



The Palestinian Authority (PA) Fight Against COVID-19 (Updated to March 31, 2020)

March 31, 2020

Data of the Spread of COVID-19 in the PA Territories

On March 31, 2020, **the number of Palestinian COVID-19 cases rose to 117, 107 in Judea and Samaria and 10 in the Gaza Strip.**¹ The cases most recently detected in the PA were a **Palestinian worker who returned from Israel and seven Palestinians in the village of Qatanna**, northwest of Jerusalem. The village and the Bethlehem area are focal points for the spread of the disease: there are 39 COVID-19 cases in Qatanna and 46 in the Bethlehem area. So far 18 Palestinians have recovered and one has died (Wafa, March 31, 2020; Palestinian TV, QudsN Facebook page, March 30, 2020).

► **Dr. Ghassan Nimr, spokesman for the Palestinian ministry of the interior**, briefed journalists on March 30 and 31 about **the geographic distribution of COVID-19** in the PA territories. He said there were 46 cases in Bethlehem, 39 in the village of Qatanna near Jerusalem, 13 in Ramallah, three in Hebron, two in Tulkarm and one each in Nablus, Jericho and Salfit (Facebook page of Dr. Ghassan Nimr, March 30, 2020). After midnight on March 31, 2020, Ibrahim Melhem, spokesman for the PA government, issued an update, stating that another case had been detected in Ramallah (Wafa, March 31, 2020), bringing the number of cases in Ramallah to 14.

Intensifying Preventive Measures in the Hebron District

► **After three people in Hebron became ill with the virus**, Jibrin al-Bakri, the governor of the Hebron district, announced the intensification of preventive measures. A full curfew will be imposed on the district beginning at 22:00; factories and bakeries will operate with emergency crews and food stores will be open between 10:00 and 12:00, 16:00 and 18:00. Pharmacies and gas stations will operate as usual (Ma'an, March 30, 2020). Al-Bakri called on residents not to

¹ A bulletin dealing with the spread of COVID-19 in the Gaza Strip was issued separately (updated to March 31, 2020).

leave their houses unless it were absolutely necessary and to obey orders and instructions (Jibrin al-Bakri's Facebook page, March 30, 2020).

► Following his announcement, the Palestinian security forces erected roadblocks to prevent people from leaving and entering the city of Hebron and the district. They used loudspeakers to tell the residents of Hebron not to leave their houses (Ma'an, March 30, 2020)



Tightening the lockdown and security measures taken in the Hebron district by the Palestinian security forces (Wafa, March 30, 2020).

► On March 30, 2020, the Hebron municipality reinforced the municipality staff and **conducted a broad disinfecting operation** in the city's neighborhoods. Hebron mayor Taysir Abu Sneineh called on the residents to obey instructions and not to panic or be anxious (Ma'an, March 29, 2020).



Teams from the Hebron municipality disinfect the city (Ma'an, March 29, 2020).

PA and Fatah Intensify Preventive Measures in the Region near Jerusalem

To fight the spread of COVID-19 **Fatah appointed emergency committees** in the cities, towns, villages and refugee camps to conduct patrols and erect roadblocks. The committees operate in every location the PA security forces find it difficult to reach, whether because of the lack of manpower or because the locations are near an area under Israeli control along the Green Line.

From Fatah's perspective, appointing the patrols is an important step in effecting PA sovereignty over all the regions not included in Area A, especially the region around Jerusalem (official Fatah Facebook page, March 28, 2020).

► As part of the fight, emergency committees were appointed through local initiatives in the neighborhoods and refugee camps surrounding Jerusalem (especially the villages on the Palestinian side of the fence, some of them under Israeli security control). They are manned by volunteers in cooperation with Fatah's Tanzim operatives, who enforce the measures determined by the PA government, with an emphasis on limiting residents' movement and closing stores (with the exception of bakeries, pharmacies and food stores) (Wafa, March 24, 2020).

► For example (Wafa, March 24, 2020):

- ◆ **Abdallah al-Louzi, a member of the Fatah committee in the Qalandia refugee camp,**² said the committees were appointed to implement the PA's prime minister's decisions. He said they instruct residents, disinfect and for collect contributions.
- ◆ **Issam Far'oun, mayor of E'izariya**³, said local civilians had appointed an "emergency and support" committee of residents of E'izariya and nearby towns and villages.



Right: Fatah operatives of E'izariya's emergency committee disinfect taxis. Left: Shabiba (Fatah's youth organization) operatives distribute flyers to residents of E'izariya explaining how to wash their hands (Facebook page of Fatah's Jerusalem branch, March 22, 2020).

² The **Qalandia refugee camp** is located in northern Jerusalem. It is considered part of Area C according to the Oslo Accords. However, because it is outside the security fence, it is administered by the PA.

