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## **The Coronavirus Pandemic and East Jerusalem**

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**East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods are liable to become morbidity hotspots for the coronavirus pandemic, notably during the month of Ramadan, posing a contagion risk to the city as a whole. In light of this danger, and given the underlying neglect in the city's eastern neighborhoods, Israeli authorities have addressed the pandemic there, albeit incurring friction with Palestinian Authority (PA) representatives – mainly in Kafr 'Aqab, which is outside the security barrier. Lags in tackling the coronavirus pandemic in the city's east have prompted the PA to accuse Israel of plotting to exploit the circumstances to advance plans to depopulate the area of Palestinians and annex territory per the "Trump Plan." Yet at the same time there has been cooperation between Israeli officials and Palestinian civil society groups in managing the crisis. It is important that this coordination be handled carefully, with an emphasis on shared public health needs and interests, and in anticipation of the severe economic crisis that East Jerusalem can expect the day after the pandemic.**

At the outset of the month of Ramadan, the picture of the coronavirus outbreak in East Jerusalem was still hazy. On the face of it, morbidity was low compared to West Jerusalem, especially relative to morbidity in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods. As of April 30, 2020 there were 151 confirmed cases in East Jerusalem, including two people who died and 41 who recovered. The main loci of morbidity have been in Ras al-Amud, Beit Safafa, Abu Tor, the Old City, Isawiya, and Silwan-City of David. No closures have been imposed on any of the Arab neighborhoods. Apparently the relatively few coronavirus cases in East Jerusalem are a function of limited testing and reliable information. East Jerusalemites are tested at designated health clinics and at a drive-through testing complex near Jabel Mukaber. Another testing site was also recently set up and closed after few days, at the Qalandiya crossing point.

The appointment by the IDF Chief of Staff of Brig. Gen. (res.) Ben-Zvi Eliassi, formerly of the Home Front Command, as the adviser to Jerusalem's mayor on the coronavirus issue in the city's eastern section reflects fear of a wide outbreak of the disease over Ramadan. In addition, a situation room has begun pandemic management operations in East Jerusalem, including with a monitoring and data collection unit. However, the

Health Ministry has not conducted epidemiological investigations in East Jerusalem, and in many instances it has been the infected individuals themselves who have submitted lists of locations they visited. In Silwan and Ras al-Amud, there have even been calls to step up enforcement of mandatory quarantines and for the police and Home Front Command troops to impose lockdowns.

The dilemma of assigning responsibility for coping with outbreaks – especially when a hotspot was detected in Kafr 'Aqab, which is north of Jerusalem, outside the barrier but under Israeli sovereignty and within Jerusalem's city limits – has sparked tension between Israeli authorities and PA representatives. Most of the 16 patients diagnosed in Kafr 'Aqab, some of them with tests conducted by PA health services, were taken to Ramallah to be isolated and treated after Israel's Health Ministry refused to quarantine them in Israel. Palestinian security services patrolled the neighborhood, apparently in coordination with Israel, and even tried to impose a closure of businesses and home curfews ahead of Ramadan, before the closure of the crossing point toward el-Bireh and Ramallah within PA territory. Passage to Jerusalem was permitted for essential workers only. Residents of the neighborhood found themselves isolated on both directions. The argument between Israel and PA officials over who would provide health care for the residents culminated with evacuation of the Palestinian security forces from the neighborhood and the erection of a roadblock to its north to prevent travel to Ramallah. On April 23, Border Police, IDF units, and municipal inspectors entered the neighborhood to enforce the closure directives, and tore up street signs placed there by the PA.

With the coronavirus pandemic underway, PA spokespeople and Palestinian media aired allegations regarding discriminatory practices by Israeli authorities in the east of the city in the service of an Israeli effort to "penetrate" the virus into specific neighborhoods, and use of the pandemic to "purge" the Old City and certain surrounding neighborhoods of their residents. Inter alia, in a pre-Ramadan speech on April 22, Abu Mazen warned of attempts to exploit the international preoccupation with the coronavirus pandemic to the detriment of the Palestinians. Saeb Erekat, secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee, claimed that Israel was denying East Jerusalem residents health care, continuing with raids against Palestinian institutions, and attacking Palestinian officials. The Palestinian Protection of Lands and Resistance to Settlements also raised the issue within the context of attempts by Israel to "annex settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem area in accordance with the Trump Plan." The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates condemned the Silwan incursion by the IDF and Israel Police forces, as well as a raid on a clinic that the Palestinian emergency council had set up.

