



Increased violations of public health guidelines and protests against Palestinian Authority during the second coronavirus wave

July 20, 2020

Overview

- ▶ Since early March the Palestinian Authority (PA) has struggled with the spread of coronavirus cases and the ensuing economic difficulties. There have been two waves of COVID-19 in the PA territories, the **first**, which lasted for two months, which resulted in **274 cases and two deaths**; and the **second**, which began about a month later, with more than **6,500 active cases and more than 60 deaths** so far; **the numbers are still trending upwards** (see graphs below).
- ▶ The PA, which was satisfied with its response to the first wave of COVID-19, **now finds itself unsuccessfully trying to halt the surge of new infections**. Conditions are difficult and there is a grave shortage of medical equipment, there are economic hardships and a need to divert attention to the campaign to prevent Israel from annexing territories. The PA decision to end all contacts with Israel has added to the PA's difficulties in dealing with the spread of the virus.
- ▶ In an attempt to halt the spread of the virus during the second wave the PA increased the severity of its preventive measures, both general and specific. The measures include lockdowns, preventing movement between the districts, a curfew, pinpointed shutdowns of infection hotspots (neighborhoods, refugee camps and villages), and a strict ban on weddings, funerals and gatherings in general. Enforcing the restrictions was turned over to the district governors with the support of the security apparatuses and the police. The effort is led by PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh with the help of the ministry of health (Mahmoud Abbas has kept a low profile throughout the COVID-19 epidemic in the PA territories).
- ▶ Paradoxically, despite the surge in the number of active cases, seriously ill Palestinians and deaths, during the second wave **there has been an increase in the violation of public health guidelines and preventive measures** ordered by the prime minister and the public health system. The districts, including the Hebron district (the epicenter of the disease, with between 75% and 80% of all cases), have shown repeated instances of violations of home

isolation, wearing masks, maintaining social distancing and keeping stores closed. Despite the ban, weddings and other large gatherings have been held. The violations may indicate a lack of public trust in the PA and its orders.

► **There have been demonstrations and protests caused by economic and social factors in addition to the current wave of new infections.** An unusual event occurred in the town of Qabatiya when the PA security apparatuses and armed residents clashed when an attempt was made to enforce the curfew. In several districts, among them Hebron and Ramallah, store owners demonstrated to protest the deteriorating economic situation. In the Jalazone refugee camp, where there are many COVID-19 cases, activists took to the social media to accuse the government of delaying treatment in the camp. Various sectors of Palestinian society, including public transportation workers and representatives of commercial and business organizations, publicly protested the restrictions imposed by the government. The union of public transportation workers issued a call for drivers to return to work despite government orders.

► Moreover, **the PA finds it difficult to end the close relations Palestinians in Judea and Samaria have with Israel:** many Palestinians work in Israel and residents of the Hebron district have clan ties with the Bedouin in Israel's south (economic constraints and family and/or social ties are stronger than PA directives). Thus there is mutual PA-Israel infection, and the unmonitored passage of Palestinians between the PA territories and Israel increased with the closing of the crossings and the halting of security cooperation between Israel and the PA.

Given the situation, the question is **whether and to what degree the coronavirus and economic crises pose a genuine challenge to PA stability.** So far, the situation in the PA territories is still under control and the grumbling and protests of the Palestinian public are still local and grassroots, undirected by political or other centers of power. However, that may change as the surge in the spread of the disease continues and the economic crisis worsens. The nature of the protests may change as other groups enter the circle of criticism. In such a situation the health and economic crises may act as **catalysts for political processes that might weaken Mahmoud Abbas, intensify the war of succession for power in the PA and undermine the security stability in the PA territories.**

