

**The Corona Pandemic and the Palestinian Arena: Significance for
Israel**

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The Palestinian arena was already in a weakened state and at a political, economic, and national crossroads in both the West Bank, under the Palestinian Authority, and the Gaza Strip, under Hamas rule, when the corona pandemic hit. The situation in the West Bank is better than in Gaza, which in part reflects a significant gap in the capabilities of the respective leaderships to confront the crisis. While the Palestinian Authority is striving to prove its ability to deal with the crisis, there is serious concern in the Gaza Strip that the potential spread of the virus, with the area's inadequate healthcare system and generally poor civilian infrastructure, will exacerbate the existing humanitarian plight and even endanger Hamas's hold on power, including its ability to rein in elements that seek a confrontation with Israel. For its part, Israel provides medical and other assistance to both areas. In tandem, it must prepare for a decline in the security situation in both areas, particularly in the Gaza Strip, yet also prepare for continued coordination and cooperation with both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas once the crisis is over, based on insights gleaned from the interactions with them during the crisis.

The Gaza Strip and the West Bank: A Significant Gap in Capabilities

The poor state of civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip is reflected inter alia in the weak healthcare system, which is short of hospital beds and equipment, including corona testing kits and protection for medical personnel, and with insufficiently skilled medical teams. Moreover, there is an overall crisis of public confidence in the healthcare system and Hamas governance in general. There is a sense that the threat of the virus exceeds Gaza's capabilities, and those of the Hamas leadership in particular. While so far the number of those infected with the virus is relatively low, the figure may reflect the small number of tests conducted there. In recent weeks, the border crossings in the Strip have been closed, and quarantine facilities have been set up close to the Rafah crossing, in schools, and in other public buildings; the establishment of one thousand quarantine rooms was announced. In addition, public gatherings are prohibited and mosques are closed. However, there is no monitoring of those who entered before the quarantine rules were implemented, and there is no monitoring of potential carriers. There is therefore increasing concern of a sudden increase in the number of patients and the broad spread of the disease. At the same

time, there is an apparent decline in the fear of Gazan residents following about three weeks of isolation for those who have entered the Strip, as there has been no significant increase in morbidity. As such, the lockdown is viewed as an effective prevention of contagion. The level of fear has apparently also declined due to the Palestinian Authority's agreement to overcome its opposition to the opening of the so-called Turkish hospital (the Palestine-Turkey Friendship Hospital) that was built in the Gaza Strip but remained closed.

The Hamas leadership, together with human rights organizations, are placing the responsibility for Gaza's fate on Israel. Khalil Hayya, a Gaza resident and member of the Hamas Political Bureau, said on March 24, 2020 that Israel was responsible for providing the Strip with what it needs to fight the coronavirus, and that it must lift the closure and renew the transfer of assistance to those in need. This seeks to pressure Israel as well as countries in the Arab and international arenas to provide assistance, while also diverting responsibility from Hamas, which might face mass demonstrations if there is a serious decline in the situation.

Israel is very much aware of the risk in the Gaza Strip in the event of the broad spread of the disease. Therefore, Israel has increased the amount of medical equipment sent into the area, including 20 respirators to join the 80 already there, about 300 testing kits, about 50,000 masks, and a large supply of other equipment ordered from China. Qatar has also committed its support, with the emir pledging to transfer \$150 million in additional financial assistance in six monthly installments. The fulfillment of the Qatari promise (if in the form of cash) will require the involvement of Israel and Egypt at a time when most airports are shut down. Coordination will also be necessary regarding the transfer of patients from the Strip to hospitals in East Jerusalem, as often arranged by the PA Ministry of Health, even though it exercises no authority in the Strip.

In contrast, the situation in the West Bank is significantly better. The PA even preceded Israel in the measures it took once the virus broke out in Bethlehem, demonstrating awareness of the health risks involved in contact with Israel and Israelis, including residents of the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria and East Jerusalem. The PA Ministry of Health's efforts are concentrated in the West Bank. It has worked to identify and map infection hotspots, encircle them, and gradually expand the closure as the virus spread. Instructions to the public are forcibly enforced, including the prohibition of gatherings and the entry of Arab citizens of Israel into the West Bank, and it seems that for now, the spread has been contained. In addition, the Palestinian Ministry of Health has acted to ease the sanctions it imposed on the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip, and has asked that the same guidelines be imposed in the Strip as have been imposed in the West Bank, despite the possibility that Hamas will not necessarily accede to the request. Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh even announced that starting this April, PA officials in the Gaza

Strip would return to work based on the previous framework, before salary and employee benefit cuts began.

Moreover, from the outset of the crisis, the PA was careful to coordinate all of its actions regarding the coronavirus with Israel, and even publicly emphasized the importance of this coordination (in the spirit of the principles anchored in the 1995 interim agreement regarding cooperation and exchange of information in cases of epidemics or pandemics). Government spokesman Ibrahim Malham noted that a joint operations center was established with the Israeli side in order to coordinate the campaign. The coordination with Israel is one of the reasons for Palestinian public confidence in the measures taken by the PA and their adherence to guidelines.

