

PALESTINE AND THE COVID CRISIS

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PREFACE

The COVID-19 pandemic is confronting governments around the world with an emergency health situation, requiring self-isolation, population lockdowns of many economic activities and households, mass virus testing, screening and hospitalizations, and much more. In areas of the world that are in the midst of armed conflict or military occupation, or are hosting refugee camps or large pools of migrant workers, harsh living conditions are becoming spaces of extraordinary vulnerability to the pandemic and what Friedrich Engels once called “social murder.”

In this context, Socialist Project reaffirms our commitment to the longstanding international demand that Israel end its illegal occupation of Palestinian land and the brutal siege on Gaza. It is imperative that Israel restore access to water and electrical power, and immediately lift all restrictions on medicines and equipment necessary to deal with the pandemic. The global health crisis makes these needs particularly acute. We insist that primary responsibility for the suffering Palestinians face is the neo-colonial occupation, in the form of an apartheid regime, that Israel has constructed with the compliance, and indeed support, of the most powerful states in the international community. We call on governments to stop colluding with Israel in their silence, military contracts, and investments, and stress the need to deepen the campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS). It is this political system, not merely an act of nature, against which we must mobilize an international response of immediate medical relief and of struggle and solidarity.

We wish to thank the photographers whose images are featured here for licensing their important and sometimes risky work under creative commons. Special recognition deserves to be extended to Remembering Ali Mustafa for publicizing Mustafa's work after his tragic death in Syria in 2014. •

—*The Socialist Project*

Palestinian boys scale the separation wall. Ali Mustafa, 2011.



FOREWORD ON THE DISPATCHES

Aaron Lakoff

When the news of the coronavirus pandemic hitting North America started to break, I was sitting in a beautiful public library in Washington DC. I travel a lot for work, and public libraries are often my office on the road. Sitting in the middle of one of the global centres of power, just a few minutes' walk from the White House, there was an eerie sense of calm at first. I noticed a couple hand sanitizer bottles placed on circulation desks for patrons to use, a few public health flyers lying around, and a few librarians wearing gloves. Otherwise, life seemed to continue as normal in that moment. People around me were reading, laughing, sipping coffees, and no one was six feet apart from each other at this point. And maybe no one really knew the hellish reality waiting just around the corner.

Then the news started rolling in on our collective feeds. Lockdowns, border closures, mandatory fourteen-day quarantine for anyone returning to Canada from abroad. One of the first phone calls I made was to a friend of mine back home in Montreal who works as a nurse. I started to ask his advice on quarantining, whether or not to wear gloves and a mask while going through the airport on my way home, and how to make arrangements with friends to get groceries while on lockdown.

I soon got caught up in my own panic on how to provide for myself during this crisis, but was also heartened by the hundreds of mutual aid groups that began popping up rapidly in different Canadian cities. As I was contemplating the unprecedented effort that it would take for all of us to make sure we all had the food, medicine and daily essentials needed to get through COVID-19, I stopped to ask myself, "where have I seen this before?" And I immediately thought of Palestine.

I was reminded of my first trip to Palestine in 2005, and the volunteer work I did with the International Solidarity Movement.

During my time in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I got to witness first-hand what mutual aid looks like on a large scale. People there understand that in order to survive life under the travel restrictions, curfews, or blockades of the Israeli occupation, you need to work together, and you need to get creative. Palestinians are some of the strongest people I know, because they are brought up in this atmosphere of creativity, cooperation, and solidarity.

I began this series of dispatches from Palestinians for Independent Jewish Voices not to draw comparisons between life under lockdown in the West and the brutality of Israeli apartheid, but rather to draw inspiration from Palestinian organizing strategies. I wanted to expand our thinking around international solidarity in a time when it's easy to just worry about your own household. That's not to say that we shouldn't be worrying about our own households – indeed we should. But Weeam Hammoudeh, a public health researcher at Birzeit University in Ramallah, cautions us that the solution to this pandemic won't come by just focusing on the immediate needs of those around us. As she tells us, “There are more immediate needs, such as providing testing, or building up our emergency infrastructure to deal with this situation. But in the end, it would be very unfortunate if we only focused on the emergency response without asking ourselves why these vulnerabilities and structural inequities continue to exist. That's why we need to shift the focus of the conversation to justice and freedom. There are a lot of lessons that need to be learned on a global scale, and the solution needs to exist beyond national borders. Global solidarity needs to push agendas that have the well-being of populations as a key priority, rather than discrimination and profit.”

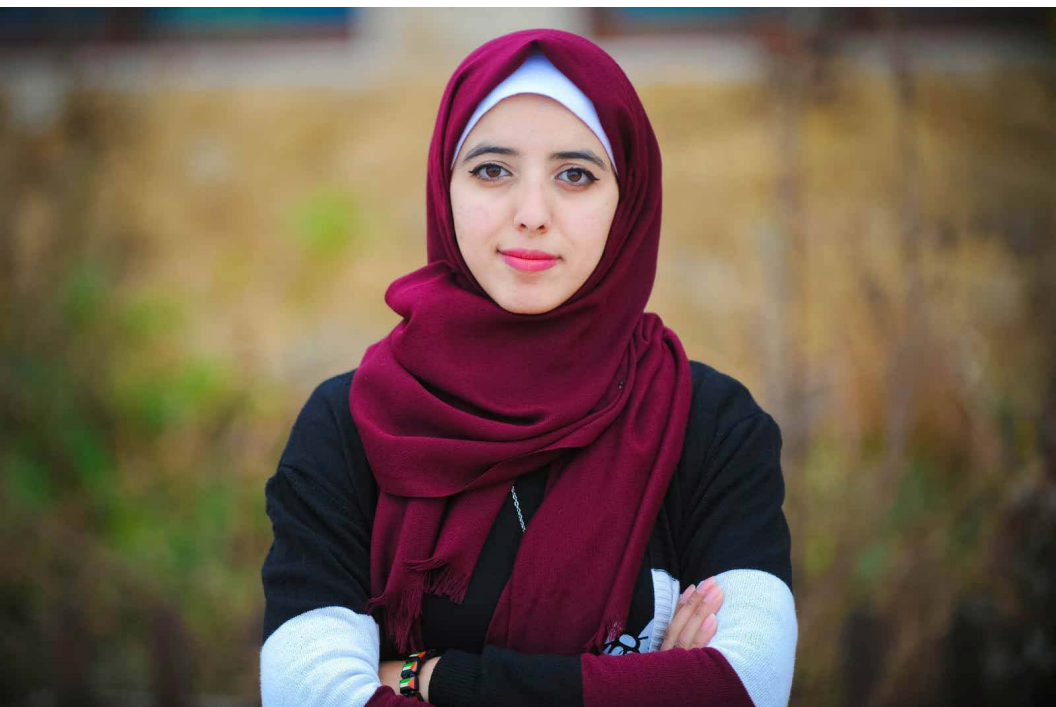
Now more than ever, Palestine must be free. The brutal siege of Gaza and the ongoing occupation of the West Bank have made these places tinderboxes for the coronavirus. Medical aid must get in, people must have access to testing, and Israel must end its daily restrictions on Palestinian life.

