Fire from the Holy Tomb of Jesus Christ on Saturday 18 April 2020. The vast space in the church is a stark contrast to the church being overcrowded from every angle.

The connection between the two images in St. Peter’s Square and in the Holy Sepulcher could be a divine message and a wake-up call for humanity before this bitter reality is reversed and the faithful flock back to the two basilicas. Thus, the triumph of the church is to defeat COVID-19.

As the rapid spread of COVID-19 took the church by surprise and imposed challenges, it might be the right moment for the church to re-visit its structures and prepare itself for the *day after*. This would enable it to tackle the challenges ahead with the deep awareness that specific teachings could be relevant, to work for closer unity on other vital issues for the survival of the church, and to keep the house of God alive in a stronger and triumphant manner. The church should not remain static but should become dynamic. It does not seem logical for Holy Week to be celebrated twice in the same week and to witness the resurrection of the Lord twice in a row. The Gospel teaches us differently.







# Religion in Times of COVID-19

## Reflections from a Palestinian Christian Theologian

**Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb**

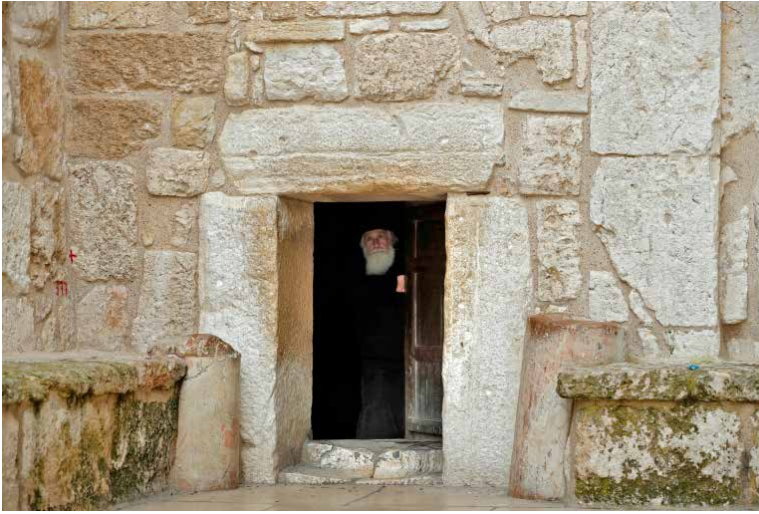
### Introduction



On 5 March 2020, the first cases of coronavirus were diagnosed in the city of Beit Jala next to Bethlehem. These first cases were linked to a tourist group staying at the Angel Hotel where most of the infections occurred. Within a few hours, the three cities of Beit Jala, Beit Sahour and Bethlehem were shut down. On the same day the Church of the Nativity, which is visited by close to two million tourists a year, closed its door to tourists and local worshippers alike. A few days later the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was shut down, together with al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

The closure of these places of worship is unprecedented in history. On March 14<sup>th</sup> the heads of churches in Jerusalem issued a statement<sup>1</sup> asking their members to abide by the law and regulations of the “civil authorities” with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. What this entailed was to refrain from gatherings on Sundays and other days of the week, and to ask members to stay home. This situation was unique because even under curfew, many Christians and Muslims used to gather to pray not only as an expression of faith but also as a symbol of creative resistance to the Israeli occupation.

For both clergy and lay Christians, it was not easy to stay away from church services and events, especially as mid-March marked the seasons of Passion and



The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem revered as the birthplace of Jesus is to temporarily close after a confirmed outbreak of coronavirus © AFP AHMAD GHARABLI

Lent with special services held every Friday and culminating in Palm Sunday and Holy Week. It was not an easy decision for the heads of churches to cancel the Palm Sunday procession, the Good Friday procession carrying the cross along the Via Dolorosa, or the Holy Fire ceremony on Saturday with the multitude of people carrying their candles and waiting for the Holy Light to come out of the tomb. It was not an easy decision for Muslims to refrain from Ramadan' evening prayers or the Friday worship at al-Aqsa Mosque.

## The Evolution of New Forms of Religious Expressions



While many of the religious and traditional celebrations had to be canceled or celebrated by clergy only, I was interested to observe new forms of religious expression evolving. One could see how faith was adapted to the new regulations under the COVID-19 pandemic with coping mechanisms that included:

1. For the first time ever, priests and pastors asked their flock not to attend church but to stay home. Usually it is the opposite as pastors always urge their members to come to church rather than stay at home. On social media, priests told parishioners to stay home. The rationale was to minimize the spread of infection. Taking care of your neighbor by not infecting them is seen as a Christian virtue of loving one's neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

2. Palestinian theologians have highlighted the fact that necessities have their own rules by quoting the words of Jesus: the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.<sup>3</sup> This means that human life is the highest priority in religion and takes precedence over any religious purity or ceremonial observation.

3. Palestinian theologians stress the theological meaning of the word ‘church’. The church is not the stone building that we gather in but is a community of believers. They reminded the faithful that whenever two or three people gather in the name of Jesus, he is there.<sup>4</sup> Thus, they encouraged people to pray at home as a Christian family in a manner similar to the early church meetings when no church buildings were yet erected. Experiencing these ancient forms of a ‘house church’ was important and transformative during this pandemic. As one pastor put it, “The church is not empty, the church has been deployed”.



4. Several churches started to broadcast their services via social media. If people are not allowed to come to church, then the church must reach out to people in their homes. That was done via the internet using Facebook groups and live streaming started to pop up everywhere in Palestine. Members could stay at home and celebrate the liturgy with their pastors while drinking their morning coffee. They would listen to sermons while preparing their meal. Many older people who were not tech-savvy were asked by the pastor to download Zoom so they could participate in Bible study. A different kind of virtual community was created by utilizing new media. While some of these phenomena were known in countries like the US and Europe, these were brand new forms of religious participation in Palestine.

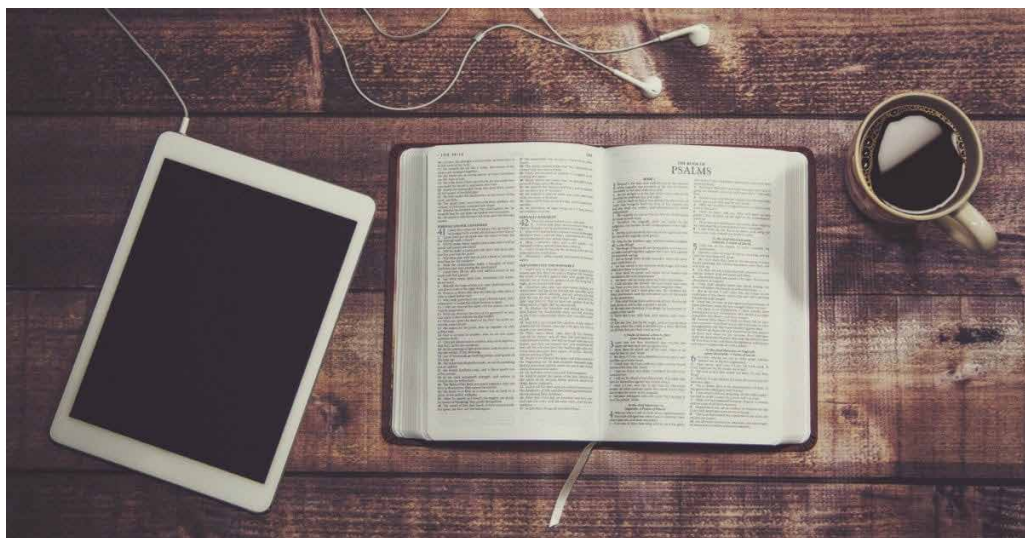
5. The use of social media by churches transformed the isolated church in Palestine into a transnational community. While watching the Easter service online, I could see that former members of the Christmas Lutheran Church from the UK, USA, Austria and Germany were participating in the service with us. Even friends from Sweden and Malaysia were tuning in. Friends from Lebanon, living in secluded areas, were eager to follow the service from Bethlehem. Suddenly, the isolation behind closed doors was defeated and a new sense of a transnational community was visible.

6. The cancelation of important mass ceremonies like the Palm Sunday procession or limiting the Holy Fire ceremony to clergy only was a great loss for many Christians. Yet, churches came up with alternatives. In the city of Beit Jala, on Palm Sunday, the Catholic youth brought palm branches, turned them small crosses and drove through the town with their car decorated with palm branches. Playing Palm Sunday songs, they went from home to home distributing the crosses they had made. The Orthodox youth in Bethlehem did the same thing on Holy Saturday; they received the Holy Fire from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and drove from home to home to share the light while playing songs of Christ's resurrection over death. This was an uplifting message for people suffering from a deadly virus and aching for life.



