



The Palestinian Authority and Hamas Blame Israel for the Spread of Coronavirus (Updated to March 26, 2020)

March 26, 2020

Overview

- ▶ Since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas have been particularly **worried about the spread of the virus from Israel** (despite the fact that the first cases of the coronavirus, and some later ones, came from people who arrived in the PA territories from abroad, not from Israel). The variety of preventive measures taken so far, including the closing of the crossings to Israel, have helped the PA and Hamas retain a certain amount of control over the spread of the disease – on the assumption that the data they release about the number of patients are exact (it is possible that there are undetected coronavirus patients in the Gaza Strip, Judea and Samaria about whom there is no information because there has been no methodical testing).¹
- ▶ In ITIC assessment the PA and Hamas are aware that **the current situation is liable to change and they may lose control of the spread of the disease**. The danger is particularly great in the Gaza Strip because of the crowding in the refugee camps, poor hygiene and the lack of medical equipment necessary to treat coronavirus patients (according to ITIC information, there are about 205 ventilators in the PA and about 85 in the Gaza Strip). Another possible consequence of the uncontrolled spread of coronavirus is the risk **it may spread into Israel** from the PA territories and the Gaza Strip.

¹ For information about PA and Hamas' dealing with the coronavirus, see the March 24, 2020 ITIC bulletin, "The Palestinians and the Spread of Coronavirus."

So far the PA and the Hamas administration have focused their efforts on preventing the spread of the virus in the territories under their control (with formal and informal coordination with Israel). However, in a scenario of an uncontrolled medical crisis, when the PA and Hamas are not able to provide a response for coronavirus patients, **both of them can be expected to blame Israel as a means to externalize internal criticism.**² Thus Hamas and the other terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip are, as usual, **liable to accompany a crisis, in this case the medical crisis caused by coronavirus, with violence against Israel. Such violence may include riots near the border security fence and/or rocket fire.**



Post from Hamas forum user. The Arabic reads, "If the cases [of people infected with coronavirus] increase, we will ask the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades to recruit their operatives to strike the entity [i.e., Israel] with all their force. We don't want to die from corona" (Hamas forum, March 26, 2020).

► So far there have been a number of statements from senior Hamas and PA figures, and several items in the media, blaming Israel for the spread of the virus. The statements have been accompanied by direct and indirect threats, and by demands. Such demands include that Israel release terrorist prisoners in Israeli jails because of the potential for transmission of coronavirus, while accusing Israel of holding the prisoners in poor hygienic conditions; the demand that Israel lift the [so-called] "siege" of the Gaza Strip (despite the fact that Hamas

² Blaming the West, including Israel, for internal crises is a method commonly used. Therefore, it can be assumed that blaming Israel fall on willing ears within the Palestinian public. So far, other Middle Eastern terrorist organizations have already found scapegoats to blame for the outbreak of coronavirus in their countries. **Senior Hezbollah figure Hashem Safi al-Din** said (as a follow-up to Iranian propaganda) that it was impossible to rule out the possibility that American intelligence is behind the coronavirus outbreak. In addition, **ISIS's media** claimed the coronavirus is Allah's revenge for the fall of the organization's strongholds in the Euphrates Valley in Syria a year ago.

announced the closing of the Erez and Rafah Crossings to human passage); and forbidding Palestinian workers from going to work in the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria, falsely claiming the communities are a source of the spread of coronavirus in the PA territories.

► **The first instances of blaming Israel for the spread of coronavirus, whose volume is so far not large, have been remarks from senior Hamas and PA figures reported in the Palestinian media.** In ITIC assessment, as the number of Palestinian coronavirus patients grows, and as the medical crisis worsens, the trend to blaming Israel is liable to increase. Below are two Appendices with examples of Palestinian accusations that Israel is spreading coronavirus and threats:

- ◆ **Appendix A:** The PA accuses Israel and the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria of being sources of the spread of coronavirus in the PA territories.
- ◆ **Appendix B:** Statements from senior Hamas figures and items in the media accusing Israel and threatening it.



Anti-Semitic cartoon by Gazan cartoonist Alaa al-Laqta. The Arabic reads, "The virus most dangerous to humanity..." (Palinfo Twitter account, March 15, 2020).

Appendix A

The PA accuses Israel and the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria of being sources of the spread of coronavirus in the PA territories

► **Bassam Zakarna, Palestinian public employees union head** and a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council, accused Israel of spreading coronavirus because of the way it relates to Palestinian workers employed in Israel. **He claimed Israel was responsible because it sends Palestinian workers suspected of being ill back to the PA territories, and destroys the PA's efforts to stop the spread of the virus** (Ma'an, March 25, 2020).

► On March 24, 2020, **Ibrahim Melhem, spokesman for the PA government**, condemned Israel's conduct towards the Palestinian workers employed in Israel. He made the [baseless] claim that **their places of work had turned into incubators for the coronavirus epidemic**. He added that the PA would protect Palestinian workers, take care of them and be responsible for them (Wafa, March 24, 2020).