The COVID-19 Crisis and the PA's Response

The second wave

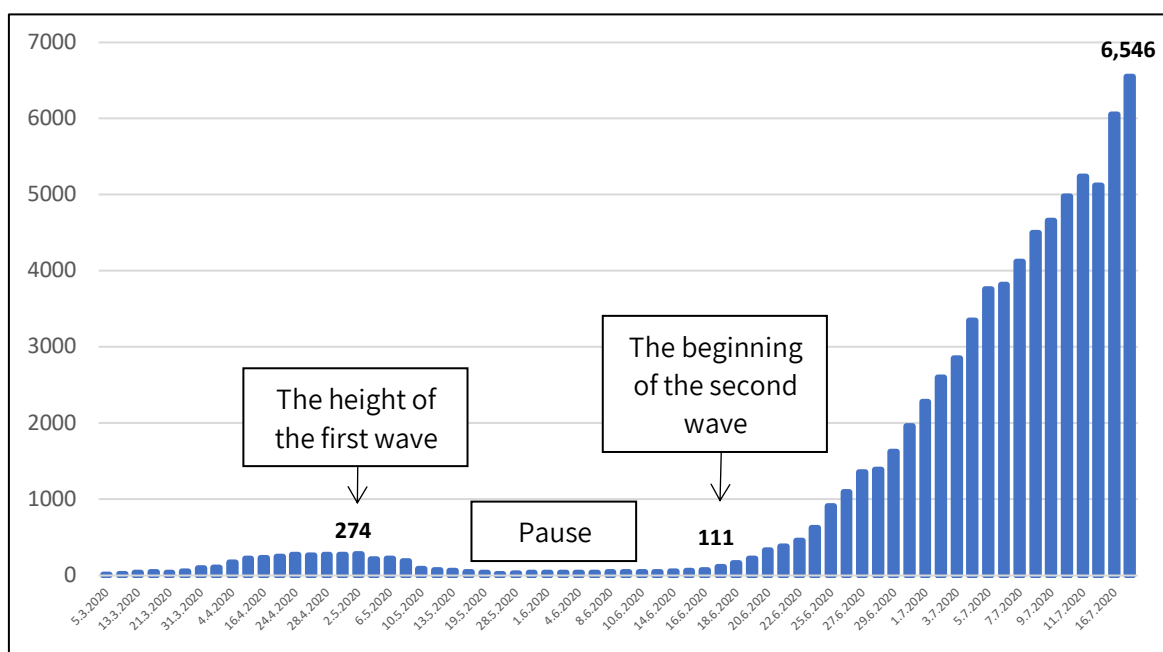
► The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in the PA on **March 5, 2020**, in Bayt Jala near Bethlehem. They were caused by contact with a group of Greek pilgrims who carried the disease.

► During the four and a half months since then there have been **two distinct waves of infection**:

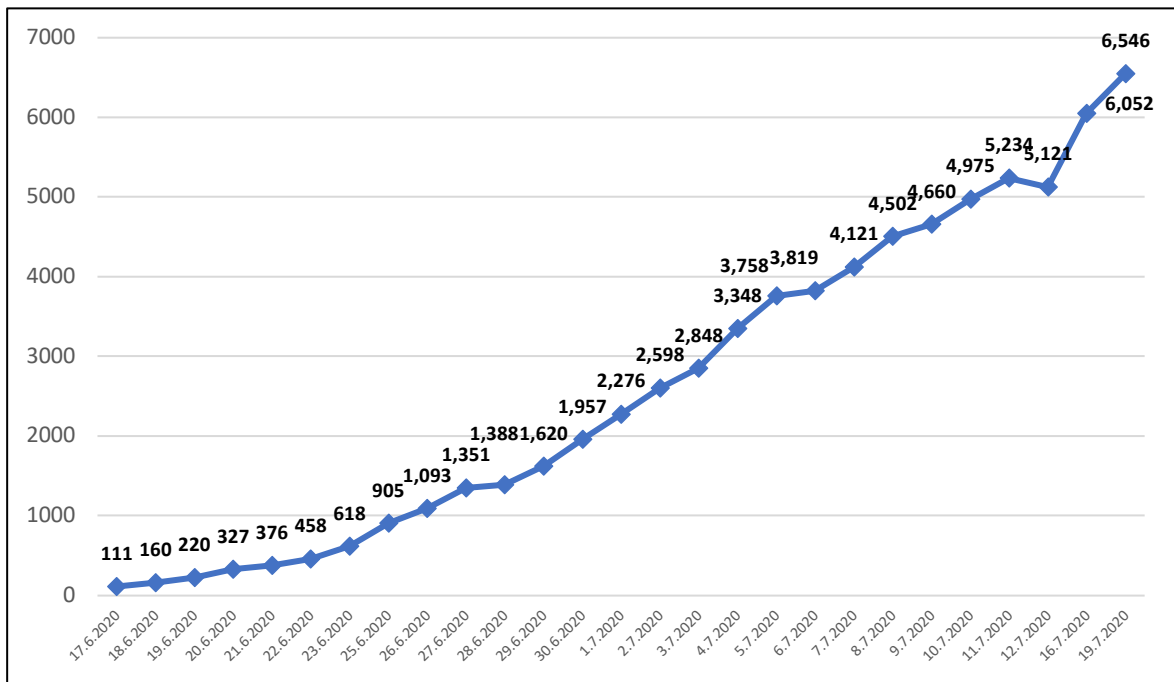
◆ The **first wave** began in March 2020 and lasted for more than three months. It peaked at the beginning of May 2020 with 274 reported active cases and then declined until it stabilized at a few dozen active cases a day for about a month and a half; two Palestinians died. The main epicenters for the disease were the villages in the Jerusalem region. The PA's preventive measures were less strict and more effective, and the rate of the spread was far lower than during the second wave