At the door of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Photo courtesy of Rafi Ghattas

7. The use of social media was not something only for the clergy. It was heartening to see the most vulnerable, the elderly in Palestine, using this medium to spread their message. The Ajyal program for the elderly, one of the outreach ministries of the Diyar consortium,<sup>5</sup> encouraged their members to make a short video with a positive message to post on Facebook. Several of the elderly people, some over eighty years old, recorded short video-clips while they were making Easter cookies, teaching their grandchildren songs or helping them with their homework. They shared these videos in multiple languages: Arabic, English, German, French and Spanish, to uplift people with their message of hope. This was not a fearful community but a robust and vibrant one.



8. The pandemic has taken an economic toll on people worldwide but for Christians in Bethlehem and its surrounding cities whose livelihoods depend exclusively on tourism, COVID- 19 has meant loss of income not only temporarily, but for months if not years to come. A key function of a church is to care for the poor, the unemployed and the needy. Churches from all denominations were eager to help, to distribute food and funds to the needy. What has been most striking is that many Christian youth groups, along with their Muslim brothers and sisters, took the initiative on their own to fundraise for the needy, to ask people for the names of needy families so that they could lend them a hand. These forms of social solidarity reflected our oneness in humanity. People from Hebron in the south and Toubas in the north were eager to support people in Bethlehem by providing fruits, vegetables and groceries. A beautiful tapestry of a united Palestinian community was once more visible.
9. For me it was important to stress that religion is not only about prayers but about the use of time. In a message broadcast on Maan TV, I urged people not to waste the time available but to redeem<sup>6</sup> and make the best use of it to practice a hobby, to read a book or a novel, to write articles, produce paintings and art, spend time with the family and to plan for the future. I concluded the message by saying: “There is life after corona and we should prepare for it from now”.





## Conclusion



The coronavirus pandemic has changed the way religion is practiced and the way the church operates in Palestine and elsewhere in the world. Some of these changes may have a short lifespan, while others will have long-lasting effects and offer something to learn from. It may be interesting in the future to compare notes with other churches and contexts in order to highlight some of the success stories and best practices.

Although nothing will fully replace a living community that meets in person on Sundays and gathers for special celebrations around Holy Communion, these new developments and the media are changing religious practices for the long term. The COVID-19 pandemic gave us a foretaste of what is to come and how to think proactively.





# Occupation and Loss under COVID-19

Dr. Varsen Aghabekian

## Summary

---



Living under Israeli occupation with its restrictions on daily life is one thing, but coupled with experiencing loss in a family during the spread and protective measures against COVID -19 is another. Disruptions to daily life, emergencies and catastrophes are not alien to Palestinians. However, life under COVID-19 alongside occupation exacerbates human suffering and the feelings of helplessness.

This article describes a first hand experience of loss at a time of ongoing conflict, heightened fears and insecurity in a volatile political environment, and the spread of COVID-19. It highlights the inevitable intertwine between politics, health and well-being.

## Introduction

---



As in most other countries of the world, both the occupied territories (the State of Palestine) and the occupier (State of Israel) have been increasingly immersed in the fight against the spread of COVID-19 and the introduction of protective measures from as early as the end of February 2020.

Palestine<sup>1</sup> was one of the first countries to institute countrywide restrictive measures to counter and suppress the spread of COVID -19 after seven cases were confirmed in the city of Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup>

Suddenly and with no preparations, the whole country, and world for that matter, were taken by surprise by the urgent need to alter routines and lifestyles. Many did not take the issue seriously at the beginning, but anxiety and fears intensified as the number of infected cases rose and the death toll worldwide soared.

The State of Palestine and the State of Israel- although in a very precarious situation of occupied and occupier- have each fought this virus on their own turf and collectively to save humanity from a virus that transcends politics.<sup>3</sup>

During the course of this fight, the recently announced Peace for Prosperity Plan, which seemed to Palestinians to be no more than a plan to further subjugate them, has been overtaken by COVID-19 related issues.<sup>4</sup> People of all walks of life, the local and international media, and politicians have been focused on COVID-19. However, on the ground and in Israeli politics, the annexation of parts or even all of the occupied territory has been given a green light by the Trump administration and remains on the agenda. For Palestinians, it is daunting to remain steadfast under occupation, challenge occupation measures on a daily base<sup>5</sup> and counter the Trump plan while facing the added challenges of COVID-19 – and all while never losing sight of the dream of liberation.

### Loss Amid Crisis



My father was a patriotic Palestinian of Armenian roots who was born and raised in Palestine a few years after the Balfour Declaration. He witnessed the revolt in the nineteen-thirties and graduated from the Terra Sancta School in West Jerusalem. He worked under the British Mandate over Palestine, lived through the 1947 division of Palestine, and experienced the uprooting and dispossession of several members of his family from West to East Jerusalem, turning them from property owners to being destitute. He worked with Palestinian refugees as a young teacher in refugee camps in Jericho, survived the 1967 war with further loss of land, and worked for over 30 years serving Palestinian refugees with UNRWA in Jerusalem, Amman and Beirut.

He often talked about Palestinians working with UNRWA with utmost pride and praised the achievements of his fellow workers, who he referred to as “the great

A. 81/1035.  
G.P.P. 19039—5000—22.10.43 2381A./S.

GOVERNMENT OF PALESTINE. P.P. No. 37.

### CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE.

Name of Officer Mr. John Shabekian.

Position held and Department Clerk Grade III.  
The Palestine Police Force.

Period of Service } Date of commencement of engagement 25th June, 1943.  
Date of termination of service 15th May, 1948.

Cause of termination of engagement Abolition of office on withdrawal of the Administration.

Efficiency Very Good.

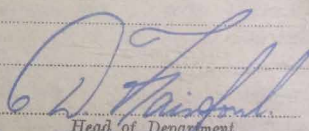
General Conduct Exemplary.

HEADQUARTERS  
THE PALESTINE POLICE FORCE

Date 15th May, 1948.

RECORDS BRANCH

NOTE.—The date here given is that of the last day on which the Officer performed the duties of his post in the country. Any leave granted is not included in the period shown.

  
 Head of Department  
 for INSPECTOR-GENERAL

CLERK

comrades”<sup>6</sup> (in common Arabic *bihizzo o birrizzoo*) during the period that he called the “golden era” of UNRWA. His reminiscences of the establishment of the Ramallah teacher training center, the establishment of a school or a health clinic in a refugee camp, and standing up for the rights of staff were so vivid that it made you live the event. His memory was impeccable.

In mid-March 2020, my 96-year-old father, the pillar of the family, was rushed with kidney failure to the emergency room of St Joseph’s Hospital, one of the six Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem. It was devastating as the family not only feared the loss of a loved one but was concerned about what to do under the circumstances with the fear and spread of COVID-19. It wasn’t the time!

As a Jerusalemite (resident of Jerusalem as defined by Israel), my father was entitled to health care under the Israeli health insurance scheme for all occupied East Jerusalem residents.<sup>7</sup> He could have gone to any hospital in East or West Jerusalem but his request had always been that if he was sick and needed hospitalization, he wanted to go to a Palestinian hospital. He often stated that,

“their hospitals (referring to Israeli hospitals) are very good, but make sure I am in a Palestinian hospital.....I would feel at home and I can communicate...Many will know us there.....Promise me you will do that”.<sup>8</sup> He felt safe in a Palestinian hospital, a feeling shared by many others primarily due to the language barrier.<sup>9</sup>

At the hospital, I wondered if the medical personnel were silently questioning what to do with this sick old man during heightened fears of dealing with the unknown and the potential spread of a virus that was anticipated to take the lives of many much younger than this patient. Despite everything, they gave him the medical attention required. In the evening, my father was moved from the emergency room to one of the wards where he stayed that night. The next day he was moved to another ward where patients were being relocated to free up a ward to receive COVID-19 infected patients. The hospital was keen to discharge patients to ensure the fewest patients possible would be present in the hospital when COVID-19 cases arrived.

The hallway of the ward was filled mostly with patients from the Gaza Strip, some of whom had not seen their loved ones for weeks. Some were with a family companion while others were on their own. For a few, their treatment had been delayed or postponed while the hospital prepared to receive COVID-19 patients.