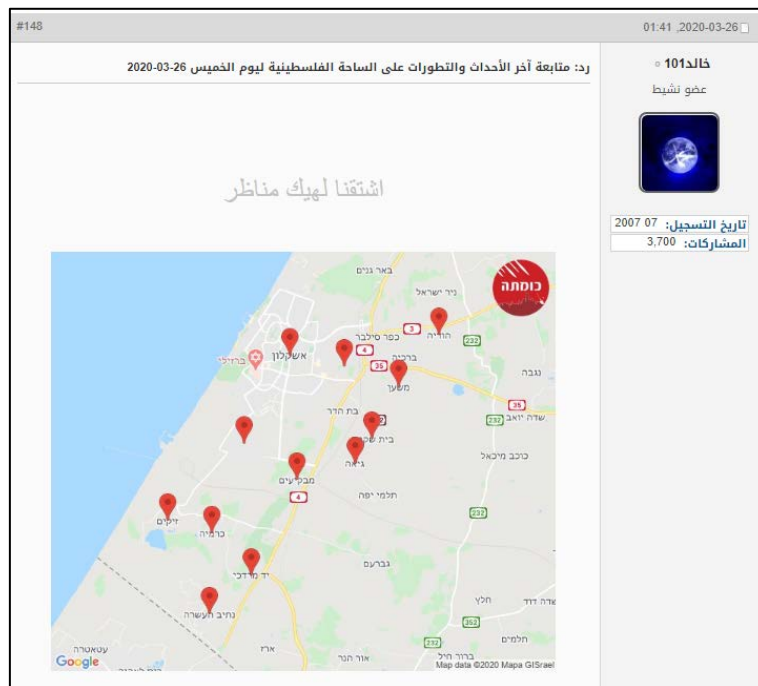
► **Abdallah Kamil, governor of the Salfit district**, said all contact with settlers was forbidden. He claimed "**the settlements are a source of the coronavirus epidemic...**" (Wafa, March 24, 2020).

► **Ibrahim Melhem, spokesman for the PA government**, objected to Palestinian workers entering the settlements, saying, "**We warned the workers and demanded they not go to the settlements because [the settlements] have become focal points of the epidemic**" (Agence France-Presse, March 18, 2020).

Appendix B

Statements from senior Hamas figures and items in the media accusing Israel and threatening it

A user of the Hamas forum Paldf calling himself "Majd al-Zeitoun" posted that "If the cases [of people infected with coronavirus] increase, we will ask the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades to recruit their operatives to strike the entity [i.e., Israel] with all their force. We don't want to die from corona" (Hamas forum, March 26, 2020). As a follow-up, another user posted a map taken from an Israeli application showing the Red Alert system, with Israel communities marked on the map where a rocket alert was heard. He wrote, "**We long to see those sights [i.e., of civilians running for shelter] again**" (Hamas forum, March 26, 2020).



The Israeli application map posted by Hamas social network user who longs for the days of Red Alerts in Israel's south (Hamas forum, March 26, 2020).

- ▶ **Hamas spokesman Abd al-Latif al-Qanua** said Israel was responsible for the unrest of the [Palestinian terrorist] prisoners in Israeli jails, for their continuing oppression and for denying them their legitimate rights, the first of which was protecting them from coronavirus (Hamas website, March 25, 2020).
- ▶ **Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum** said that the continuing siege of the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip was a form of aggression and a crime against humanity, **especially in light of**

coronavirus. He claimed the [so-called] **"Israeli occupation" bears the results and consequences of the danger of the virus to the life of the Gaza Strip and its residents.** What was necessary, he said, was to end the "siege" immediately and to provide and deliver everything the residents of the Gaza Strip need and everything necessary to cope with coronavirus (Hamas website, March 24, 2020).

► **Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem** called on all the international institutions to intervene quickly to ensure the welfare of the [Palestinian terrorist] prisoners [in Israeli jails] after the increase in the spread of coronavirus. He said Israel would be responsible for the results of the negligence of its prison service in ensuring the welfare of the [Palestinian terrorist] prisoners. He stressed that **any harm that came to them would be a red line for the Palestinians which could not be crossed in silence** (Hamas website, March 24, 2020).

► **Khalil al-Haya, deputy chairman of the Hamas political bureau,** elaborated for an al-Aqsa TV interviewer about what Hamas had done to fight coronavirus. **He also accused Israel of responsibility for the spread of coronavirus in the Gaza Strip** (Hamas website, March 23, 2020).



Senior Hamas figure Khalil al-Haya interviewed by al-Aqsa TV (Shehab Facebook page, March 23, 2020).

► **Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip,** met with the director of the office of the World Health Organization. **He said Israel was responsible for the medical and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip.** He also called on the UN to take responsibility for the Gaza Strip and rush to meet its urgent medical needs (Palestine Online, March 22, 2020).

► **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau,** gave a speech about the fight against coronavirus on March 21, 2020. He said that Hamas was monitoring the ongoing situation of the Palestinian prisoners in the Israeli jails. He called on the international community and the

relevant organizations to act quickly to ensure the prisoners receive protection from the disease. **Haniyeh warned Israel against any harm coming to the prisoners. He said the "siege" on the Gaza Strip had to end once and for all, and that its continuation endangered the lives of two million people [living in the Gaza Strip]. He said the occupation [i.e., Israel] would be responsible for all future developments** (Hamas website, March 21, 2020).

► **The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, quoting "Hamas sources,"** reported that the Egyptian and Qatari mediators had received communiqués [from Hamas] urging them to deal with the economic situation in the Gaza Strip in light of its medical emergency. According to Hamas' communiqués, **it would be possible to ignite the situation along the Gaza Strip border and create a situation that Israel would not want.** In fact, Hamas' communiqués said, **"the 'resistance' can send half of Israeli society into bomb shelters,** which would double the number of people infected with coronavirus and cause Israel to lose control of the situation" (Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, March 21, 2020).



Right: Cartoon by Hamas-affiliated cartoonist Omayya Joha. The Arabic reads, "The Palestinian prisoners between the hammer of coronavirus and the anvil of the occupation" (*al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 24, 2020). **Left: Cartoon by Gazan cartoonist Alaa al-Laqta. The Arabic reads, "The struggle against the occupation and the struggle against the epidemic...jihad"** (*alresala.net* Twitter account, March 25, 2020).