³ **E'izariya** is a village in east Jerusalem considered part of Area B according to the Oslo Accords (an area under the civilian control of the PA).

◆ **Nasser al-Shehab, secretary of the Fatah movement in the neighborhood of Aqab,**⁴ said an emergency committee subordinate to the municipality had been appointed. The committee operates dozens of volunteers who try to limit movement in the village, close stores and carry out disinfections. Abdallah al-Louzi, the member of the Fatah committee in the Qalandia refugee camp, said measures were being taken to limit the movement of the residents of Jerusalem to and from the Aqab region by erecting roadblocks manned by members of the Shabiba (Fatah's youth movement).



Emergency committee operatives in Beit Surik in a disinfection operation (Facebook page of Fatah's Jerusalem branch, March 22, 2020).

◆ On March 23, 2020, the PA began implementing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the towns and villages surrounding Jerusalem located near Israel. That was after the Palestinian security forces closed the entrances to E'izariya, Abu Dis and al-Sawahra al-Sharqiya (southeast of Jerusalem) for 14 days. The security forces also patrol in Anata and the village of Zaim to enforce government decisions (Safa, March 22, 2020; the Facebook page opened by the PA's Jerusalem district to deal with COVID-1, March 23, 2020).

⁴ **Aqab** is a neighborhood in east Jerusalem, on the Palestinian side of the border fence, with a population of about 60,000. It is under the management and control of the Israeli Jerusalem municipality, but about 10,000 of its residents are under the control of the Palestinian municipality.



PA security force patrols in Anata enforce the order to close stores (Facebook page of Maarouf al-Rifai from Anata, March 23, 2020).



PA security force operatives in northwest Jerusalem (Facebook page of Maarouf al-Rifai from Anata, March 26, 2020).



PA security force operatives disinfesting in the villages of Bidu and al-Qubeiba (Facebook page of PA national security public relations, March 29, 2020).

Accusing Israel of Spreading COVID-19

Senior figures in the PA and Fatah continue accusing Israel of [allegedly] deliberately spreading COVID-19 in the PA territories and waging biological warfare. For example:

- On March 29, 2020, **Walid Assaf, head of the committee for struggle against the fence and settlements**, published a post on the PA's official Facebook page, strongly attacking Israel and

accusing it of waging [so-called] biological warfare against the Palestinians. He claimed that after Israel had failed to contain the spread of the virus in its own country, it was **trying to spread it to Palestine.** To that end, he claimed, Israel opened the crossings along the security fence in the Qalqilya and Tulkarm districts to help Palestinian workers who were infected with COVID-19 while working in Israel to infiltrate into the PA, without going through accepted medical procedures and examinations. Assaf claimed that the PA was successfully coping with the virus while Israel had failed (Facebook page of the committee for the struggle against the fence and settlements, March 29, 2020).

► **Usama al-Qawasmeh, Fatah spokesman in Judea and Samaria** and a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council, accused Israel and the settlers of [allegedly] spreading COVID-19 in the PA territories by infecting Palestinian facilities. He claimed that Israel was throwing Palestinian workers back to the PA-controlled area, revealing Israel's racism (Dunia al-Watan, March 29, 2020).

► **The authority for the affairs of prisoners and released prisoners warned of a "genuine disaster"** in the prisons in Israel after three prison guards tested positive for COVID-19. The authority claimed Israel does not take preventive measures to protect the Palestinian prisoners from the spread of the virus, and does not even disinfect the prison wings. The authority said Israel was responsible for the lives of the Palestinian prisoners, and called on international organizations to act immediately to release aged, sick and underage prisoners (QudsN website, March 30, 2020).

Foreign Support for the PA

► The Fatah Facebook page reported that Palestinian general intelligence, in conjunction with the Palestinian ministries of health and civil affairs, had **gotten 30,000 COVID-19 test kits from abroad, 10,000 of which had already been transmitted to the Palestinian ministry of health** (Fatah Facebook page, March 29, 2020).

► **The Chinese ambassador to the PA** said that following an appeal from the Palestinians, China was considering sending a delegation of doctors to the PA to help Palestinian medical teams cope with the spread of the virus. The Chinese ambassador said governmental and non-governmental medical support would be flown in from China on special flight in the near future. It was also reported that at the end of last week Palestinian medical teams had video-conferenced with Chinese medical teams. Mai al-Kiayla, the Palestinian minister of health,

participated in the video conference to learn from China about stamping out the disease (Wafa, March 30, 2020).

Israeli Support for the PA

► On March 29, 2020, **Israel transferred 1,500 test kits to the PA** to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the PA territories. That was in addition to activities to instruct Palestinian medical teams, currently being held in the Tel Hashomer Shiba Medical Center (Facebook page of the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories in Arabic, March 29, 2020).



Transfer of 1,500 test kits to the PA (Facebook page in Arabic of the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, March 29, 2020).