Their conversation revolved around two subjects: returning to and reentering Gaza, and their stay at the hospital amid uncertainty and loneliness. They wondered whether checkpoints would be open, would they be able to pass through the Beit Hanoun (Erez) checkpoint and enter Gaza, how they could travel on their own without a companion. Would there be enough patients and companions to fill seats in a cab and reduce the cost of travel? What if they were returned back? What if COVID-19 related restrictions on movement were tightened and they could not be transported? So many questions.

The fears and anxiety of these patients were heightened by the spread of COVID-19 and hospital preparations to receive infected patients were greeted with continuous prayers and calls for divine intervention. Reciting from the Quran could be heard from several rooms; some were reading the Holy Book not only to save their loved ones in hospital, but also to save the nation and the world from this quickly spreading disease that transcends race, color, ethnicity, social status and politics.

Hospital staff continued to check the temperature of visitors entering into the hospital. Visitation hours were reduced and visitor numbers and movements were monitored by hospital security personnel to ensure strict compliance with visitation



hours. I asked myself that if I left the hospital to go home, whether I would be able to return? How would I feel if I left for a few hours and something happened or I was unable to come back to the hospital? I would be devastated.

At times I felt guilty and a sense of selfishness that I was consumed with fears about my family's situation. People were infected in their thousands globally; cases were on the rise in Palestine and with our neighbors in Jordan, and much more so in Israel. My thoughts were with Gaza and our refugee camps within Palestine and in the diaspora. A single COVID-19 case there would result in unimaginable tragedy under a very high population density and very difficult social-physical distancing. The seemingly endless wait in the hospital reminded me of our prisoners and their plight for freedom. It must be extremely difficult to be locked in the same place day after day, especially now with fears of the spread of COVID-19. They certainly all needed our prayers for their safety and calls for their release.



Palestinians gather for a demonstration to demand coronavirus (COVID-19) protection for Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, in Gaza City, Gaza on 19 March 2020 [Ali Jadallah/Anadolu Agency]

With all the discussion of nationwide lockdown, I couldn't help but question how Gazans endure life under siege. They have been under a lockdown in a large open air prison for too long. How do they grapple and cope with this? How does humanity accept this? Will there be encounters on the border between Hamas-controlled Gaza and Israel that might undermine the capacity to deal with COVID-19? On the positive side, I gained strength from the Gazans in the hospital. They seemed much stronger than I was. They had faith that things would get better and that it was their destiny to endure it.

I couldn't stop thinking about Jerusalem hospitals and what their situation would be if and when they were bombarded with many infected people. How would they handle this situation given their already difficult financial situation, worsened by the withdrawal of US aid to East Jerusalem hospitals. Do they have sufficient number of respirators? Have their staff received training to face this? Would they have the required medical equipment and materials? Will they manage? Will this drain their capacities and create even greater challenges post COVID-19?

My father stayed in the hospital for a week, a week that was not only challenging to the family but exacerbated by the circumstances created by the COVID-19 situation and ongoing restrictions by the Israeli occupation. My father kept calling for my sister; I repeated the quarantine requirements that she was obliged to follow<sup>10</sup> and my father seemed to accept, but deep inside I knew he was dissatisfied.

Every couple of hours he would suddenly ask that I make sure to give the payment receipt of the *arnona* to the lawyer for my case of threatened residency status in East Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup> He seemed fixated on the issue. His insistence reflected the importance of countering the revocation of Jerusalem identity cards by the Israeli authorities and stripping Jerusalemites of their residency rights.<sup>12</sup> My father wanted to ensure that I never gave up my right to live in my city where his great-grandparents were born and died.

A night before he passed away, on his sixth night in the hospital and while he was half asleep, he spoke non-stop as if he was moving through the different stages of his life. He talked of his childhood years carrying vegetables from Battir to Jerusalem, his school years with his classmates, who included George Habash and Zuhdi Tarazi and of whom he always spoke very highly. He claimed that Habash was top of the class. He spoke of the band he was part of, the parties in the Armenian Club, meeting his future wife (my mother), his work in Cyprus and Saudi Arabia, the power struggles among the clergy in the Armenian Patriarchate, the accommodation of Armenians in the Armenian convent and quarter, and so on. He was telling us of his long history in this country.

One event that stood out and which I had heard from him previously was when the daughter of their Jewish neighbor pre-1948, whose father was a rabbi and head of the Jewish community in the Jewish Quarter, at that time located next to my grandparents in the Armenian Quarter, came one month after the 1967 war to check on my father's family and others who used to live in the same quarter. I am not sure why he remembered this specific incident. Could it be that he wanted to stress that coexistence is possible, that human relationships transcend politics?

He spoke of his sons-in-law, both of them non-Christian, with pride and much love. I was relieved, I thought we may have angered him when we opted to marry non-Christians. This was further reaffirmation that his humanity surpassed all differences. He mentioned the family dog, Chico, and asked where he was. His humanity was again at the fore in caring to mention an animal – a creation of God-on his death bed.

My father's recitation of historical events was very much an attestation by a resilient Palestinian-Armenian who was deeply rooted in the history of his country, and proud to contribute to his country and people. It was his last show, probably unaware of who he was speaking to. My daughter and I listened attentively and wondered where this energy to speak was coming from.

My father passed away the next evening, ironically in the presence of a colleague whose father had worked with my father at UNRWA and one who had been made a refugee when dispossessed from West Jerusalem. Was this a sign of the need for people to stick together and support each other? Whatever it was, the support was needed and most helpful.

By this time, there were already further restrictions on movement due to COVID-19, I was bombarded with questions to which we needed to find quick answers: how



Photo courtesy of AFP.

will the undertaker usually called to prepare the body for burial get to the hospital? Where will we buy the coffin and how will the coffin and the body be transported to church? Will we be able to obtain the burial permit on time? Who will be allowed to attend the funeral given the rules on a limited number? How will close family members from the West Bank join? Some of them are aged over 50 and would ordinarily be allowed through checkpoints but were now forbidden to enter Jerusalem due to the disease. How do his son and grandchildren residing abroad feel about not being able to be near their father and grandfather during his last days, nor participate in the funeral due to travel restrictions and the closure of airports? What does my sister - his daughter - feel now because she was unable to be with her father at his death bed given that she and her family were under voluntary house quarantine? Will two of my children holding West Bank identity cards<sup>13</sup> and staying with me in Jerusalem during this difficult time with permits, be able to pass through additional checkpoints in East Jerusalem if cars are stopped by Israeli forces checking on compliance with COVID-19 protective measures?<sup>14</sup> Are their permits still valid or have they been canceled? Will they be returned to the West Bank? Who from the clergy can make it to the funeral service? Does my father deserve this, a very humble funeral unworthy of his life's contribution? How will we be able to carry out traditional funeral rituals?<sup>15</sup> The questions and worries were seemingly never-ending.

The funeral was prepared with permission for up to 20 attendees, including the clergy, although physical distancing was required in the church and at the burial site. We were transported from home to church in taxis which could carry one person only in addition to the taxi driver. After the service and burial, a very small group gathered to offer condolences without hugs or kissing and at more than a meter's distance. This felt very odd. Could we, for example, kiss our mother who had lost her lifelong husband and offer to console her? Should we maintain a distance? How do we deal with our loss and mourning with such imposed coldness? We were definitely not prepared for this social and psychological resilience although we understood the need to abide by COVID-19 protective measures in the public interest.

My father is no longer with us. He experienced loss of land and ongoing conflict. He did not witness peace in his lifetime, a peace he yearned for due to his belief that there is so much in life to live for and to enjoy. He repeatedly questioned why peace has not been achieved despite the concessions made by Palestinians: "What other concessions are needed?". For him there was nothing left to be conceded. Yet despite all the challenges, he continued to believe in non-violence and that

one day the injustices and wrongdoings that have befallen Palestinians will be rectified. He lies in Jerusalem, the city that he loved the most.

Daily life under occupation is difficult. The loss of a loved one in the time of COVID-19 makes it more difficult. The virus is vicious, non-discriminatory, and disregards the politics of conflict and occupation. Its spread highlights the necessity for Israel as an occupying power to assume its responsibilities and fulfill its obligations towards the occupied population in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It also requires the joining of forces and cooperation across the divide to combat the disease. Will such cooperation be sustained or replicated to lead towards genuine aspirations for peace and stability in the future or will it be a cover for more underlying harassment to further subjugate Palestinians?

