



The Fight Against the Spread of COVID-19 in the Gaza Strip (Updated to May 3, 2020)

May 3, 2020

Main developments

- ▶ The main developments in the Gaza Strip have been the following:
 - ◆ According to reports from the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, **the number of COVID-19 cases remains steady at 17**. Twelve people have already recovered; 1,963 are still quarantined in various facilities.
 - ◆ Despite the low number of Gazans who have tested positive for the disease, sources in the Hamas administration have **expressed concern that there may yet be a mass outbreak of the disease. They have warned the local population not to become complacent.**
 - ◆ The Hamas administration continues issuing detailed instructions regarding mandatory preventive steps. However, **apparently in reality people do not always follow them**. While the mosques remain closed, even though it is the Muslim religious month of Ramadan, **it was decided to open restaurants and shopping centers**, which apparently led to criticism of the Hamas administration.
 - ◆ Despite the ongoing streaming of funds and donations of medical equipment into the Gaza Strip, senior figures in **the Hamas administration continue to complain that necessary medical equipment does not arrive from the Palestinian Authority (PA), the Arab world and the international community**. The Hamas administration continues asking for medical and financial aid for Gaza's public health system.
 - ◆ **The Hamas-controlled ministry of health continues to blame Israel and the so-called "Israeli siege" for the shortage of drugs and medical equipment, and for the severe humanitarian and health conditions in the Gaza Strip**. The ministry of health's spokesman called for pressure to be exerted on Israel to lift the "siege" and support Gaza with drugs and medical equipment.

Extent of Infection

The number of cases of COVID-19 in Gaza reportedly remains steady at 17. Five Gazans are still ill and 12 have already recovered (Twitter account of Ashraf al-Qidra, April 29, 2020). The remaining five patients are being treated in the quarantine center at the Rafah Crossing and so far are all in stable condition (Facebook page of the ministry of health in Gaza, April 30, 2020). In addition, **1,963 people are isolated in 21 quarantine centers** (Safa, May 2, 2020). As of May 2, 2020, **4,804 COVID-19 tests had been conducted** (Safa, May 2, 2020).

Fear of the Spread of the Disease in the Gaza Strip

► Despite the low number of reported COVID-19 cases, **medical sources in Gaza continue to express concern over a mass outbreak of the virus and warn the general public not to be complacent.** Some of their statements were the following:

◆ **Dr. Abd al-Nasser Sabah, director of the WHO regional office in Gaza,** said a **mass outbreak of COVID-19 was just a matter of time** because Gaza was not isolated from the world, and the quarantine centers would not last forever. He said he hoped the outbreak would be as delayed as possible in order **to allow Gaza to continue preparing to deal with the virus.** He also said he hoped that in a future outbreak of the disease only a few dozen people would be infected, to the extent that the public health system would be able to cope with it (news.un.org website, April 28, 2020).

◆ **Muhammad Awad, chairman of the Hamas administration monitoring committee in Gaza,** said that coping with the disease was based on **four main factors: first,** the quarantine centers, which have so far been successful; **second,** the capability of the ministry of health to provide drugs and medical equipment, both of which are in critically short supply; **third,** test kits, which are also in short supply; and **fourth,** how society deals with the disease. He said there is **a lack of interest and the public is largely complacent,** and he stressed that people would have to be stricter in following the instructions of the ministry of health and the authorities (al-Ra'i news agency, April 27, 2020; al-Quds, April 26, 2020).

◆ **Dr. Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman of the ministry of health in Gaza,** repeatedly warned that the spread of COVID-19 in the Middle East put the Gaza Strip at the heart of the danger, and that there could be an outbreak at any moment. He added that the

continuing [so-called] "Israeli siege" hampered the availability of medical resources. **He claimed Israel was responsible for the dangerous consequences to the humanitarian and public health situations in Gaza.** He called on all relevant bodies to exert pressure on Israel to lift the "siege" and support the Gaza Strip with drugs, disposable medical equipment, materials for laboratory testing, ICU beds and ventilators (Facebook page of the ministry of health in Gaza, April 28, 2020; al-Ra'i news agency, April 30, 2020).

Preventive Medical and Public Health Measures

- ▶ The ministry of health in Gaza formally issued guidelines for preventing the spread of the virus in public institutions and facilities. Workers have to wear masks, preserve a distance of at least 1.5 meters (about 5 feet), wash their hands frequently, avoid touching their faces, not use other people's equipment, urge people to cover their mouths when they cough and not shake hands. Instructions were published for conduct in the work environment, for employers, criteria for work spaces and which sanitizing products to use (Facebook page of the ministry of health in Gaza, April 29, 2020).
- ▶ Various evidence suggests that there **is a substantial discrepancy between the instructions from the ministry of health and the conduct of Gazans when it comes to turning theory into practice.** Dr. Mona Siyam, a specialist in human development, reported on her own experience at the Blue Beach hotel in Gaza, where she stayed after she returned from Ramallah. She wrote that when she arrived at the Gazan side of the Erez Crossing (the "Beit Hanoun Crossing") she had to wait for more than four hours. **During that time people came into contact with her without keeping their distance, and they were given non-medical masks which offered no protection.** They were taken to the hotel, which, she said, was **dirty and unfit for human habitation.** She added that from her hotel window she could see people walking along the beach. She said the ministry of health did not monitor the situation at the hotel and only delivered bleach and toothpaste to the people staying there (Amad, April 25, 2020).



Measures taken by the military police on the Palestinian side of the Erez Crossing with the arrival of Palestinians (Twitter account of the ministry of the interior in Gaza, May 1, 2020).