Apartheid is a virus. Freedom is the cure. •

Aaron Lakoff is the Communications and Media Lead for Independent Jewish Voices Canada and a long-time Palestine solidarity organizer. If you appreciate these dispatches, you can visit IJV's website to find out more about the work they do: ijvcanada.org.

DISPATCH FROM ASMAA TAYEH

Aaron Lakoff



Asmaa Tayeh lives in the Jabalia Refugee Camp in the north of the Gaza strip, and works as the Operations Manager for We Are Not Numbers (WANN), a citizen journalism project for Palestinian youth in Gaza.

I start by asking her how she's feeling, and if she's scared with the coronavirus now in Gaza.

"For at least two months, we've been hearing news about the whole world suffering from COVID-19. When we first started hearing the news about it from China, I was sure it wouldn't be a

problem for us, because China is so far away, and it would take so much time to get here. Maybe by then there will be a cure.

“Then the whole world started to suffer from the coronavirus, and people started to envy us, saying that the Gaza Strip is one of the only places with no reported cases. They started to say that maybe this is an advantage of the Israeli blockade. I really hated this notion, because the whole world was thinking we were safe, while we’re actually not. Just because you’re in an enclosed place doesn’t mean you’re safe. Because if we have any cases inside the Strip, our enclosure will help the virus spread even more.

“We live in a very crowded area, especially in my camp, Jabalia. In each building or flat, there are a minimum of five to ten people living there. This helps the virus to spread. The world thinks we’re safe, but I really don’t. It means that if we get one case, we could all die.”

She says this with a laugh, which I imagine is a coping mechanism in these grim times.

“We don’t have the capacity or equipment to keep us safe from this virus,” Asmaa continues. “It will spread very easily, and we will start to see the numbers here that we’ve been seeing in Italy and Spain. And after the world thought of us as the luckiest people on Earth, they will think of us as the unluckiest. Because all these other countries at least have emergency plans, the technology and the medicine to fight it.

“So I was in fear, to be honest. But I kept going to work, and tried to convince myself that we are going to be safe. Most of us are religious people. We thought, ‘God is merciful. He won’t make us live under two things at once: the Israeli blockade and the coronavirus.’ One problem at a time!

“I actually wanted to stay home, to be honest, but it’s so hard. We’re not used to this. The Gaza Strip is the only area where we can go. We can’t go outside of it. So how can we cope with not moving around inside of it? We can’t just lock ourselves inside our rooms and get used to it. I know it’s hard for other people around the world right now, but it’s much harder for us.”

It’s hard for many of us to imagine life in Gaza – being confined to a territory 365 square kilometers in size. That’s smaller than Toronto or the Island of Montreal. Many have called Gaza

the world's largest open-air prison.

At some point in the interview, she mentions casually that today is her birthday.

"I just turned twenty-four today, and for twenty-four years, I have never been outside of Gaza. I have never seen the world beyond. So it's gonna be much harder for me to stay home rather than those in the West who are used to getting around and then have to stay in one place. It's different."

Asmaa said that she celebrated her birthday today with a friend who came over to her place, although her friend said they would soon be quarantined. Her sister did go out and get a birthday cake, and they managed to have a little celebration in the evening.

I asked her if any protective measures are being taken in Gaza. For example, are people being asked to not leave their homes?

"To be honest, before the first two cases were reported, most people in Gaza used to think about the coronavirus like me: this is far away from us, we're safe, and we don't need to go crazy with protective measures. But after these first cases were reported, we can see some people getting serious about it. We see some people wearing medical masks, using hand sanitizer, or not going to work. But there are still huge amounts of people who are still going out because they think the virus is a lie. I'm trying to understand their psychology. Maybe it's because they're used to being unsafe for so long. Maybe they're numb. They have no feelings of fear because they are just used to this."

Gaza has been under blockade for over a decade, and it's been such a struggle for people to meet their daily needs. I ask Asmaa how they've dealt with meeting their day to day needs over the years.

"We have this proverb in Arabic that says, loosely translated in English, 'dying with others makes death easy.' So when you live in these hard circumstances and everything is deteriorating around you, you have to think that you're living with two million other people [in Gaza] who are also experiencing this, so you have to cope like they do.

"I don't like thinking that people around the world are suffering. It sucks, and I don't want this for anyone. But to be honest, a part of me is happy that maybe after we're done with the coronavi-

rus, people will understand us more.

“What saddens me though is also that once this is over, each country will try to come to the aid of its citizens. Maybe through economic aid, and they will again have the ability to move around, buy things, and get on with their daily lives. But we in Gaza will still suffer because nothing will change. The blockade will stay in place, the high unemployment rate will remain, there will be less goods and the prices will be higher.”

The last question I ask is her advice to people in other parts of the world who are facing isolation and quarantine.

“People need to seize this opportunity to be better people. Quarantine is giving us more chances to sit with ourselves, to understand ourselves, and to try to figure out what we need to develop or change so that we can be better people. It’s a really good chance to get in touch with the people we have quarrels or problems with, and make up with them. It’s also a chance to develop better relationships with our families, because at the end of the day, it makes you realize how important your family is. So sit with your family, understand them, and develop your relationships with them.

“Finally, it is a good chance for you to study more, and learn more about the world. If you’re in quarantine right now and have access to the internet, you can seize the opportunity to learn and read more about other people who are suffering. But we must think of them as humans. Because once this is over the whole world is going to need to work together to solve these problems.

“For me, I’m going to read more. I’m going to learn a lot, and study! It’s a chance from God to do the things I have delayed,” she says with a good laugh.

“I also really love writing. For me, it releases stress. So I would advise everyone to write something. Some people might think that they don’t know how to write, but if you just try to write what’s on your mind, it can be a great way to release stress, make you feel better, and discover some new things about yourself.” •

The online version of this article is at ijvcanada.org/dispatch-3-from-palestine-on-covid-19-curfews-and-mutual-aid.

