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The Coronavirus in the Palestinian Authority (PA) Territories and the Gaza Strip
(Updated to March 22, 2020)

March 22, 2020

Overview

So far 57 people in the PA have been diagnosed with coronavirus, 17 of whom recovered. **Two people in the Gaza Strip**, Palestinians who returned from Pakistan, have also been diagnosed. As of March 22, 2020, the PA prime minister imposed a closure on the PA territories, with a few exceptions. In the Gaza Strip the Hamas administration took a variety of steps to prevent gatherings but so far no overall closure has been imposed. Most of the Hamas administration's efforts are invested in quarantining Palestinians entering the Gaza Strip and constructing quarantine facilities in preparation for the threat of a spread of the virus. Particularly prominent is the enlisting of Hamas' military wing, led by Yahya al-Sinwar, in the construction of 1000 quarantine units in Rafah and the northern Gaza Strip. The project is advancing rapidly.

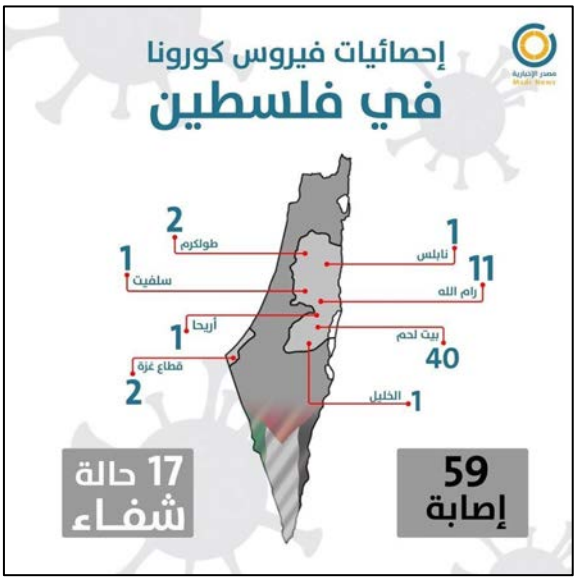
▸ The Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced that as of the morning of March 22 all the crossings will be closed and Palestinians workers and businessmen will not be allowed to enter Israel until further notice (with a few exceptions). The Palestinian media reported that despite the restrictions, **illegal Palestinian workers continue to infiltrate into Israeli territory**. PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh repeatedly stressed that it is absolutely forbidden for Palestinian workers to arrive for work at the Israeli communities in Gaza Strip. The Palestinian security forces have begun taking steps to implement the order.

The Palestinian Authority

Extent of the infection (an overview)

▸ **So far 57 people in the PA have been diagnosed as infected with coronavirus**. Seventeen (in the Bethlehem district) recovered and were discharged from the hospital. The distribution of the remaining 40 is as follows: 23 in the Bethlehem district, two in the Tulkarm district, 11 in

the Ramallah district, one in Nablus, one in the Salfit district, one in Hebron and one who arrived in the PA via the Allenby Bridge and is currently in Jericho.



Infographic of the distribution of the 59 Palestinians ill with coronavirus: 57 in Judea and Samaria and 2 in the Gaza Strip. Seventeen have recovered.

- The sources of the infection located in the PA are the following:
  - On March 21, **Ibrahim Melhem**, spokesman for the PA government, reported that a young woman from the village of Shuqba, west of Ramallah, who **arrived from Turkey** on March 14 through the Allenby Bridge, was infected with coronavirus (Wafa, March 21, 2020). The governor of the Ramallah district imposed a closure on the village (Ma'an, March 22, 2020).
  - On March 21 the Palestinian minister of health announced that four Palestinians had been diagnosed as having been infected within the past 24 hours, **three of them students in Ramallah who had returned from Britain** and the fourth **a doctor from Hebron who worked in the Israeli Hadassah-Ein Kerem Hospital** (Wafa, March 21, 2020). The minister of health also reported that a Palestinian from Salfit who **returned from Pakistan** had been diagnosed with the virus (Wafa, March 20, 2020). A spokesman for the PA government reported that a brother and sister from Ramallah and **a female Israeli Arab student** went into quarantine **directly from the airport** (Wafa, March 21, 2020).

- On March 19 a spokesman for the PA government reported that two female students, one from Ramallah and the other from Jerusalem, **who arrived from France**, were diagnosed as infected with coronavirus. In addition, a Palestinian in Nablus was diagnosed as carrying the virus (Wafa, March 19, 2020). The PA minister of health, a spokesman for the government and the governor of the Salfit district reported that the sick Palestinians from Ramallah, Jerusalem and Salfit had been transferred to the Hugo Chavez Hospital in Turmus Ayya [near Ramallah] (Wafa, March 19, 20 and 21, 2020).