◆ The **second wave** began in the middle of June 2020. Within slightly more than a month, the number of active cases **rose from 61 on June 15, 2020, to 6,546 on July 18, 2020, with 62 deaths as of July 19, 2020**. The second wave has not yet ended and the numbers are still surging. The epicenter is the Hebron district (where there are between 75% and 80% of all the COVID-19 cases in the PA territories).

Active COVID-19 cases in the PA territories



Active cases in the ongoing second wave of COVID-19 cases



The PA's response

► **With the initial detection of COVID-19 in March the PA immediately locked down the Bethlehem region**, and later took pinpoint preventive measures to keep the disease from spreading. After two and a half weeks PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh announced a general lockdown of all the districts and issued stay-at-home orders for all residents (with certain exceptions), and lockdown violations were punished.

► **The results of the preventive measures the PA took during the first wave were effective.** The rate of infection was far more moderate than during the second wave and there were two deaths. Generally speaking the Palestinian public obeyed Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh's public health guidelines (throughout the crisis Mahmoud Abbas has kept a low profile). There were instances of violations and objections to the guidelines, but the enforcing bodies, mainly the security apparatuses and local police, **contained them and prevented an uncontrolled spread of the virus.**

► The PA could therefore be satisfied with its response to the first wave of coronavirus. However, certain weak spots became evident, especially **the severe shortage of medical equipment, primarily the lack of ventilators¹ and test kits.** In addition, during the first

¹ On July 13, 2020, Dr. Usama al-Nagar, director of medical services in the PA ministry of health, related to the Hebron district, the main hotspot of COVID-19 infection. He said there was a serious shortage of test kits, with only between 1,000 and 1,500 remaining (Ma'an, July 13, 2020). A spokesman for the PA

wave the PA had no response for its increasingly difficult economic situation. That worsened because of the PA's refusal to accept tax revenues from Israel and because of the blow to its economy caused by the coronavirus crisis, both of which made it difficult for the PA to deal with the second wave.

► **During the second wave the preventive measures have been stricter, both in general and regarding specific measures taken by the PA leadership and the district governors.**

The measures were instituted because of the surge in the numbers of active cases and deaths, and concern over the public health system's inability to deal with a number of critical cases. The measures included a general lockdown (recently on the weekends), preventing movement between the districts, a curfew, stricter pinpoint lockdowns in infection hotspots (neighborhoods, refugee camps and villages) and strict ban on weddings and funerals (and gathering in general). Places of entertainment, restaurants and gyms were closed. The PA security apparatuses and police, supervised by the district governors, oversaw the enforcement of the orders.

Violations of Public Health Guidelines and Protests

Despite the surge in the number of cases and deaths during the second wave there has been an increase in the number of violations of the orders issued by the PA leadership and ministry of health. Comparing the behavior of the Palestinian public during the two waves shows that during the second wave there have been far more violations of public health orders, and in some instances protest demonstrations have been held and Palestinians have clashed with the security apparatuses. **The public health crisis also exposed the helplessness of the PA and the low level of services it is capable of providing to residents.** The PA leadership finds itself severely criticized on the social media, laughed at for their confusion during the crisis and for not following the guidelines themselves.

► On the other hand, as **deterrence, punishments given to guideline violators have been stiffened**, including closing stores and businesses and fines of several hundred shekels (Ma'an, July 7, 2020). However, the measures have not motivated public adherence to guidelines, and sometimes instead they have increased the voicing of grievances and protests as the disease spreads and economic difficulties increase.

ministry of health reported that about 70% of its 350 ventilators were in use, and that currently, in the middle of July, there were fewer than 100 ventilators for COVID-19 patients.

Examples of violations of public health guidelines and protests in the PA districts

Hebron district

► The Palestinian ministry of health has repeatedly complained that the residents of the Hebron district do not follow the guidelines despite the fact that the district is an epicenter of the disease. In one instance the ministry of health reported that the Palestinian security apparatuses were able to locate a verified COVID-19 patient who had violated his self-quarantine order for the second time (Facebook page of Samer al-Sharawi, July 15, 2020). Protest demonstrations were also held by store owners and local residents, and festivities were held when the matriculation exam results were published, violating quarantine and mask-wearing orders



Right: Business men in Hebron demonstrate (QudsN Facebook page, July 12, 2020). Left: Stores stay open during the lockdown in Hebron (Facebook page of hedron.g, July 12, 2020).