The talk of further annexation of Palestinian land by Israel is a step in the opposite direction, especially in the complicated context of COVID -19 today and going forward. On the other hand, there is a vision of peace presented by Palestine that is worth exploring,<sup>16</sup> a peace that will create a more secure region engaged in development and better prepared for the future. COVID -19 should be a tipping point for justice, peace and healing.

One day- near or far- my father's wish for peace will materialize. It is inevitable and he will rest in peace.





## FOOTNOTES

### Article 1

#### The Impact on International Relations During and Following the Coronavirus Pandemic

- 1 World Bank “Gross domestic product 2018” available at <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/gdp-ranking>. Last accessed on 18 April 2020.
- 2 As reported by CNN INT on 10 April 2020.
- 3 Tony Romm . 3 million Americans filed jobless claims last week, pushing eight-week total to 36.5 million. The Washington Post . May 14, 2020
- 4 An analysis comparing both economic policies can be seen in Chuck Jones’ article for Forbes “No President Trump, Obama’s Economic Recovery Was Not A Con Job” available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chuckjones/2020/02/19/no-president-trump-obamas-economic-recovery-was-not-a-con-job/>. Last accessed on 18 April 2020.
- 5 For more information see: Edward Alden. “After the pandemic: Can the U.S. finally retool for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” *Council on Foreign Relations*. 3 April 2020.
- 6 Ibid p.4
- 7 World Bank data (2018) available at <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/dataset/gdp-ranking>. Last accessed on April 18, 2020.
- 8 Statement by EU High Commissioner Josep Borrell 23 March 2020.
- 9 Coronavirus Pandemic. EU agrees 500 billion Euro rescue package. BBC 10 April 2020.
- 10 In 2017 the EU produced 45% of its own energy needs and imported 55%: 39% of its crude oil from Russia, 11% from Norway, 8% from Iraq, 7% from Saudi-Arabia and another 7% from Kazakhstan. Natural gas imports came from: Russia 40%, Norway 26% and Algeria 11%. Solid fuel (coal) imports from Russia 39% and 17% each from Colombia and the US. What energy is available in the EU. EC.EUROPA. EU-energy.2019.
- 11 Based on data from the International monetary fund. I.M.F.2018.
- 12 China’s imports and exports. Oec. World. 2018
- 13 -U.S.: \$ 478 billion, E.U. \$ 467 Billion, Hong Kong: \$ 225 billion, Japan: \$ 157 Billion. And South Korea: \$ 99 billion. China’s imports in 2018 stood at \$ 1.7 trillion: E.U. : \$ 245 billion, Asia : \$ 151 billion ( excluding: South Korea+ Japan), South Korea: \$ 150 billion , Japan : \$ 135 billion , U.S. : \$ 133 billion.
- 14 Dr. Amira Abo El-Fetouh. The world is not going back to what it was before the Coronavirus outbreak. Middle-East monitor.com. 23 March 2020.
- 15 Bloomberg Business News: Russia expects 10% slump this year in worst-case scenario. 22 March 2020
- 16 PLO Negotiations Affairs Dept. Israeli violations under Covid-19. 9 April 2020.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 i.e. Two states: State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital to live side by side with the State of Israel on the 1967 borders.

### Article 2

#### East Jerusalem and COVID-19

- 1 The number of 113 infected cases in East Jerusalem with one death are according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health website on COVID-19 <https://www.corona.ps/>. These numbers may not be accurate because they came from local sources in East Jerusalem.
- 2 The three Jerusalem hospitals designated to deal with COVID-19 patients are Makassed Islamic Charitable Hospital, the Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives and the St. Joseph Hospital (the French Hospital) in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. The three hospitals are part of the East Jerusalem Hospital Network, established in 1997, which comprises six medical facilities: Augusta Victoria Hospital, Makassed Islamic Charitable Hospital, St. John Eye Hospital, St. Joseph Hospital, the Red Crescent Society Hospital, and the Jerusalem Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1651421/middle-east>
- 3 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/global-virus-deaths-154000-cases-700000-live-updates-200417234910029.html> and <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/tamara-nassar/israeli-neglect-fuels-coronavirus-east-jerusalem>
- 4 Haaretz newspaper, among other media networks, reported the closing of this clinic on the pretext that the tests would be screened by the Palestinian Authority. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israeli-police-raid-palestinian-coronavirus-testing-clinic-in-east-jerusalem-1.8767788>

5 Fifteen different UN Security Council Resolutions were adopted, starting with Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967 to Resolution 2334 of December 23, 2016, which highlighted that East Jerusalem is part of the Palestinian Occupied Territory. In particular, Resolution 252 of May 21, 1968, condemned the occupation of any land through armed aggression while demanding that Israel “desist from taking any further action which tends to change the status” of the city. For a full list of UNSCR and GA Resolutions on Jerusalem as well as UNESCO’s Resolutions see <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/resolutions-occupied-east-jerusalem-171206081326131.html>

6 On Adalah’s petition to the High Court and subsequent decision to open up testing centers in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, see <https://www.adalah.org/en/content/view/9979>

7 The two hotels are the Christmas Hotel, whose general manager Moussa Jarjoui decided to make the hotel available to medical personnel working in Jerusalem hospitals who would otherwise have to move back and forth to the West Bank. The second hotel is the Saint George’s hotel which was turned over to the Jerusalem Alliance as quarters for the quarantine of those persons whose residential conditions make it impossible for safe quarantine. See <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1656746/middle-east> for the hotels in East Jerusalem that offered their premises for COVID-19 related matters.

8 The performance of the Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh and his team in managing the crisis and keeping Palestinians informed on developments in daily briefings has won praise. See <http://www.alquds.com/pdf/1585692358662077700/1585728708000/> which reports that 80% of Palestinians polled by Awrad Polling Center trusted the way the Shtayyeh government is dealing with COVID-19 and efforts at its containment. Barron’s com also refers to the success of the Shtayyeh government <https://www.barrons.com/news/with-abbas-absent-palestinian-premier-is-star-of-virus-crisis-01586434207>

9 For the Christian heads of churches and their statement urging the faithful to adhere to the instructions of the civil authorities for containing the spread of the virus, see the March 14, 2020 statement <https://www.lpj.org/posts/patriarchs-and-heads-of-churches-urge-communities-to-adhere-by-coronavirus-precautions.html> See also Jerusalem Christian leaders’ Easter message of hope, consolation amid pandemic <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-04/christian-church-leaders-jerusalem-easter-message.html> . The Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine has also issued a fatwa related to fasting for those affected with COVID-19 during Ramadan. In other interviews with the media he asked Muslims to celebrate the month within their own houses and to undertake Salat Al Tarawih, prayers usually held at mosques after breaking the fast, at their own homes for fear of spreading the virus. See <http://www.alquds.com/articles/1587149049329850600/>

### Article 3

## Violations of the Law during COVID-19: Israeli Annexation Plans in Western Bethlehem

1 United Nations “Secretary-General Calls for Global Ceasefire, Citing War-Ravaged Health Systems, Populations Most Vulnerable to Novel Coronavirus” (March 23, 2020) available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20018.doc.htm> last accessed on April 20, 2020.

2 The Times of Israel “European Union said to warn Gantz not to agree to West Bank annexation” (April 19, 2020) available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/european-union-said-to-warn-gantz-not-to-agree-to-west-bank-annexation/> last accessed on April 20, 2020.

3 Ravid, Barak “Israel’s Netanyahu, Gantz agree to form emergency coalition government” (April 20, 2020) available at <https://www.axios.com/netanyahu-gantz-israel-emergency-government-16c96cf4-5dfe-4d43-9cc6-09340a0eba0c.html> last accessed on April 21, 2020.

4 United Nations “Key Players Reject Proposed United States Peace Plan as Failing to Meet Minimum Rights of Palestinians, Special Coordinator Tells Security Council” (February 11, 2020) available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14103.doc.htm> last accessed on April 20, 2020.

5 Fatah Central Committee member and former foreign minister Dr. Nasser Al Kidwa said that in this scenario Palestine should “declare that Israeli actions actually closed the door on a negotiated settlement and insist on continuing the struggle to achieve national independence in a Palestinian State on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital, without negotiations”. Summary of the presentation available at [http://www.yaf.ps/?url=posts/show/2090/Alkidwa's\\_Presentation\\_on\\_the\\_The\\_Middle\\_East\\_Policy\\_of\\_the\\_U.S.\\_Administration\\_and\\_its\\_Future\\_Plan](http://www.yaf.ps/?url=posts/show/2090/Alkidwa's_Presentation_on_the_The_Middle_East_Policy_of_the_U.S._Administration_and_its_Future_Plan) last accessed on April 20, 2020.