- On March 20 the PA minister of health reported that 17 of the coronavirus patients who had been quarantined in the Angel Hotel in Beit Jala [close to Bethlehem] had recovered and been discharged with orders to remain at home for 14 days.

17 coronavirus patients from the Bethlehem district who had been quarantined in the Angel Hotel in Beit Jala are sent home (Wafa, March 20, 2020).

PA measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus

- On March 22, 2020, PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh held a press conference where **he announced new measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus**. The measures will remain in force for 14 days:

  - **A closure will be enforced on all residents. They are forbidden to leave their homes as of March 22, 2020**. Exceptions are visits to medical services, pharmacies, bakeries, grocery stores and banks (which will operate under emergency conditions).
  - Passage between districts is strictly forbidden. Residents of villages and refugee camps are banned from entering the cities except in cases of medical emergencies. Israeli Arabs are banned from entering the PA territories.
  - Any Palestinian arriving from abroad will be quarantined for 14 days in a quarantine center in one of the districts.
  - **Palestinian workers are absolutely forbidden to go to work the settlements**.

- Israel, as the "occupying power," must take full responsibility for the residents of [east] Jerusalem. The PA will [also] bear responsibility for them. Israel is responsible for protecting the prisoners, and must immediately release prisoners who are ill, women and children.
- The PA security forces will be deployed inside the cities and at their entrances to ensure their security and to implement the above measures.

Muhammad Shtayyeh's press conference
(Wafa, March 22, 2020).

- After the press conference there was increased activity in the markets as residents went to stock up on essentials in preparation for the closure (QudsN Facebook page, March 22, 2020).
- After Muhammad Shtayyeh announced that legal measures would be instituted against anyone who violated the closure, the Palestinian attorney general issued a list of what those measures would be. They included the following: anyone who disobeyed the order to remain at home could be imprisoned for at least a year or fined between 1,000 and 5,000 Jordanian dinars (about $1400 to $7000), or both (Wafa, March 19, 2020)

The PA security forces block the entrances to Bethlehem
(Palinfo Twitter account, March 18, 2020)

The PA security forces at the entrance to Bayt Sahour (Wafa, March 18, 2020).

- **Ibrahim Melhem, spokesman for the PA government**, reported that the ministry of the economy was taking strict steps to prevent hoarding or price gouging. He called on the private sector not to exploit the situation to raise prices or hoard goods, adding that anyone who raised prices would be held legally accountable. He called on civilians not to empty the markets, stressing the availability of goods, and announced that there was no reason to be concerned about a lack of food (Wafa, March 20, 2020). He also said that the ministry of the economy had agreed with suppliers to keep prices stable at the pre-coronavirus level. He reiterated that there was no lack of food and no concern that food supplies would run out, and called on people not to crowd the markets (Wafa, March 21, 2020).
- In a video call about the coronavirus with the UN's "Crisis Cell," headed by Jamie McGoldrick, deputy special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Muhammad Shtayyeh said that most of the PA districts were prepared, and each had an examination center and a quarantine center for coronavirus patients. McGoldrick said the Palestinians would receive $1 million from the UN's Humanitarian Fund to fight the coronavirus (Wafa, March 18, 2020; Twitter account of Jamie McGoldrick, March 20, 2020).

The Jerusalem area

- The Palestinian minister of health held a meeting in her office with the directors of the hospitals of the Jerusalem hospital network. The meeting was attended by senior figures in the PA ministry of health and doctors from the hospitals. The health minister said that preparations for centers for examination, quarantine and care for coronavirus patients in Jerusalem were **almost ready**. She said examinations of people from around Bir Nabala (west of Ramallah) would be performed in the center for emergency medicine in Bir Nabala; and in the Musqat medical center in al-Ram; and in the health department center of the Jerusalem district in al-E'izariya. Quarantine centers will operate in al-Nabali Hotel in Bir Nabala and in

the center for vocational training of the PA ministry of labor in al-E'izariya. Patients will be treated in quarantine wards of the Augusta Victoria, al-Makassed and Saint Joseph hospitals of the Red Crescent. The network of Jerusalem hospitals will prepare them (Wafa, March 19, 2020).

- On another occasion the minister of health said that the national program to fight the coronavirus included Jerusalem with three examination centers outside the city and one in the al-Makassed Hospital. Patients will be treated at the Augusta Victoria, al-Makassed and Saint Joseph hospitals [(in east Jerusalem] (Wafa, March 21, 2020).