Convoy in Hebron celebrating the publication of matriculation exam results (al-Risalah Twitter account, July 11, 2020).

► On July 11, 2020, the medical emergency committee of the village of Taffuh² announced that because village residents violated the public health guidelines and did not

² A village in the Hebron district with a large number of cases, where the Palestinian minister of health declared a state of emergency.

take preventive measures, the work of its teams in the medical centers shut down for 48 hours. The committee said the Palestinian security apparatuses would be responsible for any deterioration in the situation. Active cases in Taffuh were referred to medical centers in Halhul and Dura for treatment (Facebook page of the medical emergency committee in Taffuh, July 11, 2020).

► **On July 13, 2020, the detention of Abu Zaki Boro was announced**, a Palestinian singer who continued appearing at local weddings in Hebron (Facebook page of Samer al-Sharawi, July 13, 2020). The Palestinian security apparatuses in Hebron also detained singer Ayman al-Sabawi from the town of Zahariya, for violating the ban on weddings and other mass-participation events (QudsN, July 12, 2020).



Right: Palestinian singer Abu Zaki Boro, detained by the Palestinian police for appearing at a local wedding (Facebook page of Samer al-Sharawi, July 13, 2020). Left: Detention of singer Ayman al-Sabawi, Ma'an, July 12, 2020).

Ramallah district

► **On July 15, 2020, dozens of people (including store owners) demonstrated in Ramallah to protest the deteriorating financial situation** (Palinfo, July 15, 2020). Demonstrators complained that no PA government minister came to talk to them, and people chanted "Where is the [Palestinian] Authority?!" (al-Araby al-Jadeed, July 13, 2020). A store owner at the demonstration said people were going to the village of Aqab (which belongs to east Jerusalem) to do their shopping, so he did not see what good the lockdown of Ramallah was doing. Another store owner said they were turning into beggars and that their demand was "We want to live" (al-Sharq al-Awsat, July 14, 2020). In the wake of the pressure the PA government exempted small businesses in Ramallah, Hebron, Bethlehem and Nablus from the lockdown (Palestinian TV, July 13, 2020).



Demonstration in Ramallah

(Right: al-Araby al-Jadeed, July 13, 2020; Left: QudsN Facebook page, July 15, 2020).

Jalazone refugee camp

► **One of the hotspots of COVID-19 in the Ramallah district is the Jalazone refugee camp.** Coronavirus has spread throughout the camp because of its great crowding, which makes it difficult to implement the PA's preventive measures. Local residents used the social media to call on all the authorities to provide quarantine locations for people who had been infected because the houses were too close together to allow for proper isolation. **Activists in the refugee camp accused the government of abandoning them.** Other residents condemned the government's delays or refusal to provide a hotel as a quarantine center, giving as an excuse the lack of funds or medical teams. Others said they opposed the idea of turning the schools into quarantine centers (Dunia al-Watan, July 10, 2020).



Disinfecting the Jalazone refugee camp
(PA police website, July 9, 2020).

Nablus district

► On July 11, 2020, the PA ministry of health published the results of the matriculation exams for 2020. Before they were published, Ibrahim Ramadan, the governor of the Nablus district, called on residents to refrain from public demonstrations and to limit celebrations to family members (Facebook page of Ibrahim Ramadan, July 10, 2020). Despite the calls, in cities

throughout Judea and Samaria, including Nablus, students drove around in convoys to celebrate, violating quarantine orders and not wearing masks (QudsN Facebook page, al-Risalah Twitter account, July 11, 2020).



Festivities in Nablus (QudsN Facebook page, July 11, 2020).

Jenin district

► On July 2, 2020, the Jenin police, with the aid of the security apparatuses, dispersed three weddings, in one instance using force, after the singer and happy couple refused to stop the party. The police detained the singer and confiscated the sound equipment (website of the PA police, July 2, 2020).



From a video of a wedding posted by Akram al-Rajoub, governor of the Jenin district, to his Facebook page, warning the DJ, "Hafez, when you break the law the PA detains you... Yesterday all we did was detain you for eight hours, and if it weren't for the love and respect we have for you, oh honorable Musa al-Hafez, we would have brought you to trial (Akram al-Rajoub's Facebook page, July 3, 2020).