COVID-19 IN GAZA

Judith Deutsch



The spread of COVID-19 into Gaza is an anticipated disaster – and possibly a holocaust given the region’s living conditions – that is still preventable if immediate measures are taken. Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas of the world, and has been under Israeli siege for thirteen years. Israel has so far blocked all efforts to break the siege it has imposed on Gaza: most recently, through its harsh reaction to the Great March of Return, killing of activists on the Mavi Marmara who were bringing medical supplies to Gaza, and subverting legal challenges to its innumerable violations of international law.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has further just demanded sanctions “against the International Criminal Court, its officials,

prosecutors, everyone.” Allied governments have sought to suppress criticism of Israel by criminalizing boycott, divestment, and sanction (BDS), which has been the primary form international solidarity efforts have taken in recent years.

The pandemic crisis is a vivid illustration of the continued colonial project of the Israeli state over the Palestinian territories and lands. Israel retains extensive control over the Palestinian Authority’s tax revenues, and thus over government expenditures, including for healthcare. Israel maintains military and administrative control over the West Bank and Gaza. We join those around the world in condemning the ongoing illegal Israeli occupation and colonization of Palestinian land, including its brutal siege on Gaza. Further, we demand that all possible pressure be brought to bear on Israel to expediently allow all necessary medicine and humanitarian aid to reach the Palestinian people. In doing so, we emphasize that the current public health crisis is sharply intensifying the ongoing humanitarian disaster created by Israel’s imprisonment of the population of Gaza, carried out with the collaboration of Canada, the US, and their regional allies.

The COVID-19 Situation in Gaza

As of April 4, there were twelve Covid-19 cases in Gaza. The Hamas government in Gaza has ordered the closure of all restaurants and cafes, wedding halls, and the suspension of Friday prayers and weekly markets. Nevertheless, there is little space for physical distancing because of high population density. For instance, in Jabalia, the largest of Gaza’s eight refugee camps, 110,000 people live in an area that is just 1.4 square km. Food is still entering Gaza through Karm Abu Salem crossing.

At this time, a field hospital partly funded by the World Health Organization has been established at the Rafah Crossing. It has a thirty-eight-bed treatment facility, including six Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds. There are only seventy ICU beds in all of Gaza, and 2,500 hospital beds altogether. So far, only ninety-two tests for COVID-19 have been administered.

In order to treat patients with COVID-19, Gaza will need equipment that is prohibited by Israel from entering. There is an immediate need for some 150 ventilators. Dr. Mona El-Farra, the health chair of the Palestine Red Crescent Society in Gaza, under-



An ambulance in Gaza destroyed by Israeli bombardment. Boris Niehaus, 2014 .

lines the urgency: “We have, up to this minute, just around twenty kits for diagnosis [and] at the moment we have 2,500 people in quarantine.”

According to Munir al-Bursh, head of the pharmacy department at Gaza’s Ministry of Health, hospitals, pharmacies, and clinics are facing shortages of 149 medicines, equipped with only sixty-nine per cent of what is needed. Food insecurity affects seventy-two per cent of households and half the population relies on food distribution by the United Nations. Exports from Gaza are almost completely blocked, imports and transfers of cash are severely restricted, and the flow of all but the most basic humanitarian goods are suspended.

Furthermore, Israel’s destruction of Gaza’s water and sewage system makes it much harder to maintain the required standards of hygiene. Physicians for Human Rights/Israel has called for the immediate provision of basic antiseptics, intensive care beds, ventilators, and alternatives for patients who need critical surgery or treatment that is currently unavailable.

Qatar has begun distributing aid to hundreds of residents in the Gaza Strip who are in isolation centers. The Qatari envoy to the Gaza Strip, Muhammad al-Amadi, states that the aid is part of

the \$150-million aid that the Emir of Qatar recently announced, which will be distributed over six months. The assistance provided includes food, appliances, and power supply to the isolation centers.

The Siege and War on Gaza

The 1947 partition of Palestine, creating the Israeli state, and subsequent war included the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians from their villages. Between 160,000 and 190,000 of these refugees fled to the Gaza Strip. The second large wave of refugees into Gaza came with the 1967 Six Day War, when Israel established the occupation over the remaining Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza. At the same time, military order ninety-two gave the military all authority over water. Similarly, order 158 gave the military authority over the permit system for houses, roads and water infrastructure, allowing the military to confiscate water resources and destroy wells and rooftop cisterns. Israel also prohibits Gaza from developing and using the offshore natural gas deposits discovered in the 1990s.

While Israel unilaterally dismantled all twenty-one Gaza settlements in 2005, it maintained full control of all land, sea, and



Apartment buildings in Gaza bombed by the Israeli military. Luis Astudillo, 2014.

air access to Gaza. Contrary to Israel's claims, every UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories affirmed that Israel remains the occupying power under the Geneva Conventions. Since this so-called "disengagement," Israel has deliberately diminished Gaza's health system, including through prohibiting the importation of a long list of so-called "dual-use" items (claiming possible military applications). These include medical supplies like glycerin and hydrogen peroxide, which is used as a disinfectant. By 2006, there were no first-line pediatric antibiotics available, most diagnostic laboratory equipment was not functioning, and nineteen per cent of essential medicines were unavailable.

After Hamas was democratically voted into power in 2006, Israel imposed a harsh siege on Gaza in 2007, and launched four full-scale military attacks against Gaza: Operations Summer Rains (2006), Cast Lead (2008-09), Pillar of Sand (2012), and Protective Edge (2014). In these assaults, Israel used disproportionate force against a civilian population that had nowhere to flee, used unconventional weapons, and destroyed the power infrastructure which disabled water purification and sanitation. As human rights organizations have affirmed, the siege on Gaza and Israel's regular military attacks constitute collective punishment of a civilian population.

Using advanced military weaponry, Israel targeted the health sector, bombing hospitals and ambulances, the medical depot of al-Shifa Hospital, killed medics and doctors, prevented evacuation of the wounded, and used unconventional weapons such as white phosphorus and Dense Inert Metal Explosives. The 2014 attack on Gaza left 500,000 displaced people, the destruction or severe damage of more than 20,000 Palestinian homes, 148 schools, and forty-five primary healthcare centres. As many as 247 factories and 300 commercial centres were destroyed. In this last year, the Israeli military targeted clearly identified medical workers in the Great March of Return.

Under the siege, seventy per cent of infants aged nine months suffer from anemia. It is estimated that thirteen to fifteen per cent of Gaza's children are stunted in growth due to malnutrition. In late 2008, Amnesty International reported that Israel barred infants from leaving Gaza for life-saving cardiovascular surgery. About 290 Palestinian patients died within two years after the im-



Fishing boats on shores of Gaza. RNW.org, 2008

position of the siege, with thirty-five per cent of the deaths being children. To date, parents of children admitted to Israel for medical care are generally prohibited from accompanying their children.