6 Shtayyeh, Mohammad (2015) Israeli Settlements and the Erosion of the Two-State Solution. Shorok: Ramallah, p. 21.

7 Drobles plan available at <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-186771/> last accessed on April 24, 2020.

8 Raz, Avi (2012) “The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians in the aftermath of the June 1967 War”. London: Yale University Press, p. 54.

9 Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs “Settlement in the Administered Territories” (18 September 1967) available at <https://www.soas.ac.uk/lawpeacemideast/resources/file48485.pdf> last accessed on April 19, 2020.

10 Given the historic relations between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, as well as Holy See diplomacy, the UN Partition Plan of 1947 included Bethlehem as part of the Jerusalem “Corpus Separatum”. A petition made by hundreds of notable Bethlehemites after the occupation also asked the Israeli authorities to keep both cities together, yet this was ignored.

11 Saint Yves Society (2014) “The Last Nail in Bethlehem’s Coffin: The Annexation Wall in Cremisan”. Bethlehem p. 13.

12 The term “settlement bloc” is an Israeli term that has largely incentivized the annexation of occupied Palestinian land located between settlements. Palestinian negotiators do not accept this terminology. More information available in PLO NAD “Blocking Peace: The Myth of Israeli Settlement Blocs” (March 2013) available at [https://www.nad.ps/sites/default/files/myth\\_of\\_israeli\\_settlement\\_blocs\\_3.pdf](https://www.nad.ps/sites/default/files/myth_of_israeli_settlement_blocs_3.pdf) last accessed on April 19, 2020.

13 Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics “The Population in the Localities 2018” (25 August 2019) available at <https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/publications/DocLib/2019/%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%97%D7%95%D7%AA%20%D7%AA%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%9D%D7>

- [%A7%D7%95%D7%91%D7%A5 %D7%99%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%91%D7%99%D7%9D\\_2018.xlsx](#) last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 14 UNESCO “Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir”, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1492/> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 15 Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs “The Security Fence in the Cremisan Valley” (15 July 2015) available at <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/State/Law/Pages/The-Security-Fence-in-the-Cremisan-Valley-15-Jul-2015.aspx> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 16 International Court of Justice (July 9, 2004) “Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory” available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/131/131-20040709-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 17 Israeli Parliament “Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel” available at [https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic10\\_eng.htm](https://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic10_eng.htm) last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 18 The US Consulate General in Jerusalem engaged in diplomacy between Palestinians and the US from 1845. It was closed by the Trump administration, effectively downgrading relations with the Palestinians. Reactions to that move are included in this article of David Halbfinger for The New York Times: “U.S. Folding Jerusalem Consulate, a Blow to Palestinians” (October 18, 2018) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/world/middleeast/us-palestinians-consulate-jerusalem.html> last accessed on April 21, 2020.
- 19 Abouna.org “US Consul General visits Cremisan Valley threatened by separation wall” (May 1, 2015), available at <http://en.abouna.org/ar/holylands/us-consul-general-jerusalem-visits-cremisan-valley-threatened-separation-wall> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 20 Btselem “Separation Barrier by Beit Jala – Critically harming town to lay groundwork for annexation” (12 November 2015) available at [https://www.btselem.org/separation\\_barrier/beit\\_jala\\_separation\\_barrier](https://www.btselem.org/separation_barrier/beit_jala_separation_barrier) last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 21 Wafa “Israeli forces demolish Bethlehem-district house, restaurant” (August 26, 2019) available at <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=00BfP0a11345583470a00BfP0> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 22 Magid, Jacob “Following pressure from KKL, Israel razes buildings near Bethlehem” (27 August 2019) available in The Times of Israel <https://www.timesofisrael.com/following-pressure-from-kl-israel-razes-palestinian-buildings-near-bethlehem/> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 23 Cook, Jonathan “How Britain dresses up crimes in Israel as ‘charitable acts’” (December 16, 2019) available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-britain-dresses-crimes-israel-charitable-acts> last accessed on April 19, 2020.
- 24 Ir Amin “Annexation Moves Intensify: Greater Jerusalem Bill Hits Ministerial Committee on Legislation on Sunday” available at <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/en/node/2121> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 25 White House “Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people” available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperity/> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 26 White House “Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem” (December 6, 2017) available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 27 Haddbinger, David “U.S. Ambassador Says Israel Has Right to Annex Parts of West Bank” (June 8, 2019) in New York Times available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/08/world/middleeast/israel-west-bank-david-friedman.html> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 28 Magid, Jacob “Greenblatt says he prefers to call settlements ‘neighborhoods and cities’” (June 28, 2019) in The Times of Israel available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/greenblatt-says-he-prefers-to-call-settlements-neighborhoods-and-cities/> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 29 The full statement is available at <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-open-debate-on-the-middle-east-9/> (July 23, 2019) last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 30 Netanyahu, Benjamin “Elections will determine whether Israel seizes or squanders a historic opportunity” (February 14, 2020) available at <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/02/14/this-election-will-determine-whether-israel-seizes-or-squanders-a-historic-opportunity/> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 31 Reuters “Netanyahu revives settlement plan opponents say cuts off East Jerusalem” (February 25, 2020) available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-settlement-e1/netanyahu-revives-settlement-plan-opponents-say-cuts-off-east-jerusalem-idUSKCN201A8> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 32 Peace Now “Givat Hamatos Tender for 1077 Units Published” (February 24, 2020) available at <https://peacenow.org.il/en/more-than-1300-units-in-settlements-to-be-approved-this-wednesday> last accessed on April 20, 2020.
- 33 Interviews with landowners and local officials, April 2020.
- 34 Only around 13% of the Bethlehem Governorate is under limited Palestinian control. The rest is under full Israeli control with 18 settlements surrounding Bethlehem from all sides. According to the US Plan, all Israeli settlements will remain in place.
- 35 Around half of the Palestinian Christians living in the State of Palestine are concentrated in the Bethlehem area. Land to the west of Bethlehem represents the main area available for urban expansion.
- 36 High Representative Josep Borrell issued a statement on April 23 stating: “The European Union reiterates that any annexation would constitute a serious violation of international law. The European Union will continue to closely monitor the situation and its broader implications, and will act accordingly.” Statement available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77856/israel-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77856/israel-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell_en) last accessed on April 25, 2020.
- 37 European Commission “Israel” available at <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/israel/> last accessed on April 20, 2020.

## Article 4

### Israeli Politics During COVID-19 and the Impact on Palestine, shedding on Annexation

- 1 <https://www.palestinianbasiclaw.org/basic-law/2003-amended-basic-law>
- 2 A joint poll conducted by JMCC and Juzoor for Health & Social Development on #Covid-19, released on 5/4/2020, showed that 96% of people had trust in the government. <http://www.jmcc.org/news.aspx?id=3819>
- 3 Tweet by the Palestinian PM on 19/4/2020 <https://twitter.com/DrShtayyeh/status/1251949773856309249>
- 4 CARE Palestine, WBG East Jerusalem Policy Brief, 20 April 2020.
- 5 [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33\\_GC-IV-EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.33_GC-IV-EN.pdf)
- 6 PLO Negotiations Affairs Dept. [Israeli violations under Covid-19](#), 9 April 2020.
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Formal name of bill: Application of Israeli Sovereignty to Judea and Samaria Bill 5778-2018
- 9 Formal name of bill: Jerusalem and its Satellites Bill 5777-2017
- 10 Formal name of bill: Jordan Valley Bill 5775-2015
- 11 Formal name of bill: Etzion Bloc Bill 5777-2017
- 12 Formal name of bill: Ma'ale Adumim Bill 5775-2015
- 13 Formal name of bill: Ariel Bloc Bill 5775-2018
- 14 PLO Negotiations Affairs Dept NAD-PNSP
- 15 The Trump plan included a conceptual map that suggested Israeli sovereignty over more than 30% of the area of the WB. As expected, these areas were identified based on annexation plans promoted by Israel. Israel welcomed the Trump plan as a green light to implement gradual annexation over parts of the occupied State of Palestine.
- 16 [UNSC resolutions](#) that guarantee Palestinian rights to 1967 lands & Jerusalem include: 242, 253, 267, 298, 476, 478, 2334.
- 17 Itay Epshtain, Special Advisor, NRC 20 April 2020 *Initial Information on the Coalition Agreement for the Establishment of an Emergency and National Unity Government*  
[file:///Users/mac/Downloads/Initial Information on the Coalition Agreement for the Establishment of an Emergency and National Unity Government.pdf](file:///Users/mac/Downloads/Initial%20Information%20on%20the%20Coalition%20Agreement%20for%20the%20Establishment%20of%20an%20Emergency%20and%20National%20Unity%20Government.pdf)
- 18 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-pompeo-says-annexing-west-bank-is-israel-s-decision-to-make-1.8791028>
- 19 Philip Weiss, *Palestinians are good enough to save Jews' lives in Israel, but not to be in their government*, Mondoweiss net, 25/3/2020 retrieved from <https://mondoweiss.net/2020/03/palestinians-are-good-enough-to-save-jews-lives-in-israel-but-not-to-be-in-their-government/>

## Article 5

### Towards A Better Statistical Communication Strategy on COVID-19

- 1 The data were obtained from app.narama.io.
- 2 <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.
- 3 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270473/age-distribution-in-italy/>.