► **On the night of July 3, 2020 clashes broke out between the security apparatuses and armed Palestinians in the town of Qabatiya an attempt was made to impose the curfew.** According to local residents, the security apparatuses used tear gas grenades, choking dozens of demonstrators, and used force to close stores and cafés. According to a different report, during the evening local youths blocked the main street to prevent the security apparatuses from reaching the city center and closing the stores and cafés. Tear gas and flashbangs were used to disperse the youths, who responded by throwing stones and burning

tires. Armed men fired shot into the air at a distance from the security apparatuses (Ultra Palestine website, July 3, 2020).



Riots in Qabatiya (Safa, July 3, 2020)

Qalqilya district

► **On July 9, 2020, the Palestinian police and security apparatuses dispersed a wedding in one of the local villages.** The groom and his father were detained for violating the ban on gatherings (PA police website, July 9, 2020). A local resident was infected with coronavirus at a wedding in Israel, and as a result the village he lived in was locked down (Facebook page of the Qalqilya governor, July 10, 2020)

Demonstrations and protests in various sectors of Palestinian society

► After new limitations were issued, representatives of business and commerce protested and decided to oppose the orders of the prime minister and open businesses in the cities. A number of public sectors also announced that they would not obey the orders. For example, the General Association of West Bank Public Transportation Workers announced it was not committed to orders keeping public transportation drivers from going to work. The association called on all drivers to return to work on July 12, 2020, while implementing public health guidelines. The association also said that if the government did not give drivers exemptions from paying the government what they owed for 2020 it would announce an escalation (Sawa, July 9, 2020).

► Dozens of public transportation drivers working on the intercity lines in the Nablus district held a protest demonstration in front of the governor's office. They demanded they be allowed to renew the inter-district transportation lines, which have been suspended since the lockdown imposed almost two weeks ago. They said that preventing the public transportation lines from operating had led to the flourishing of illegal private taxi operations (Shehab, July 15, 2020).



Demonstration of public transportation drivers in Nablus (Shehab Facebook page, July 15, 2020).

PA Difficulties in Overseeing Contacts with Israel

The PA is finding it difficult to efficiently oversee the daily social and commercial contact of PA residents with Israel. That became especially difficult when Mahmoud Abbas announced the end of the agreements with Israel due to its intention to annex territories in Judea and Samaria. The PA thereby intensified the common Palestinian practice of illegally entering Israel for work or socializing, which **contributes to the mutual spread of COVID-19, especially between Palestinians from the Hebron district and Bedouins from the Negev.**

- ▶ Palestinian residents of Jerusalem have contacts with Israel in three main areas:
 - ◆ **The daily passage of Palestinians to Israel for work**, which has great importance for the PA economy. Some of the workers illegally pass unsupervised through the hundreds of holes in the security fence. According to orders issued for the second wave of the coronavirus, a ban was placed on the passage of workers from Israel to their homes in Judea and Samaria. However, they continue leaving the PA territories through illegal passages, which is particularly prominent in the Hebron district. **The district governor said there are 150 holes in the fence in his district through which Palestinians go to work in Israel** (Facebook page of the governor of the Hebron district, June 30, 2020).



**Palestinian workers infiltrating freely into Israeli territory south of Hebron
(Facebook page of Yusuf Amro, June 28, 2020).**

◆ **Palestinians who have relatives in Israel.** Most of them come from the southern Hebron district or east Jerusalem, and meet to maintain family ties. The governor of the Hebron district said one reason for the high numbers of COVID-19 cases in his district is the family relationship between local residents and Bedouins in the Negev or in east Jerusalem, and their meetings led to the surge in infection. He called on the residents of Jerusalem and the Bedouins in the Negev not to enter the Hebron district until COVID-19 in the district had been stamped out.

◆ **Israeli Arabs who enter the PA territories** mainly to go shopping, for other services or to meet residents of east Jerusalem. Mai al-Kayla, the Palestinian minister of health said that was also a source of mutual infection. She said seven residents of Ramallah were infected when they played cards with a friend from east Jerusalem (Facebook page of Samer al-Sharawi, July 15, 2020). Israeli Arabs have strong buying power, and their purchases in Judea and Samaria have considerable economic importance. Nevertheless, given the orders issued for the second wave of COVID-19, they were asked to refrain from entering the area.

The PA is aware of the potential the above areas have and is trying to limit them, but without much success. PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh recently said he had appealed to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) to oversee the entrance and exit of Palestinians at the crossings between Israel and the PA. That, he said, was because reports indicate that the PA security apparatuses' inability to oversee the passage of Palestinians through the crossings is the main cause of the rise in the COVID-19 infections (al-Quds, July 6, 2020).