In the Israeli wars on Gaza, children were targeted and killed as they played on the beach or on the rooftops of their homes. Moreover, Defense for Children International has long documented Israel's punitive judicial and military practices against Palestinian children. Israeli air force deploys sonic booms nightly over Gaza, which has caused night terrors and bedwetting. From 2000, it was reported that Israeli soldiers targeted the knees and eyes of children and adults, intentional injury that caused lifelong crippling.

Violations of International Laws and Norms

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has called Israel's strategy the 'incremental genocide' of the Palestinian people. Senior Israeli General Gadi Eisenkot describes the "Dahiya Doctrine," named after a Lebanese village it destroyed in its 2006 bombing of that country: "We will wield disproportionate power against every village from which shots are fired on Israel, and cause immense damage and destruction. From our perspective, these are military bases... This

isn't a suggestion. This is a plan that has already been authorized."

In 2012 it was revealed that in early 2008, Israeli authorities drew up a document calculating the minimum caloric intake necessary for Palestinians to avoid malnutrition, so that it could limit the amount of foodstuffs allowed into Gaza without causing outright starvation.

Despite extensive documentation of Israel's atrocities, powerful states across the world (including Canada), the major world powers constituting the UN Security Council, innumerable professional bodies, anti-nuclear weapons organizations, and even human rights NGO's exceptionalize Israel or remain silent about Israel's crimes.

Israel has bombed, with impunity, the entire life-sustaining infrastructure of Gaza. Unless the Israeli siege of Gaza is entirely dismantled, the many warnings that the COVID-19 pandemic could well be a holocaust could well become a reality.

For the last thirteen years the international community has been fully informed that Israel has undermined and robbed Gaza of the necessities of life. The Canadian and Global Left is now confronted with parallel global emergencies that require urgent global action against great economic and military power. In January 2009 Israeli journalist Gideon Levy wrote "someone has to stop this rampant madness. Right now."

For Palestinians living in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel, it's past time to restore all water and twenty-four-hour access to electrical power, and for Israel and the international community to provide all essential medicines, nutrition, and equipment necessary to deal with the pandemic and with other urgent health needs. It's time to open up the borders of Gaza and the West Bank so that patients are able to access the care they need. And crucially, it's past time to end the cruel military and prison regime, planned prior to World War II and subsequently implemented with the acquiescence of the international community. •

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Israeli watchtower. Ali Mustafa, 2011

DISPATCH FROM WEEAM HAMMOUDEH

Aaron Lakoff



Weeam Hammoudeh is a professor and researcher at the Institute of Community and Public Health of Birzeit University, just outside of Ramallah. She coordinates the mental health unit within the institute, and much of her work relates to well-being and quality of life issues within populations. Her research interests are focused on how broader structural and political factors affect health and well-being.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic began, Weeam was part of a research team looking at the concept of uncertainty in the Pales-

tinian context, and how uncertainty impacts people's lives and mental health. "We had just started doing the analysis, and then the whole COVID-19 situation broke out, so we might need to go back and do more data collection," she says with a bit of a nervous laugh.

Uncertainty is certainly a phenomenon being experienced by many around the world right now, from borders being closed, to schools being shut down, to thousands upon thousands of people losing their jobs. I ask Weeam what the atmosphere is like around her in Ramallah and the broader West Bank.

"I think there is a lot of uncertainty, and people are starting to get more worried. Yesterday, there was a woman who died of COVID-19. She was diagnosed the same day, and died later that evening. This heightened a lot of the worries and fears.

"In the beginning, people didn't fully understand the magnitude of the problem. But ever since the first cases were confirmed in Bethlehem on March 5th, you could sense people were starting to get more worried. But that was also when the Palestinian Authority (PA) began to take stricter measures to try to contain the spread. They wanted to contain the problem before it got out of hand, because we don't actually have the infrastructure to deal with a wide scale spread.

"The PA took strict preventative measures early on, which I think was responsible. It's also a recognition of how things could get if the virus were to be left alone, such as has been suggested by other global leaders." We can think of leaders like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, who balked at concerns around COVID-19 earlier on in the outbreak.

Bringing up the difficulties in Gaza with the blockade, I ask her what the situation is in the West Bank with hurdles due to the Israeli occupation.

"If you look at the development of the healthcare system broadly speaking, it has faced a lot of obstacles related to the political context. We don't have control over our borders, so Israel dictates what's allowed in and what isn't. There are certain services, and certain medical equipment, that are prohibited. Israel designates certain items as 'dual use.' So if there is anything that could potentially be used to breach security, then it isn't allowed. For example, if we're talking about oncology services within the West Bank or Gaza, Palestinians are only allowed to have equipment for chemotherapy. Anything related to radiotherapy or radiation isn't allowed, because the equipment is prohibited. Therefore patients need to be transported to East Jerusa-

lem, Jordan, Israeli hospitals, or Egypt. This is one example of constraints on the healthcare system, aside from the broader challenges to health. And because of these constraints and structural issues, we have a fragmented, aid-dependent health system unable to fully realize its potential.

“Some might say that with regards to health conditions, Palestine is in a better situation than other countries in the Middle East. But as the occupying power, under international law, Israel has the responsibility for the health and well-being of the occupied population. So the point of comparison shouldn’t be other countries in the region, but rather with the Israeli health system, which is actually allowed to thrive.

“You see differences in the Israeli and Palestinian populations in terms of life expectancy, child mortality and maternal mortality rates. There is a discrepancy in the quality of the services. Even among Israeli citizens, you often see many disparities between the Palestinian-Israeli population, and the Jewish-Israeli population. These disparities are entrenched within that system.”

As Weeam speaks to me with a hint of anxiety in her voice, I ask her how she’s been coping with the changes brought on by the coronavirus.

“They closed down the schools and universities in the West Bank as soon as the first cases were discovered in Bethlehem. For me, I had to shift all my classes online. It was difficult, but I think it was very important they did this. They also closed down places where there could be large gatherings of people, such as mosques. It’s hard to focus on work, just because there’s a lot of uncertainty and anxiety about how things can go moving forward.

“Everyone is worried. I’m constantly tracking the news on the ministry’s website. It’s taking a lot of headspace. But at the same time, you do see people trying to support each other, even if it’s remotely. My colleagues and family are very supportive, and we all check in with each other. We’re seeing initiatives such as people preparing food baskets for families in need.