## Article 8

### Violence against Women and COVID-19 in Palestine

- 1 Amanda Taub, "A New Covid-19 Crisis" NY Times. April 6 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>
- 2 The resolution acknowledged the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls and called for governments to adopt a gendered perspective in post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.
- 3 Antonio Gueterres, "Make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of national response plans for COVID-19" (statement, United Nations, April 5 2020) Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/make-prevention-and-redress-violence-against-women-key-part>
- 4 Dubravka Simonovic, "States must combat domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns" (statement, Geneva, March 27 2020)

Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25749&LangID=E>

5 United Nations, Dept of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, *The World's Women 2015*, New York: United Nations Publications, 2015, chapter 6.

6 State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Preliminary Results of the Violence Survey in the Palestinian Society 2019*, Ramallah: PCBS, November 2019, page 22-23.

7 WCLAC is an independent Palestinian, non-profit NGO seeking equality and social justice between men and women. WCLAC has played a prominent role in addressing gender-based violence in Palestinian society in both private and public spheres and has bridged the need to address discrimination and violence against women within Palestinian society by providing legal and social support to women and reporting on violations of women's rights by Israeli military occupation and Palestinian patriarchy.

8 Ola Awad, "Situation of the Palestinian Women on the Eve of the International Women's Day", PCBS State of Palestine, March 5 2020. [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/\\_pcbs/PressRelease/Press\\_En\\_15-4-2020-lab-en.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_15-4-2020-lab-en.pdf). <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3679>

9 State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Palestine in Figures 2018*, Ramallah: PCBS, March 2019.

10 *Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment*, UN Women, July 2018, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.

11 Awad, *Situation of the Palestinian Women on the Eve of the International Women's Day*.

12 *ibid*

13 Ahmed Melhem, "Private sector asked to help cover Palestinian COVID-19 costs", Al-Monitor, April 14 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/palestinian-fund-private-sector-businessmen-coronavirus.html#ixzz6KtxenZJ>

14 World Health Organization, *Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 countries*, Health Workforce Working Paper 1, Geneva: World Health Organization, 2019, page 3.

15 State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Men and Women in Palestine*, Ramallah: PCBS, December 2018, pages 38, 40.

16 Antonio Gueterres, Twitter post, April 2020, 6:30 p.m., <https://twitter.com/antoniogueterres>.

17 *For more information on women's organizations providing services to women victims of VAW see directory prepared by UNFPA Sub-Cluster Group on all official, UN organizations and civil society organizations providing services to women victims of GBV during COVID-19. The Directory is available in Arabic on Palestine.unfpa.org. In addition, a weekly situational report is produced by UNFPA sub-cluster group on a regular basis on services provided starting from the announcement of the state of emergency on 5 March 2020.*

18 *Preliminary Results of the Violence Survey in the Palestinian Society 2019*, page 21.

19 CARE Palestine, *Gender-Based Violence in COVID-19*, Policy brief, 23 April 2020.

20 *Ibid*

## Article 9

### The Church and COVID-19

1 At various periods of time, we have witnessed clergymen from different denominations defending their cause. Patriarch Michel Sabbah was the first Palestinian patriarch of the Latin Patriarchate (1987-2008) who defended justice and peace; Rev. Fr. Ibrahim Ayyad (1911-2005), member of the Palestinian National Council and member of the Palestinian Central Council, is another example; Rev. Mitri Al-Raheb, member of the Central Council of the PLO and member of the Revolutionary Council.

2 There are 13 recognized churches in the Holy Land composed of the Orthodox family churches, the Catholic family churches, and the Anglican and Lutheran churches.

3 On 5 March 2020, President Mahmoud Abbas issued a presidential decree declaring a state of emergency in Palestine for one month in an effort to contain the virus.

4 Israeli military forces besieged the Nativity Church (2 April – 10 May 2002), requesting that Palestinian activists who had taken shelter inside the Church surrender. A settlement was reached which ended the siege by 10 May 2002.

5 In Al-Quds daily newspaper of 24 March 2020, Fr. Ibrahim Faltas, Franciscan board advisor of the Custody of the Holy Land, expressed the intention to leave the Holy Sepulcher Church open at this holy time of the year.

6 For more details see the article on *The Jerusalem Post*, accessible on URL: <<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/jeruselems-church-of-the-holy-sepulchre-closes-amid-coronavirus-fears-622370>> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

7 Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in the Holy Land, *Easter Message*, Jerusalem on 9 April 2020, accessible on URL: <<https://www.lpi.org/posts/easter-2020-message-of-patriarchs-and-heads-of-churches-of-jerusalem.html>> (consulted on 20/04/2020).

8 Greek Orthodox, Franciscans and Armenian Orthodox Patriarchs and Custos, *Letter to the Israeli President and Prime Minister on the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Easter prayers - Emergency regulations closure – Covid-19*, Jerusalem on 30 March 2020.

9 *Letter to the Heads of the Three Communities to whom is entrusted the duty of guarding the Holy Sepulcher Church in response to the Holy Sepulcher Church*



Closure - Covid-19, Ramallah on 3 April 2020.

10 Statement by the Patriarchates and Heads of the Holy Land Churches on Israeli Unilateral Annexation Plans, 7 May 2020, on URL: [https://www.lpi.org/posts/holy-land-heads-of-churches-voice-concern-about-israels-planned-annexation-of-west-bank-land.html?s\\_cat=1102](https://www.lpi.org/posts/holy-land-heads-of-churches-voice-concern-about-israels-planned-annexation-of-west-bank-land.html?s_cat=1102)

11 Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, *Homily of Easter 2020*, Jerusalem on 12 April 2020; the full text is accessible on URL: <https://www.lpi.org/posts/homily-of-archbishop-pierbattista-pizzaballa-for-easter-2020.html> (consulted on 20/04/2020).

12 The usual mission of the Franciscan Custody is to ensure the steadfastness and resilience of the faithful by providing houses, employment, education and social support. Such efforts continue in the Holy Land during the times of the coronavirus.

13 Congregation for the Oriental Churches, *Collection for the Holy Land 2020*, Vatican City on 2 April 2020; the official communiqué accessible on URL: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/04/02/200402b.html> (consulted on 20/04/2020).

14 One of the school principals whispered in my ears lately, that no tuition fees had been paid since the beginning of the second semester, i.e. since after Christmas. He added "It would be undiplomatic of us to pressure the parents to pay their dues at a time when the coronavirus is confining us at home and many parents have already lost their salaries or their work, especially those who work in tourism, and donations have dropped drastically".

15 There are 32 Catholic schools within the 1967 borders, cfr. Secretariat of Solidarity for Catholic Schools and Institutions in the Holy Land, *Statistical Data for Catholic Schools, Holy Land*, 2018 – 2019.

16 For more on the initiative: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/jordan-king-waiver-rent-waqf-properties-jerusalem.html>

17 See the official statement on the Patriarchate's website, accessible on URL: <https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/blog/2020/03/28/in-response-to-coronavirus-epidemic-patriarch-theophilos-iii-exempts-tenants-of-the-old-city-of-jerusalem-from-rent-for-the-year-2020/> (consulted on 20/04/2020).

18 The Patriarchate considers itself as the Mother of all Churches and made a large donation to the Emergency Fund established by President Mahmoud Abbas to encourage the private sector, civil society, Palestinians in the Diaspora, and individuals to contribute financially to the fight against the pandemic. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem donated half a million shekels to this special fund set up for this purpose. See the official statement on the Patriarchate's website, accessible on URL: <https://ar.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/2020/04/11/65241/> (consulted on 20/04/2020).