At the same time, Israel and the PA have conducted close cooperation in the struggle against the coronavirus, stemming from common awareness of their geographical proximity and daily contacts between Israelis and Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Inter alia, there have been training sessions for Palestinian doctors in Israel, and substantial aid in the form of drugs and medical equipment has been provided, including to East Jerusalem hospitals. Similarly, Palestinian security services have operated in conjunction with Israeli authorities in enforcing closures and traffic restrictions that the PA has imposed on PA residents. And indeed, recent weeks have seen an Israeli institutional drive that has involved the Health Ministry, health funds, the municipality, community centers, the Home Front Command, and Magen David Adom, alongside the Red Crescent, East Jerusalem hospitals, and even East Jerusalem civil society leaders, to control the spread of the pandemic and deal with various aspects of the crisis.

The PA's relatively high performance level in dealing with the coronavirus has won it praise within the Palestinian domestic arena. Cooperation with Israel, which helps it function, is especially manifest when it comes to employment. Israel has permitted overnight stays on its territory for Palestinian laborers in order to mitigate the setbacks in the Israeli construction sector and to offset the exaggerated economic distress in the PA. But more recently it has been the PA that has limited Palestinian labor in West Bank settlements and travel to employment in Israel. Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh called on Palestinian laborers to return home one week after an agreement was reached with Israel on staying overnight in Israeli territory. This stemmed from the relatively high rate of infection in Israel and the fear of increasing the presence of the virus in PA territory (according to PA data, 79 percent of Palestinian coronavirus cases originated with employment in Israel). This policy was regretted soon after the rate of infection dropped.

The struggle against the spread of the coronavirus in Jerusalem and its environs reflects the interplay between the two parts of the city, West and East, and at the same time the intimate links between Palestinian residents and the PA territories. These ties are especially salient in neighborhoods outside the security barrier (Kafr 'Aqab, which links up to the Ramallah area, and the Shuafat refugee camp, which links up to the Anata area) and in the ties between East Jerusalem and the Bethlehem area. Also noteworthy are processes underway in East Jerusalem in recent years: a rise of civil society bodies and institutions at the neighborhood and municipal levels, some of which maintain a range of contacts with the Israeli bureaucracy and some of which are connected to Palestinian elements. The five-year plan for reducing socioeconomic gaps and for economic development in East Jerusalem (Cabinet Resolution 3790 of May 2018) constituted the groundwork for establishment of municipal youth movements, with youth distributing

thousands of food baskets in the city's east, and assistance has been provided by students as part of the al-Bashir Project in filling out employment and National Insurance Institute forms in order to secure unemployment benefits for the thousands of workers put on unpaid leave. There has been a similar mobilization of many social activists and doctors in East Jerusalem to help in managing the campaign against the virus.

## **Recommendations**

### ***The Month of Ramadan***

The main challenge of the coming weeks will be to dealing with the impact of Ramadan and the widespread family and communal activities that are part of the holiday. Thus there is a need to enforce limitations imposed by the government on movement and assembly, in cooperation with clergy and social activists, in the East Jerusalem neighborhoods. Actions by the police and Border Police should be taken with care so as to avoid confrontations and escalation.

### ***Exit Strategy***

The greatest challenge that will occupy all those involved in East Jerusalem affairs is the severe economic crisis expected once the coronavirus pandemic passes and there is a gradual return to (a new) normal. Mass layoffs, the dependency on the labor market in West Jerusalem, and the overall difficult economic straits of the city and Israel as a whole will all exert a deep impact on the situation in East Jerusalem. Friction points, among them the Temple Mount/al Aqsa, or developments like the annexation of settlements and parts of the West Bank to Israel, are liable to foment waves of protest and violence.

### ***Capitalizing on Success***

The success of the Israeli government and the civil society groups in East Jerusalem in mounting a coordinated handling of the coronavirus pandemic may also help in dealing with the "day after" economic crisis. This success could serve as a basis of trust between the East Jerusalem public and the Israeli ruling authorities, on condition that massive investment in the city's east continues after the pandemic passes.

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