► **Hamas would seem to be aware of the discrepancy** and is trying to bridge it in various ways, including **an appeal to influential people in Gazan society**. For example, **Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, recently sent letters to mukhtars and tribal elders updating them on the preventive steps taken by the authorities to cope with the virus. He called on them to use their social status to support the authorities. He stressed the need to disseminate the instructions to the clans and to influence society at large to follow the guidelines to prevent the disease from spreading (Hamas website, April 27, 2020).

► In the meantime, work continues to complete preparations at the European Hospital in Khan Yunis, which was designated as the main hospital for treating COVID-19 patients. According to Muhammad Awad, chairman of the government monitoring committee in Gaza, \$17 million is still necessary to complete preparations, and the funds have not been raised (al-Ra'i news agency, April 27, 2020). However, the hospital holds drills for patient reception readiness and treatment (European Hospital Facebook page, April 29, 2020).



Readying the European Hospital (European Hospital Facebook page, April 29, 2020).



Dr. Yusuf Abu al-Rish, deputy minister of health, visits the hospital to examine its procedures (European Hospital Facebook page, April 30, 2018).



COVID-19 patient reception readiness drill at the European Hospital (European Hospital Facebook page, April 28, 2020).

Opening Restaurants and Shopping Centers

Despite concern over an outbreak of COVID-19, and despite the preventive measures taken by the Hamas administration, **it was decided to open restaurants** in the Gaza Strip as of April 26, 2020.



Restaurants in Gaza reopen (Twitter account of journalist Hassan Aslih, April 26, 2020).

► The decision to open them led to considerable criticism in the social media. Hamas administration spokesmen tried to minimize the significance of the step while stressing obedience to preventive measures:

◆ **The ministry of the economy** said that obeying the preventive measures imposed on restaurants would be monitored and offenders would be punished; punishment could include closing the restaurant (Facebook page of the ministry of economy, April 26, 2020).

◆ **Iyad al-Buzum, spokesman for the ministry of the interior in Gaza**, announced that all decisions relating to gatherings were still in place and had not been changed. He said measures would be implemented against anyone who violated them, including closing facilities (al-Quds, April 28, 2020).

◆ **Amid Faiq al-Mabhough, director of the central operational authority in the ministry of the interior**, said there would be an increased presence of security personnel in shopping centers to regulate the number of customers and prevent crowding. He added that the ministry of the interior would monitor the implementation of the measures with regularly timed patrols, and stressed that strict measures would be taken against offenders (website of the ministry of the interior in Gaza, April 28, 2020).

◆ The heads of **the ministry of the interior's "crisis cell"** held a meeting with the restaurant and hotel owner's association, where al-Mabhough said the situation was still dangerous. He warned against disregarding official instructions. Claims were made at the meeting that coffee houses, places of entertainment on the beach and playgrounds remained closed, and that hotels were still being used as quarantine centers for returning Gazans (website of the ministry of the interior, May 2, 2020).

The mosques remain closed

► **Salameh Maarouf, chairman of the Hamas administration office of information**, refuted rumors that the mosques would be reopened. He said the Muslim religious position on closing the mosques was continually being updated in light of medical recommendations, which have not changed (al-Ra'i new agency, April 28, 2020).



An empty mosque
(QudsN Twitter account, May 2, 2020).

External Help for the Gaza Strip

The WHO

- On April 30, 2020, **the WHO delivered 1,100 COVID-19 test kits** to the Gaza Strip, donated by Britain (WHO website, April 30, 2020)



Delivering COVID-19 test kits
(WHO website, April 30, 2020).

- **Dr. Abd al-Nasser Sabah, director of the WHO regional office in Gaza**, said the agency had prepared a program to help the public health sector cope with the coronavirus. He said its cost was estimated at \$34 million. So far funding has been found for more than a third. Kuwait has donated \$9.5 million, and other donors include the EU, Britain, Italy and Australia. Dr. Sabah said the money enabled the WHO to purchase the equipment and laboratory materials necessary for COVID-19 testing, as well as personal protective equipment (PPE), all of which were delivered to the ministry of health in Gaza (news.un.org website, April 28, 2020).

Other external help

- The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre in Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with UNRWA to donate \$1 million to support the agency's efforts to deal with COVID-19 in the

Gaza Strip. The funds will be used to purchase ventilators and other medical equipment for Gaza's public health system (ksrelief website, April 30, 2020; UNRWA website, May 1, 2020).

► As part of supporting Gaza's public health system, the "48 Welfare Association" held a seminar for 50 doctors who had just completed their internship (**Note:** The Association is a committee of the Israeli Islamic Movement which supports orphans and the needy, and has a branch in the Gaza Strip.) (qudsnet.com, May 1, 2020).



Gaza Strip doctors attend the seminar
(qudsnet.com, May 1, 2020).

► **Muhammad Awad, chairman of the Hamas administration monitoring committee in Gaza**, appealed to the international community to donate money and medical aid to the Gaza Strip for coping with COVID-19. He denied reports that money had arrived from Qatar, claiming that has been donating money to Gaza on a regular basis Qatar since 2019, but that no funds designated for the war on the coronavirus had arrived so far. He added that not even the PA had sent aid to deal with the pandemic. He claimed that what had arrived in Gaza from the PA was part of the routine supply of medical equipment and drugs (al-Ra'i, April 27, 2020).



Infographic showing that the Gaza Strip received only 1,500 of the 50,000 COVID-19 test kits China sent to the PA (Shehab Facebook page, April 28, 2020).