19 Cf. Holy See Press Office, *Communiqué*, Vatican City 8 March 2020; see the official communiqué, accessible on URL: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/08/200308b.html> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

20 Pope Francis, *the Pope's words at the Angelus prayer - After the Angelus*, Saint Peter's Square on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020, accessible on URL: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/29/200329a.html> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

21 Pope Francis, *Easter Message and "Urbi et Orbi" Blessing*, Vatican City on 12 April 2020, accessible on URL: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/04/12/200412b.html> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

22 President Mahmoud Abbas, *Easter Greetings - Letter*, Ramallah on 10 April 2020, published news accessible on URL: <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=BPzmJka115748392848aBPzmJk> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

23 *Idem*.

24 Pope Francis, *Homily of the Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Time of Epidemic, Sagrato of St Peter's Basilica* on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020, accessible on URL: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html) (consulted on 21/04/2020).

25 Cf. Vatican News, *Pope: COVID-19 teaches us we are one human community*, published on 20 March 2020, accessible on URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-coronavirus-teaches-one-human-community.html> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

26 Cf. Vatican News, *Covid-19: Pope establishes emergency fund*, published on 6 April 2020, accessible on URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/coronavirus-pope-emergency-fund-pontifical-mission-societies.html> (consulted on 21/04/2020).

27 Pope Francis, *Homily of Easter Vigil*, St. Peter's Basilica on 11 April 2020, accessible on URL: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200411\\_omelia-veglipasquale.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200411_omelia-veglipasquale.html) (consulted on 21/04/2020).

28 Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in the Holy Land, *Easter Message*, Jerusalem on 9 April 2020, accessible on URL: <https://www.lpi.org/posts/easter-2020-message-of-patriarchs-and-heads-of-churches-of-jerusalem.html> (consulted on 20/04/2020).

29 *Idem*.

## Article 10

### Religion in Times of COVID-19

1 Statement of the Patriarchates and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem regarding the Corona Pandemic "COVID 19." Jerusalem, 14/3/2020.

2 Mark 12: 31

3 Mark 2: 27

4 Mathew 18:20

5 This program was started by Diyar in 2006 to offer a psycho-social and creative program to keep the elderly members active. Ajyal members have their own book clubs, choir, theater group, yoga classes, educational trips, retreats and joint events. For more, see: <https://www.diyar.ps/en/page/ajyal-program>

6 Ephesians 5:16

## Article 11

### Occupation and Loss under COVID-19

1 On March 5<sup>th</sup> President Mahmoud Abbas issued a presidential decree declaring a one-month state of emergency in the State of Palestine. This was renewed on April 5<sup>th</sup> for an additional month as numbers had increased to over 250 cases. The state of emergency entailed various directives related to people's movement and access to services, including social distancing, and a ban on social gatherings and religious rituals. A national emergency committee was established to oversee crisis management as a result of COVID-19.

2 Bethlehem and neighboring Beit Jala and Beit Sahour were the first cities to go under lockdown.

3 An Israeli-Palestinian emergency joint committee was established for this purpose.

4 Announced by President Trump in January 2020.

5 Including: arrest, home demolition, land confiscation, restrictions on movement and access, revocation of Jerusalem identity cards and withholding Palestinian tax money.

6 Including but not limited to: Antranik Bakergian, Jamil Kassissieh, Dr Salim Al Hussein, Shafiq Kassissieh, Dr Arafat Hidmi, Madeeha Nuseibeh, Anwar Nusseibeh, Dr Adrineh Karakashian, Jamileh Azzouni, Ibrahim Abu El Reesh, Inaam El Mufti, Salameh Khalil, Mary Nahhas, Widad Tubbeh, Abdallah Salah, Abdel Malek El Nashef, Sami Saeed, Michel Nakhleh, Ibrahim Najjar, Nabeeh Awad, Ahmad Mousa, Jordan Marashlian, Adel Abu Jbara, Vahe Aghabekian and Ibrahim Tomayan. Of the younger ones: Zahira Kamal, Teddy Theodory, Doris Salah, Doris Franjeh, Mary Kukeyan and many others.

7 Health services for EJ residents are provided by five main providers : (1) UNRWA serving the refugee population; (2) private centers including clinics, laboratories and maternity hospitals; (3) charitable and religious entities such as Makassed, Augusta Victoria Hospital, St John's Ophthalmic Hospital, St Joseph Hospital and the Red Crescent Society, as well as some clinics; (4) other NGOs active in primary health care services; and (5) the Israeli medical funds which contract health services in EJ and WJ to provide healthcare to Jerusalemites.

8 Given that my mother, myself and both my brothers-in-law work in health and have taught or are acquainted with many currently working in these hospitals.

9 The younger generations may have received Hebrew language classes at school or university .The older generations did not have that opportunity and may have limited interaction with Israelis.

10 The daughter returned from abroad and was living in the same house with difficult one-person quarantine measures, thus requiring collective quarantine.

11 The arnona is a tax on dwellings in Jerusalem and is proof of residency in the city. It is one of the documents required for renewal of a Jerusalem identity card or to regain a revoked identity card at the Israeli Ministry of Interior.

12 To maintain a residency right in Jerusalem, a Palestinian must prove that their center of life is in Jerusalem. Residency is judged based on dwelling and daily presence in Jerusalem, utility bills, work in Jerusalem etc.

13 In violation of international law, Israel illegally claims that Jerusalem (WJ and EJ) is a unified city and the eternal capital of the state of Israel. As such, residents of occupied East Jerusalem are distinguished from other occupied Palestinians by the color of their identity card.

Residents of occupied East Jerusalem hold blue Jerusalem identity cards while West Bankers hold green Identity cards. In 1967 when Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights, Palestinians were treated as if they were immigrants to Israel. The Access to Israel Law of 1952 allows the Interior Minister to confiscate identity cards from anyone they deem as a danger and threat to Israeli security. Those born to Jerusalemite parents outside of Israel, in the West Bank or abroad, for example, are not granted permission to reside or work in Jerusalem. Families with West Bank parents cannot reside in Jerusalem as they hold West Bank Identity cards.

14 Close to 4 million people from the West Bank and Gaza are allowed to enter Jerusalem only with a permit from the Israeli authorities: these are limited and difficult to obtain. Palestinians who are able to obtain a permit can only use four of the 16 checkpoints along the Annexation Wall.

15 The traditional Armenian Orthodox rituals include condolences for 1-3 days, visiting the grave for two consecutive days after burial along with clergy for prayer, visiting the grave every Saturday afterwards until 40 days have passed since burial, and attending church on the third, the ninth and 40th day after burial.

16 Outlined by President Mahmoud Abbas at the UN.

### **Hani Abu Dayyeh**

---

The President of NET Tours with offices in Jerusalem, Amman, Istanbul, Athens and Rome since 2002 following an earlier career with NET Tours and Transportation.

Mr. Abu Dayyeh initiated the establishment and has served as President, board member and Director of the Higher Council of the Arab Tourist Industry (HCATI), the Union of Arab Tourist Transport, the Palestinian Development Fund (PDF), Bethlehem 2000, the Middle East Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation Hospital, Bethlehem University, Bethlehem Development Initiative (BDF) and the Bethlehem University Tourism Institute (BUTI). He was also responsible for the Palestinian presence at various tourism fairs.

He has represented Palestine internationally and negotiated on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, including during the Paris Agreement on tourism and transport.

Mr. Abu Dayyeh holds a graduate studies degree in Chemical Engineering (1975) from Vanderbilt University, Tennessee, and a BSC in Chemistry (1971) from Belmont University, Tennessee.

### **Xavier Abu Eid**

---

Originally from Beit Jala, Palestine, Mr. Abu Eid was born in Santiago de Chile. Has worked as a communications adviser to the PLO Negotiations Affairs Department since 2009.

He has volunteered with several non-governmental organizations, including BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights and Open Bethlehem.

His last paper was a comparative study of the role played by the UN General Assembly in the peace processes in South Africa and the Middle East. His current research is about the role of Palestinian Christians in the Palestinian National Movement.

Mr. Abu Eid holds a BA in Political Science from Diego Portales University (2008), a MA in Diplomatic Studies from Leicester University (2013) and currently studies Mediation in Peace Processes at ETH Zurich (2017- ).

### **Dr. Varsen Aghabekian**

---

A freelance management and policy consultant, Dr. Aghabekian is currently a consultant with the Palestinian Negotiations Support Project. Previous positions included Manager of Capacity and Institution Building in the office of the President; Executive Director of Al Quds-Capital of Arab Culture 2009; Director of Research and Planning at the Welfare Association; and Associate Professor, Dean of Health Professions and Dean of Graduate Studies at Al-Quds University.