“A situation like this lays bare a lot of the inequities that exist on a global scale. It’s highlighting who is more vulnerable. I think it’s important not simply to say who is more vulnerable, but also to recognize why these vulnerabilities exist. These vulnerabilities exist because of structural issues – the way that economies function, and the way that



The lockdown of the West Bank town of Beit Jala. AFP, 2020.

society is set up.

“Here in Palestine, it’s very much intertwined with the political context of ongoing occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid. It’s important to keep this in mind. But also, we can’t lose sight of the source of all of this. What happens in these situations is that you get caught up in the urgency of the situation, in either containing the problem, or providing quick solutions to the immediate problems. And I think this is important. It’s important to take all the measures that we can to save people’s lives, or to stop this disease from spreading.

“There are more immediate needs, such as providing testing, or building up our emergency infrastructure to deal with this situation. But in the end, it would be very unfortunate if we only focused on the emergency response without asking ourselves why these vulnerabilities and structural inequities continue to exist. That’s why we need to shift the focus of the conversation to justice and freedom. There are a lot of lessons that need to be learned on a global scale, and the solution needs to exist beyond national borders. Global solidarity needs to push agendas that have the well-being of populations as a key priority, rather than discrimination and profit.” •

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“BETWEEN THE ROCK OF THE OCCUPATION AND THE HAMMER OF CORONAVIRUS”

The coronavirus and the conditions of
Palestinian workers

G.N. Nithya

Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body
endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its
natural state.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963)

This past month Israeli soldiers dumped a Palestinian worker at a checkpoint on the border of the West Bank, shivering from fever and barely able to breathe. According to *Middle East Eye*, he “had been showing signs of the coronavirus over the past four days, and was recently tested for the virus. But before the man, allegedly a resident of Nablus, could receive his test results, his Israeli employer reportedly called the authorities, who picked him up and dropped him on the other side of the Beit Sira checkpoint, which connects central Israel and the occupied West Bank.” “It’s like we are slaves to them,” says a local Palestinian, “They use us when they need us, and when they are finished, they throw us away like trash.” Since the crisis began Israeli soldiers have actively obstructed the emergency response for Palestinians by shutting down multiple clinics and continuing their practice of arbitrary house demolitions.

Praise for “battle-ready” Israel’s militarized response to the coronavirus pandemic has turned a blind eye to the manner in which it has also weaponized the coronavirus pandemonium against Palestinians. While Gaza has been strangled by a



Palestinian workers crossing at a checkpoint near Bethlehem. Anne Paq, 2018.

thirteen-year blockade and repeated military invasions, which renders its two million inhabitants vulnerable to pandemics, in the West Bank Palestinians struggle with a brutal occupation that seeks to deny them the most basic and necessary means to survive and care for themselves. As of April 9, 2020, the West Bank is reported to have 250 cases of the coronavirus. However, these numbers are set to increase significantly in the coming period due to the return of many Palestinian workers from Israel following Passover and for Ramadan. While people in Italy and UK take to their balconies applauding the “essential sector” workers, Palestinians who work in Israel’s “essential industries” find themselves crushed “between the rock of the occupation and the hammer of coronavirus.”

Palestinian civil society organizations are calling for an immediate international intervention. Though the COVID crisis may be an “exceptional” moment in recent world history, the conditions to which Palestinians are subjected reminds us that the Nakba – the expulsion, dispossession, and dehumanization of Palestinians in 1948 – is not a fact of the past, but is ongoing. Palestinian workers bear the brunt of this violence. It is impera-

tive that the international left recognize the exceptional setting of the pandemic confronting Palestinians, and take political actions in support of immediate relief to the medical emergency and an end to the Israeli occupation.

The Occupation and the Pandemic

Many Palestinians are denied access to basic health services by Israeli land confiscations and checkpoints. Palestinian communities in Area C, which comprises approximately 60 per cent of the West Bank, are particularly in jeopardy. In the area of the Naqab (or Negev), for example, over 80,000 Palestinians have no access to emergency healthcare. Coronavirus cases are rapidly spreading in East Jerusalem, where Palestinians are subject to Israel's discriminatory "residency" criteria and severe underfunding of public services. Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem only have twenty-two ventilators for nearly 350,000 people. Many working class and poor Palestinians' access to health services in the West Bank has been on the decline because their public health infrastructure

The Huwwara checkpoint near the West Bank town of Nablus. Harry Pockets, 2006.



has been undermined by Israel's withholding of clearance revenues to the Palestinian Authority (PA), cuts in US funding under the Trump administration, as well as austerity measures imposed on the PA by the World Bank and IMF. In the West Bank, only 256 adult ventilators are available for a population of three million Palestinians, of which 90 per cent are already in use. Spread of the virus will have catastrophic consequences for Palestinians.

Yet efforts by Palestinians to develop communal systems of support are systematically sabotaged by the Israeli occupation. In March, Palestinians involved in disinfecting public spaces and distributing aid packages in the Old City of Jerusalem were arrested. In early April, the Israeli army arrested the Palestinian Authority's Jerusalem Affairs Minister Fadi Hidmi as he sought to assist Palestinians in Jerusalem with the COVID pandemic. On April 15, despite forty confirmed cases in the East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan, the Israeli army raided the coronavirus testing clinic in the local mosque and arrested its organizers. Palestinian residents of Silwan have been repeatedly the target of evictions and expulsions, as have Palestinians throughout Area C. In the Jordan Valley hamlet of Khirbet Ibziq, similarly, the Israeli army is sabotaging coronavirus relief attempts by confiscating equipment for the construction of a field clinic and emergency housing for its residents, some of whom have been subject to house demolitions. Even as the United Nations has called for ceasefire in all conflict zones and populations worldwide are told to stay indoors, Israel throws Palestinians out of their homes.

On a daily basis, Palestinians confront institutionalized segregation through Israel's control over their water, access to which is a basic necessity under this pandemic. Israel's appropriation and exploitation of water in Palestine's coastal and mountain aquifers and in the Jordan Valley has been one of its main weapons of war. After the 1967 occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, Israeli authorities issued military orders to consolidate their control over underground water basins and water-related infrastructure, a control which they safeguarded under the terms of the 1994 Oslo Accords. Tens of thousands of Palestinians are forced to purchase water (trucked or from the Israeli state-owned water company, Mekorot) at

exorbitant prices. According to the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 180 rural communities in the West Bank have no access to running water. In the “unrecognized” villages of the West Bank, over 56,000 people are in the same situation. According to Amnesty International, water expenses can amount to one-half of the family’s monthly income in some of the poorest communities. The outcome is a manifestly racialized discrimination; the average Israeli settler living in the West Bank consumes three to eight times the amount of water than Palestinians. This system of “water apartheid” makes it impossible for Palestinians, especially working class and poor, to maintain the most basic hygiene conditions that are necessary to survive this pandemic. Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel as an occupying power must at a minimum ensure the basic conditions of health and hygiene, including conditions of water and sanitation.