Closing the crossings and preventing Palestinians from entering the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria

Closing the crossings

- The COGAT announced that as of the morning of March 22 all the crossings into Israel would be closed and no Palestinian workers or businessmen would be allowed to enter Israel until further notice. The ban will not include workers who possess permits to work in Israel's medical sector, workers employed in vital factories in the Atarot (north of Jerusalem) industrial zone and humanitarian and medical emergencies. **Workers currently staying in Israel will not be able to return to their homes in the PA until further notice. The commercial crossings will operate as usual** (Facebook page of the COGAT in Arabic, March 21, 2020).

The PA security forces supervise the roads leading to the Palestinian villages close to the Green Line (Wafa, March 21, 2020).

Palestinians illegally staying in Israel

- Despite the restrictions placed on the entrance into and exit from Israel, Palestinians reportedly continue to infiltrate into Israel illegally from the PA territories (QudsN Facebook page, March 22, 2020).

Preventing Palestinian workers from entering the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria

- Following the order banning the entrance of Palestinian workers into the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria, the Palestinian security forces erected **roadblocks in the region of the Jordan Valley**. That was reportedly done to prevent workers from entering the Israeli communities (Wafa, March 22, 2020).
- Abdallah Kamil, the governor of the Salfit district, reported there was a Palestinian with the coronavirus in the district. He issued an announcement in which he stressed the ban on coming in contact with Israeli settlers in any way. He added that anyone who violated the order would be detained. In addition, he said that **any store that was in contact with settlers would be closed**. He repeated the libel that the settlements were the source of the coronavirus [in the PA territories] (Abdallah Kamil's Facebook page, March 20, 2020).

The Gaza Strip

The extent of the infection

On the night of March 21, Yusuf Abu al-Rish, deputy minister of health in the Gaza Strip, reported that two cases of coronavirus had been discovered in the Gaza Strip. He said they were **two Palestinians who had returned to the Gaza Strip from Pakistan on March 19**. Upon their return they were placed in the quarantine center at the Rafah Crossing, and later transferred for quarantine in the field hospital erected at the crossing (al-Andalou News, March 22, 2020; Ma'an, March 22, 2020).

Hamas' preparations

- Other steps announced by spokesman for the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip were the following:
  - Yusuf Abu al-Rish, deputy minister of health, announced **the closing of restaurants, coffee shops and reception halls, and the suspension of the Friday prayers in the mosques until further notice** (al-Andalou News, March 22, 2020).
  - Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, announced that from March 15 **anyone who returned to the Gaza Strip through the crossings would be required to spend 14 days in quarantine**. He said 1,271 Palestinians had returned through the crossings and that they were staying in 20 quarantine centers in

the Gaza Strip. The centers included schools, hotels and medical centers (website of the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, March 21, 2020; Ma'an, March 21, 2020).

- Iyad al-Buzum, spokesman for the ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, reported that **the ministry had decided to close all the reception halls and well-frequented markets throughout the Gaza Strip, and to prevent celebrations from being held in the streets**. The decision will remain in force between until March 27 and may be extended, depending on developments. He said the security forces and police were securing the quarantine centers in **the Gaza Strip (website of the ministry of the interior, March 21, 2020).**

Work which began on March 17 continues for the erection of 1,000 quarantine units in Rafah and the northern Gaza Strip (Msdrnewsnetwork Facebook page, March 21, 2020).

Top: Yahya al-Sinwar pays a visit to the site where quarantine units are being constructed in the northern Gaza Strip. Bottom: Yahya al-Sinwar and Rawhi Mushtaha visit a school in the northern Gaza Strip which was turned into a quarantine center (Palestine Online Twitter account, March 19, 2020).

- On March 22, 2020, the commander of the police force in the Gaza Strip announced the banning mourning gatherings. It was also decided to close coffee shops and restaurants, and to cancel Friday prayers in the mosques as of March 22 (Facebook page of the police force in the Gaza Strip, March 22, 2020).
- The ministry of Muslim endowments in the Gaza Strip issued an announcement calling **for prayers to be held at home**. The ministry also called for mourning gatherings to be cancelled and to make do with offering condolences at the gravesite without shaking hands or embracing (website of the ministry of endowments in the Gaza Strip, March 22, 2020).

- Rushdi Wadi, deputy minister of economy in the Gaza Strip, said that **since the outbreak of the coronavirus, the governmental monitoring committee in the Gaza Strip and the ministry of the economy had taken a series of preventive measures to ensure a reservoir of basic strategic commodities**. In addition, he said measures had been taken to facilitate wholesalers' import of basic commodities into the Gaza Strip. He said the reservoir of basic commodities in the Gaza Strip was sufficient for weeks (website of the ministry of the economy in the Gaza Strip, March 22, 2020).