She has directed several national studies (including a multi-sector review of East Jerusalem and the National Plan for Education in Health), and has produced articles and national reports on Jerusalem, education, youth, women, the Christian presence and emigration from the Holy Land.

A founding member of several NGOs and forums, Dr. Aghabekian is currently a board member of Dar Al Kalimah College, Bethlehem University, the Palestinian Health Policy Forum, also serving as Commissioner General on the Board of Commissioners of the Independent Palestinian Commission for Human Rights

Dr. Aghabekian holds a PhD in Administrative and Policy Studies-Education from the University of Pittsburgh, USA (1988) and a MSc from Indiana University, Purdue University (IUPUI), USA (1983).

### **Dr. Faisal Awartani**

---

The founder and CEO of Alpha International for research polling and informatics. The company aims to enhance public opinion polling methodologies, promote data-driven decision making and study the effects of the fourth industrial revolution on labor markets.

With experience in designing and implementing market research and socio-economic studies, Dr. Awartani has supervised over 200 projects related to market research, policy analysis, reform studies, socio-economic studies, monitoring and evaluation in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon.

He holds a PhD in Statistics (1993), a Master's degree in Computer Science (1988) from the American University in Washington, DC and a Bachelor's degree in

Mathematics from Birzeit University, Palestine (1986). He has contributed to the establishment of the Master's program in Applied Statistics at Birzeit University and to the Master's program in Data Science at the Arab American University of Palestine.

### **Maher Deeb M.D M.H.A.** ---

Dr. Maher Deeb is a board certified cardiothoracic surgeon. He graduated from the Hadassah and Hebrew University school of medicine in 1990, and completed a residency program at Hadassah Hospital. His fellowship in general thoracic surgery was at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. After his return to Jerusalem, Dr. Deeb established and chaired the thoracic surgery unit at Shaare Tsedek Hospital in Jerusalem for 10 years and completed a Master's degree in Hospital Administration from Tel Aviv University. For the past 10 years, Dr. Deeb has worked as a surgeon and as the medical director of St. Joseph's Hospital in Jerusalem. He is also active with the Doctors for Human Rights team which visits the Gaza Strip to perform surgeries on seriously ill patients.

### **Dr. Saeb Erakat** ---

Member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Executive Committee and the Central Committee of Fatah since 2009. Currently the Secretary-General of the PLO Executive Committee and the chief Palestinian negotiator of the Negotiations Affairs Department. In 1991, Dr. Erakat was the deputy head of the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Peace Process, and later during the Washington negotiations of 1992. In 1994, he was appointed as the Chairman of the Palestinian delegation for negotiations and then the head of the Palestinian negotiations team leading negotiations with Israel.

Dr. Erakat has served as Minister of Local Government, Head of the Central Elections Commission, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, Professor of Political Science at An-Najah University and on the editorial board of Al-Quds newspaper.

The author of numerous books and papers, and a longstanding member of the Palestinian leadership. Dr. Erakat holds a PhD in Peace Studies from Bradford University, and a Bachelor's and a Master's Degree in International Relations from the University of San Francisco.



## **Dr. Dalal Iriqat**

---

Dr. Iriqat is the Vice-President for International Relations and Assistant Professor of Conflict Resolution, Diplomacy and Strategic Planning at AAUP. She is also a weekly columnist for Al-Quds newspaper.

She served as senior advisor to the Prime Minister on strategic communications and was a Senior Policy Consultant on the UNDP Human Development Report for Palestine.

Dr. Iriqat holds a PhD in Public Administration from Paris I Sorbonne (2011), a Master's degree in Diplomatic Studies from Westminster University, London (2004) and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Jordan 2003. She has taught at the Faculty of Law and Public Administration at Birzeit University, and was elected President of the Diplomatic Academy of London Students' Association (2003) and to the student council at the University of Jordan (2001).

Passionate about bringing about change in Palestinian society through education and improving Palestinian diplomacy and branding, Dr. Iriqat is a member of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN), and a board member of the Policy and Conflict Resolution Studies Center, of the international French Lycée in Ramallah and of Eco Peace Palestine. She has published work on diplomacy, state building, coercive and public diplomacy, nation branding, soft power, mediation and conflict resolution.

## **Amb. Issa Kassissieh**

---

Ambassador to the Holy See and the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, Mr. Kassissieh was previously a senior policy advisor on foreign diplomatic relations at the Office of the President. He served as head of the European Desk at Orient House in Jerusalem and was a coordinator of the Palestinian team for multilateral talks on Jerusalem and church affairs, engaging in both official and second-track negotiations with the Israelis.

He serves as member of the Presidential Committees on Christian Affairs and the Renovation of the Nativity Church, and is a board member of several philanthropic and civil society organizations.

Mr. Kassissieh was awarded the Raymond and Josephine Vernon Book Award for Academic Distinction at the John F Kennedy School of Government in 2004.

In 2012 he also received a medal from the Russian Orthodox Association in Palestine. In 2013 he was awarded the “L'onor Eficenza di Cavaliere” on behalf of the President of the Italian Republic.

He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, USA, a Master's in Diplomacy and Statecraft from the University of Birmingham, UK, and a third Master's in International Studies from Birzeit University, Palestine.

### **Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb**

---

The founder and President of Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture in Bethlehem. Dr. Raheb is the most widely published Palestinian theologian to date with 18 works translated into eleven languages. He holds a PhD in Theology from the Philipps University in Marburg, Germany.

He served as senior pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem and as President of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

Dr. Raheb founded several NGOs, including the Christian Academic Forum for Citizenship in the Arab World. He also founded and is a board member of the National Library of Palestine and is a founding member and author of the Kairos Palestine document.

Dr. Raheb has received several awards that include the Tolerance Award from the European Academy of Science and Arts (2017); the Olof Palme Prize (2015); the German Media Prize (2012) (an award usually granted to heads of state); an honorary doctorate from Concordia University in Chicago (2003); the International Mohammad Nafi Tschelebi Peace Award from the Central Islam Archive in Germany (2006); and the renowned German Peace Award of Aachen (2007).

He has appeared widely in the media on CNN, ABC, CBS, 60 Minutes, BBC, ARD, ZDF, DW, BR, Premiere, Raiuno, Stern, The Economist, Newsweek, Al-Jazeera, al-Mayadin, Vanity Fair, and others.

### **Dr Bernard Sabella**

---

Dr. Bernard Sabella is a retired associate professor of sociology at Bethlehem University and an associate professor of sociology on a part-time basis with the master's program in Jerusalem studies at Al-Quds University. In 2006, he was

elected to the Jerusalem Christian constituency to the Palestinian Legislative Council. He is a member of the Board of Diyar. His research focuses on immigration and Palestinian Christian identification with their society, its woes and aspirations.

### **Randa Siniora**

---

Ms. Siniora is a human rights and women's rights defender with over 33 years of experience in the field of international human rights and humanitarian law as a leader of human rights organizations.

She is currently the Director of the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling (WCLAC), a Palestinian feminist human rights organization holding a special consultative status at the UN ECOSOC. She was previously the Senior Executive Director of the Palestinian National Human Rights Institution (ICHR) (2007-2015) and Director of Al-Haq/Law in the Service of Man (2001-2005), one of the most prominent NGOs in Palestine.

Ms. Siniora was selected as one of the 100 most influential people globally in gender policy for 2018. This is a prominent global list drawn from over 9,000 nominations to recognize and celebrate the hard work done on gender policy around the world.

Ms. Siniora holds an LLM degree in International Human Rights Law from the University of Essex, UK (1995) and an MA in Sociology-Anthropology from the University of Cairo-Egypt (1997).

**This unique booklet on the impact of COVID-19 on Palestine was prompted by the need to provide an overview of the effects of COVID-19 in the realms of politics, economy, health, gender, and religion. We are delighted to present this booklet with eleven contributions by prominent public figures in Palestine:**

**Hani Abu Dayyeh, Xavier Abu Eid,  
Varsen Aghabekian,  
Faisal Awartani, Maher Deeb,  
Saeb Erakat, Dalal Iriqat,  
Issa Kassissieh, Mitri Raheb,  
Bernard Sabella, Randa Siniora**



State of Palestine  
Palestine Liberation Organization  
Negotiation Affairs Department



**Diyar Publisher**

ISBN 978-9950-376-41-0



9 789950 376410