This moment of the COVID pandemic is being exploited by the Israeli authorities to further intensify military actions, electronic and other mechanisms of surveillance, and to create new “facts on the ground” in a process of annexation of Palestinian land that has been normalized by the Trump administration, recent Israeli Knesset decisions, and the “unity deal” being negotiated between Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz. In the last month, major Israeli settlement blocs such as Gush Etzion south of Jerusalem are being expanded, further cutting the territorial contiguity of the West Bank. Apartheid road infrastructure for settlers only are being extended in major settlements like Ma’ale Adumim. While the Palestinian Authority has imposed lockdowns in the West Bank, the Israeli army has intensified night raids, arrests, home demolitions, and house evictions in the West Bank and Jerusalem. In a two week period during the pandemic in March alone, according to *Mondoweiss*, “Israeli forces injured 200 Palestinians, detained 100, demolished sixteen structures.” Israeli violations in the West Bank have intensified meanwhile, with recent news reports that attacks by settlers have risen by seventy-eight per cent with Palestinians being brutally assaulted, kidnapped, their olive trees uprooted, and their property spat on by Israeli soldiers and attacked by settler-youths who are under coronavirus quarantine.



Women wait at the Qalandia checkpoint near Ramallah. United Church photo archive, 2009.

Palestinians Crossing the Green Line and the Apartheid of Virus Containment

Palestinians who work in Israel and the settlements are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. Having stripped Palestinians of their land, Israeli colonization has worked to transform them under military rule into dependent, subordinate, and exploitable wage-workers incorporated into the Israeli economy. A systematic policy of de-development suppressed Palestinian industrial development after 1967, and, accompanied by the expropriation of cultivable land and water in the Occupied Territories, forced many Palestinians to work as daily wage labourers in Israel and on the very settlements built on their confiscated lands. This policy remains in place today. Given the high levels of unemployment as a result of Israel's strangulation of their economy, Palestinians now working in Israel and the settlements are estimated to number over 133,000, while their wages support a population of over half a million.

Even before the pandemic, these thousands of workers were subject to multiple tools of racial discrimination by the Israeli

authorities. These include subjection to the checkpoints' permits system, which is a primary tool of blackmail to politically discipline Palestinians and force collaboration; inhumane conditions in the checkpoints as thousands cross in the early morning hours; humiliation and harassment by soldiers; and discrimination in law and exploitation in practice by Israeli employers. Palestinian workers have minimal to no legal protections, are paid far less than their Jewish Israeli co-workers, without the benefits of health insurance, and yet they are forced to pay social security contributions and union fees to the Israeli labour syndicate Histadrut without representation. They are exploited by Israeli and Palestinian intermediaries – mafias who force them to pay exorbitant fees (at over \$800 (US) monthly) to acquire black market permits to simply cross the Green Line but without any guarantee of actual employment.

The Israelis have been lauded for their “military style” effectiveness in response to COVID, tightening internal lockdowns. However, in order to keep key sectors of the Israeli economy running in the midst of the pandemic, which stood to lose \$1.8-billion a month from the cessation of construction alone, the Israeli government allowed continued entry of Palestinian workers into Israel. In doing so, Israeli authorities have used the pandemic to intensify surveillance and repression of these workers. Palestinians who require permits to stay in Israel are now “advised” to download a smartphone app called “Al Munasiq” (“The Coordinator”) which allows the Israeli military to track users’ location, and access their personal files as well as the phone’s camera.

The frontiers of Israeli apartheid not only segregate Palestinians from Jewish Israelis, but also the Palestinian bodies themselves. Israel has privileged able-bodied young Palestinian workers to the exclusion of older ones. On March 11, the Israeli authorities announced new regulations barring Palestinian workers over fifty years of age from crossing effective March 12; On March 17, they announced that effective March 18, those Palestinian workers under fifty were obliged to remain in Israel for a one- to two-month period if they wished to continue employment. It is estimated that between forty and fifty thousand Palestinian workers entered Israel in this scramble. However, on March 25, the Palestinian Prime Minister issued a call for



Israeli soldiers train their guns on Palestinian civilians in the West Bank. Ali Mustafa, 2011.

Palestinian workers to return to the West Bank following public outcries over their racist and inhumane treatment. Workers are being forced to live in squalid conditions at their places of work in Israel, which are reportedly “not appropriate for humans” while Israel has failed to test workers for coronavirus. Rather than being cared for, workers who develop symptoms or who have been suspected of being sick have been dumped back into the West Bank at checkpoints along the Green Line, “like trash,” often without coordination with Palestinian authorities.

A potential uncontrolled spread of coronavirus is feared in the West Bank due to the return of over 40,000 workers after the start of Passover and Ramadan. Moreover, the Israeli government has announced that workers who return to the West Bank during this holiday period will be denied entry back into Israel for employment. These workers are highly reliant on their wages in Israel as the only source of income and many still owe debts for the permits they purchased to cross the checkpoints. Meanwhile they risk direct exposure to the virus in Israel and are simultane-



Palestinians in Hebron protest at the Ibrahimi mosque on the twentieth anniversary of the 1994 massacre there. Mustafa Bader, 2014.

ously unable to access healthcare or testing. Upon their return to the West Bank, these workers are still unable to get tested and face backlash with the recent surge of cases.

International Labour Solidarity with Palestinians

This moment of crisis offers a historical opportunity to galvanize solidarity movements with Palestinians and other indigenous people and workers around the world. On April 7, a coalition of Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations issued a new call for international solidarity, demanding that Israel allow access to critical civilian health infrastructure, and release Palestinian political prisoners who have been illegally detained and risk exposure to the virus in Israeli prisons. They have also called for the siege of Gaza to be broken with another Freedom Flotilla, and the escalation of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign. Coalitions between civil society organizations have issued a Palestinian Civil Society Joint Statement on COVID. Regular systems of reporting have been established by Al-Haq, the long-time legal advocacy group, to monitor the violence to

which Palestinians are being subject in the current pandemic, as well as, on basic conditions of water, health, and medical equipment. Most recently on April 14, 2020, a coalition of human rights organizations issued an urgent appeal to the United Nations Special Procedures. They are calling on the UN to denounce Israel's systematic practices of racial discrimination and exploitation of Palestinian labour, who are forced to risk their health and life under this crisis. Beyond COVID, initiatives to bring Israel to trial on war crimes in the International Criminal Court have direct bearing on current realities.