In view of the crisis, Israel decided to transfer NIS 120 million to the PA from the funds it has collected on its behalf, and to tighten healthcare coordination and transfer medical equipment. Palestinian laborers continue to work in Israel on the basis of a joint agreement that they will sleep close to their place of work. However, the PA later called on them to return to the West Bank after one of them was infected and there was concern of widespread infection (as well as anger over the sleeping conditions that were allocated to the workers by employers in Israel).

The PA's performance regarding the crisis has earned the Palestinians' appreciation. A recent public opinion poll conducted among the Palestinian public by a research institute headed by Dr. Nabil Kukali showed 80 percent trust in the PA's performance. In parallel, there are private initiatives assisting and supporting the PA's activities. For instance, food contributions from Hebron were sent to residents of Bethlehem, which is suffering from higher morbidity than other cities; assistance was sent to needy families; and internet bandwidth was increased for free for customers of the PalTel communications company.

Implications for Israel

Risks

Decision makers in Israel must assume that corona-related morbidity in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is more serious than reported. The more significant challenge is the Gaza Strip, due both to the potential rapid and wide spread of the virus, and due to the limited ability of Hamas to deal with a broad crisis in a densely populated distress area. In addition, there are no ongoing effective coordination mechanisms between Israel and the Strip, as there are between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

The spread of the disease in the Gaza Strip and the loss of Hamas control would put Israel in a complex and difficult situation due to potential spillover from the area. Hamas may also attempt to escalate the security situation, with the intention of diverting public

attention from its powerlessness in dealing with the virus. While Hamas has made a concerted effort of late to prove its control over the Strip in view of the virus, including tightening and enforcing movement restrictions, the loss of the Gaza population's trust in the Hamas leadership may lead to a flood of people at the border fence.

In terms of the West Bank, Israel must also prepare for the possibility of a broad spread of the virus in the West Bank and the PA's difficulty in containing the crisis, partly due to limited medical infrastructure and a shortage of testing kits and ventilators. It is therefore important to reinforce the Palestinian hospitals in Jerusalem, taking into account that they are an essential part of the Palestinian healthcare system and a backup for advanced medical treatment for the West Bank population and that of the Gaza Strip. A broad outbreak may lead to a collapse of the Palestinian economy, the loss of public confidence in the PA leadership, and even chaos as a result of shortages in food, water, electricity, and medicines. Therefore, assistance and cooperation with the PA, including joint appearances by physicians and other professionals from both sides to underscore the seriousness of the crisis to the Palestinian and Israeli publics, as well as continued security coordination, will help contain the crisis. However, Israel would also do well to prepare for a scenario in which the PA collapses, whether as a result of economic collapse or due to difficulties in performance.

Israel must halt attempted infiltrations from either the West Bank or the Gaza Strip and prepare a response should some such attempts succeed. Tightening the border between Israel and both areas, in coordination, will be required if there is a mass spread of the disease, even if the situation in the West Bank is more complex due to the presence of Jewish settlements in the heart of the area.

Opportunities

It appears that the Hamas leadership is aware of the seriousness of the challenge before it, and of its dependence on Israel. Indeed, the spread of the disease in the Gaza Strip may put its own survival at risk. Therefore, this difficult time may actually spur Hamas to become more flexible in its conditions for reaching arrangements with Israel. Assuming that the Israeli interest is a broad arrangement with the Gaza Strip, the corona crisis may prove to be an opportunity for Israel to advance it. Given its current vulnerability, the Hamas leadership may find it appropriate to return the two Israeli civilians and the bodies of the two IDF soldiers. The need to make room in Israeli prisons due to the concern of a virus outbreak in the prisons may also lead to the release of Palestinian prisoners as a component of an exchange between Israel and Hamas.

On the other hand, if the Israeli interest is for the Palestinian Authority to return to govern the Gaza Strip, a necessary step for the political process, the corona crisis may provide an

incentive and an opportunity to take steps in this direction, partly with Egyptian and Saudi support, and perhaps even with the involvement of Qatar and the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov. The seriousness of the situation and Hamas's understanding of its own weakness may increase the possibility of repaired relations between the two leaderships, even if short of reconciliation, and in this framework, PA readiness to take on more responsibility for civilian aspects in the Gaza Strip even without full control of the area.

Conclusion

Against the background of the corona crisis, there is greater recognition among the two Palestinian leaderships and their respective populations of the imperative of cooperation with Israel. The pandemic illustrates the extent to which cooperation, even beyond the security realm, is necessary under the circumstances and may even be life-saving. After the crisis, both leaderships are likely to consider if and how the coordination can be expanded. Future developments will be linked to the extent of reconstruction required in each area, and to the attention in Israel, the region, and the international sphere to a possible renewal of the political process. If parts of the "deal of the century" presented by the American administration are removed, the chances that the Palestinian Authority will return to the negotiations will presumably increase, at the expense of possibly improving relations with Hamas. In contrast, if the "deal of the century" remains as presented, the chances of closer relations between the PA and Hamas will increase.

In addition, the successful performance of the Palestinian Authority in face of the corona crisis will also demonstrate to Israel the PA's improved ability to govern. Against this background, the Israeli approach, which is skeptical and critical of the potential of PA institutions, may change, and this in turn might even encourage increased flexibility by Israel toward the PA.