



Sharp rise of Covid-19 cases in Judea and Samaria increases risk of mutual Israeli Arab-Palestinian population infection

November 17, 2020

Overview

In Judea and Samaria cases of Covid-19 have recently spiked. According to the Palestinian ministry of health in Ramallah, **the number of active cases currently stands at 4,897** (November 16, 2020). However, according to **Mai al-Kayla**, Palestinian Authority (PA) minister of health, **the actual number is three times higher than what is reported in the media.** The extent of infection in Judea and Samaria and the lack of the effective enforcement of public health guidelines **increase the risk of the mutual infection between Israeli Arabs** (whose rate of infection is relatively higher than other sectors of the Israeli population) and the **Palestinian population.** Israeli Arabs and Palestinians interface at many locations, among them visits of Israeli Arabs to Judea and Samaria, the entrance of Palestinian workers (legally or illegally) into Israel and Israeli Arab weddings held in wedding halls in Judea and Samaria. The difficulty in preventing mutual infection has been exacerbated in recent months by **the PA's stopping its cooperation with Israel, even regarding a critical civilian issue such as combatting the Covid-19 epidemic.**



A wedding held in the Palestinian village of Barta'a al-Sharqia, close to the Israel border.¹ No masks, no social distancing (Studio Omar on YouTube, October 7, 2020). There are five reception venues in the village where Israeli Arabs who live in Wadi 'Ara hold their weddings.

¹ The Israel-PA border cuts through the village of Barta'a; half is on the Israeli side, half on the Palestinian side.

Rise in the number of coronavirus infections in the PA territories

► **The number of verified active cases of Covid-19 in Judea and Samaria recently spiked** (the Nablus district currently has the largest number of cases). According to the ministry of health in Ramallah, **the number of active cases now stands at 4,976**, up from 4,281 a week ago. This past week 3,194 new cases were detected, up from 2,358 a week ago. The number of deaths rose to 524 from 477 (ministry of health in Ramallah, updated to November 16, 2020).

► According to **Mai al-Kayla**, PA minister of health, the extent of Covid-19 infection and mortality in the PA territories is far higher. **She said the actual number of cases in the PA territories is three times higher than what is reported by the media.** She added that **local residents do not obey public health guidelines** or implement the preventive measures announced by the ministry of health in Ramallah. For example, weddings are still held in the Nablus district and medical teams coming to administer Covid-19 tests in the Nablus and Hebron districts have been chased away (Voice of Palestine radio as quoted by Dunia al-Watan, November 4, 2020).

Mai al-Kayla's statement supports Israeli assessments that infection and mortality in Judea and Samaria are **far higher than the official reports of ministry of health in Ramallah.** **The high rate of infection increases the risks of transmission between Israeli Arabs and the Palestinian population.** According to Ayman Sayif, who holds the Covid-19 portfolio in Israeli Arab society for the Coronavirus Project Coordinator, that is one of the reasons behind **the very high rate of Covid-19 infection among Israeli Arabs.**

The main interfaces between Israeli Arabs and the Palestinians

► There are many interface areas between Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in Judea and Samaria:

- ◆ **Israeli Arabs visit Judea and Samaria for entertainment and shopping.** Some even stay overnight in the PA territories for several days. In addition Palestinians visit Israel for entertainment and socializing.



Israeli Arabs shop in the market in Barta'a (Facebook page of the "al-Jalameh roadblock from Jenin," November 14, 2020. The cars with yellow license plates are Israeli.



Palestinians pass through the security fence in Faroun, south of Tulkarm, through holes in the fence for a visit to Israel (al-Fajr TV Facebook page, August 7, 2020).

- ◆ **Palestinians who work in Israel, legally and illegally, enter Israeli territory.** It is particularly common south of Hebron, where there are family ties between Palestinians and Israeli Bedouins.



Palestinian workers enter Israeli territory through holes in the security fence south of the Hebron region (Facebook page of Yusuf Amru, June 28, 2020).

- ◆ **Israeli Arabs hold weddings in reception venues in Judea and Samaria** because of the limitations on them in Israel. Weddings are often held in the village of Barta'a al-Sharqia in Samaria, a favorite location for weddings of residents of the central Israeli cities in Wadi 'Ara. Weddings are also often held in the villages around Jerusalem by Arabs from east Jerusalem.



A wedding in Barta'a al-Sharqia, in the PA. No masks, no social distancing (Omar Studio on YouTube, October 7, 2020).

◆ **Arabs from east Jerusalem move to and from work** in the Jewish western part of the city. Israeli Arabs also have family ties in the PA territories, especially in the Ramallah area and in the villages around Jerusalem (for example, Kafr 'Aqab, which is part of Israel, but where the level of Israeli governance is low).



A wedding in Kafr 'Aqab, an epicenter of east Jerusalem Covid-19 infection (Miran Studio Facebook page, November 14, 2020). About 40,000 Kafr 'Aqab residents work in the west Jerusalem neighborhoods. Most of them enter and exit every day through the Qalqilya Crossing.²

► **Ayman Sayif, who holds the Covid-19 portfolio in Israeli Arab society for the coronavirus project coordinator**, was interviewed by an Israeli Arab radio station. He spoke about the reasons for the high rate of Covid-19 infection among Israeli Arabs. He said **one reason was the entrance of many Israeli Arabs into the PA territories**, where all business are open: **restaurants, cafés and shopping centers**. Some Israeli Arabs even remain overnight for two or three days, and then return to their villages, bringing the coronavirus with them. **He especially noted the weddings held in the PA**. The reception venues in Wadi 'Ara, for example, he said, are closed, so many Israeli Arabs go to the village of Barta'a al-

² For further information, see the August 3, 2020 bulletin, "COVID-19 Infection in the East Jerusalem Neighborhoods: The exceptional case of Kafr 'Aqab."

Sharqia. There are **five reception venues in Barta'a al-Sharqia**, and weddings are held there and in other locations (Makan al-Akhbar YouTube channel, November 11, 2020).

► Interviewed on another occasion, Ayman Sayif said that thousands of Israeli Arabs enter the PA territories for entertainment and shopping, and they do not strictly follow public health guidelines (Ynet, November 17, 2020).

► Ayman Sayif was interviewed after **the Commander of the Central Command decided, on November 10, 2020, to ban the entrance of Israeli civilians into Area B**, with no distinction between Jews and Arabs. He said they had to wait and **see if and how effectively the decision would be enforced**.³ He said the decision had been made **following recommendations from the ministry of health, in view of the high rate of infection among Israeli Arabs**. He added that while ultra-Orthodox cities that had been red became yellow, **many Arab towns and villages were red again**, which meant a full lockdown had to be reimposed, including stores and businesses (Radio al-Shams Facebook page , November 11, 2020).

³ Ayman Sayif interviewed by Ynet, where he said the Commander just issued an order banning entrance into the PA territories, but the point is enforcement. "Here and there it is still possible to enter [Judea and Samaria]" (Ynet, November 17, 2020)