One of the questions for the international left is how to urgently mobilize support for the campaigns and coalitions being advanced in/from Palestine. Nakba Day on May 15, 2020 will mark the 72nd year of the unconscionable injustices against which the Palestinian people continue to struggle. It is imperative for left forces to link the specific conditions of colonialism and apartheid facing Palestinians with neoliberal attacks on working classes the world over. The struggle of Palestinian workers cannot be interpreted only as a national struggle for self-determination. COVID-19 comes at a time of intensified capitalist crisis, in which the working class has been under systematic attack from decades of neoliberalism, commodification of most areas of social life, dispossession of land base, and indebtedness. Palestinian workers are fully incorporated in these processes of global finance capital, in the particular context of the ongoing Israeli settler-colonial rule. Thus, struggle of workers in Palestine with COVID-19 needs to be understood as a struggle also against capitalism. Calls for unified global action by labour have been made by the International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle, among others, demanding solidarity with Palestinians and all colonized people in this pandemic. We need to urgently act in solidarity, understood, in the words of Mozambican revolutionary Samora Machel, not as "an act of charity but an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains toward the same objectives." •

G.N. Nithya is a Ph.D. candidate at York University. The on-line version of this article is at socialistproject.ca/2020/04/between-rock-of-occupation-and-hammer-of-coronavirus.

DISPATCH FROM MOHAMMAD SAMARA

Aaron Lakoff



Mohammad Samara is a 37-year old nurse living in Nablus, in the West Bank. Mohammad shares a home with his wife and two young daughters (one is 3-years old, and the other is 4 months). He also describes himself as a social activist, an English teacher, and a tour-guide. He's been living in Nablus since 2003.

When I spoke with Mohammad, he was taking a couple days off to go visit his parents in the countryside outside of Nablus, a

big bustling West Bank city.

“It seems that things are getting more and more difficult, because we’re getting more cases,” Mohammad tells me over a choppy cell phone connection. “Today we just confirmed another 14 cases.” At the time of this writing (April 14), there are around 280 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

“Since the start of this, my life as a nurse has changed. We have to work more than normal. I work in a public surgical hospital in Nablus. We don’t have any scheduled operations – they’ve all been cancelled due to these emergency measures. We only get the worst cases that absolutely need treatment, because we need to be ready with all we have.

“And when I say ‘all that we have,’ I don’t mean that we’re really well-prepared. We’re doing all we can do. The Ministry of Health is doing all it can do. The Palestinian Authority is doing all it can do. But with the shortages in income, and the difficult economic situation of the P.A., the best thing to do is prevention and caution.”

I ask him to describe the situation in Nablus, whether or not shops have started to close, or if things are continuing as normal.

“The Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh announced the security measures in early March. Schools and universities all stopped, and places with public gatherings were shut down. The P.A. told people to avoid mosques and churches in the beginning, and then they were closed down completely. About a week later, the P.A. closed all the cafes and restaurants, as well as parks and playgrounds. Now kids don’t have anywhere indoors or outdoors where they can play together.

“This is really difficult. I have a 3-year old daughter, and she gets bored really easily. And it’s hard to explain all these restrictions to a little kid, but I think my daughter understands, and we try to keep her busy.”

As many countries around the world are now in nearly month-long lockdowns, we’re beginning to see more images of public places normally teeming with life becoming the domain of pigeons, scattered trash, or police with masks. Some of the most remarkable scenes of late have been the emptied out landscapes of Times Square in New York, St. Peter’s Square in the Vatican,

or the Great Mosque of Mecca. I ask Mohammad to describe the atmosphere in the streets of Nablus.

“Most people are freaked out. The most important things are food and groceries. We’re seeing grocery stores get emptied out pretty quickly. The streets are empty. There are no taxis. Public transportation is shut down, so people can’t get to work. The surrounding area around Nablus is also blockaded by P.A. police.

“But this makes me think of the period between 2003 to 2005 when I was studying to be a nurse. Nablus was surrounded by many Israeli checkpoints. For me, it was really difficult coming and going from Nablus to my town to study. The trip should have normally taken twenty minutes from my town to Nablus, but during that period it would take three hours. I would have to go around mountains, transfer from car to car, walk for long periods. The coronavirus lockdown measures aren’t traumatizing because I’ve already had this experience!

“I’m not sure how the younger generations are reacting to this, but because I lived through the Second Intifada with its travel restrictions, I can be a bit more relaxed.

“People in the city, though, are anxious. Most workers in Nablus are day labourers – they don’t have a fixed salary. Many people from the West Bank work in Israel, but now they are being sent back to the West Bank. The disease is spreading very quickly in Israel. So all of these people are out of work now, and don’t know what to do.”

A few weeks ago, shocking reports surfaced that Israeli authorities were simply dropping off sick Palestinian day labourers in Israel at checkpoints, and leaving them to fend for themselves.

A lot of people in different parts of the world are trying to cope with not being able to leave their houses. Police in some countries, such as Italy, are even arresting people for leaving their houses, and in Montreal, where I’m based, police have been issuing steep fines to homeless youth who have nowhere to go during the pandemic. It is becoming clear that police repression is aggravating social tensions linked to the virus in many countries. I ask Mohammad if he could reflect on what life was like under Israeli military curfews, and how people managed to make ends meet.

“I remember the curfew of 2003 in Nablus. It was really long.



Amman Street in Nablus. Ameen, 2020.

Even medical teams weren't able to move around the city. During the curfew, people opened their houses to be used as field hospitals. The medical teams were trying all they could do to get medical supplies and food delivered to families during that time."

Mutual Aid Initiatives in Nablus

"Now I see that since this quarantine started, there have been very interesting initiatives that have started up. Some grocery stores and restaurants have stepped up to help out people who've lost their jobs by coming up with pay-it-forward programs. So anyone can go to these shops, leave a donation, and then an unemployed person can come and buy things with that donation. At one particular shop, eleven different families benefited from this in one week.

"In many of our restaurants in Nablus, before they had to close down they made daily meals for families in need. And now we have volunteer brigades who are helping people out. In fact, just the other day, I was kind of stuck in the middle of nowhere, and a couple of these volunteers saw me, asked how I was doing, took my

temperature, and then offered to drive me home. These people are doing patrols, looking out for people who don't have anywhere to go or are far from home."

As Mohammad is explaining this, I'm really in awe at what's happening. I tell him that in Montreal, not many restaurants are stepping up to feed people in the community. I tell him that it sounds like there's a huge level of social solidarity in Palestine right now.

"This is what we learn growing up," Mohammad responds. "We're raised by our parents to take care of each other. Not just our families, but other people in our neighborhood as well. Because everyone here believes that when you do a good thing for someone else, a good thing will happen to you.

"In villages right now, young people are starting to organize themselves into committees for the quarantines. They help people if they need anything. For example, if someone runs out of rice or bread, they can call the committee, and volunteers will bring it to them. This is to encourage most people to stay at home."

In closing, I ask Mohammad if he has advice to offer to people who are having a hard time coping with coronavirus lockdowns.

"This virus will either kill you, or you will survive. And if you want to survive, you need to think about what you need to do to survive. It's not just going out and buying tons of groceries or toilet paper. In the Western world, people are much more individualistic. We really need to think about the people we care about, and care for them.

"Maybe this is a time to go back to our roots – forget about some technologies, restaurants, cafes, or travelling. Let's spend some time with ourselves or our own families, and try to protect them and protect ourselves from the virus. During any hard times, we gain strength from people we care about."

Just as I'm wrapping up my phone call with Mohammad, he brings up a poem that he's been thinking of lately, "We Teach Life, Sir" by Palestinian spoken word artist Rafeef Ziadah. "Anything I can't say myself, has been said in this poem." •

The online version of this article is at ijvcanada.org/dispatch-6-from-palestine-on-covid-19-curfews-mutual-aid.



Israeli soliders stop and search Palestinians in Hebron. Ali Mustafa, 2011.

RENEWING BDS IN CANADA AND THE US

The movement must stay focused on the state

Niko Block

Since 2005, when a coalition of Palestinian groups issued the call for an international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel, the North American public has become significantly more cognizant of the racist atrocities committed daily by the Israeli state – indeed these are hard to ignore. Since the siege of Gaza began in 2007, Israeli assaults have killed approximately 4,500 Palestinians there, nearly a quarter of them children. In the West Bank, meanwhile, Palestinians remain subject to a strangulating military occupation, arbitrary detentions, house demolitions, and land confiscations.

Whereas at the beginning of the second intifada in 2000, the question of Palestine was seen as complex and polarizing, polls now show that two thirds of Canadians believe that sanctions are warranted against Israel given its illegal oppression of Palestinians. Such a change in western public opinion could pose a significant threat to Israel, given that sanctions are the most ambitious component of BDS's strategic agenda.

Yet the BDS movement in Canada has failed to keep up with these gains in public awareness, and the Canadian state is in many ways doubling down on its support for Israel – a dynamic that echoes its reluctant participation in the embargo against apartheid South Africa. The straightforward reason for this distinction is the fact that the Canadian government maintains strong ties to Israel, which are rooted in some combination of its Washington-led foreign policy and the influence of the Israel lobby in both countries.

The challenge in this context is for the movement to stay focused on the objective of pushing the Canadian state toward sanctions, even though this is for now an uphill battle. Choosing in our day-to-day lives not to buy Naot sandals or Sabra hummus



Protesters in Ottawa. Reuters, 2014

is worthwhile, but it nonetheless exerts a paltry level of pressure on the Israeli government in comparison to a severing of regular diplomatic ties and a full economic embargo. As in the South African case, positive change is only likely to emerge if the maintenance of regular relations is made conditional on Israel's respect for human rights and international law.

This position is gaining considerable ground internationally. Last year the governments of Chile, Ireland, and several municipalities across Europe banned the entry of products manufactured in the occupied Palestinian territories. While Israeli soldiers fired indiscriminately into crowds of protesters in Gaza, South Africa recalled its ambassador to Tel Aviv and the UK Labour Party reaffirmed its call for the immediate suspension of arms sales to Israel.

In Canada the story has been extremely different. Governments at multiple levels have attempted to undermine the movement against Israeli apartheid by adopting new resolutions that duplicitously expand the definition of anti-Semitism to effectively include anti-Zionism. The most dangerous of these is Ontario's bill

168, which is in the process of passing through the legislature with unanimous support, and which adopts a definition of anti-Semitism from the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). This proscribes a variety of criticisms of Israel, including “claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.” (Pablo Rodríguez, the federal Minister of Canadian Heritage and Multiculturalism, has also expressed interest in the adoption of this definition as part of the government’s “anti-racism strategy.”) Yet without identifying the Jewish state as a racist one, it is frankly impossible to comprehend the pattern of displacement, killing and harassment Palestinians have suffered from the moment of Israel’s establishment in 1948. It is impossible to understand the state’s stringent efforts to discourage intermarriage between Jews and Arabs, and it is impossible to understand its explicit policy of *hafrada*, or separation, between Jews and Arabs.

Still, there are opportunities for the growing numbers of allied Canadians to change the current. Canada’s official stance on the conflict is more or less in accord with international law, and Ottawa does not technically recognize Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, or the settlements there. It is not hard to imagine that stronger mobilization within the NDP and Liberal party bases would influence their positions in the same way that has happened in many European parties.

The Struggle in the United States

The most important factor in Israel’s impunity is of course the diplomatic and economic assistance it receives from the United States – in particular its \$3.8 billion in military aid annually. It is vaguely conceivable that stronger BDS-style action at the international level may sway this policy somewhat, but by and large it is clear that any truly effective mobilization must occur within the US itself. There too, the movement for Palestinian solidarity has experienced debilitating setbacks, with the passage of laws in at least twenty-seven states that are designed to penalize BDS supporters, including businesses and non-profit organizations. Last summer Congress endorsed these draconian policies with a legislation whose very title implies the unbounded logic of US imperialism: the “Strengthening America’s Security in the Middle East Act of 2019.” Now, in the aftermath of Bernie Sanders’s defeat in the

Democratic primary elections, the path forward for the American left seems, in many respects, like an especially steep climb.

The BDS movement will need to regroup and strategize, and in the process may revisit the debate of the late-aughts on why exactly the US gives such massive and seemingly unconditional support to Israel. Is it rooted in the strength of the pro-Israel lobby, or in Washington's own foreign policy interests and imperialist strategy? The former position was elaborated by political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in their 2007 book *The Israel Lobby*, which argues that the alliance with Israel has been so costly for Washington, both financially and diplomatically, that it can only be explained by the extraordinary strength of the lobby. The latter position, supported by Noam Chomsky and others, is that Israel offers a valuable base of US imperial power in the region, and additionally possesses a sort of cultural affinity with the US based in their shared identities as settler-colonial societies. In this view, the US supports Israel because the two states share the same foreign policy objectives.

There is some evidence to recommend the “shared interests” perspective, but all of it comes with so many qualifications that it



Protest in central Ramallah. Ali Mustafa, 2011.



can hardly explain the remarkable persistence and extent of US support. At times when Washington ostensibly relied on Israel to stabilize regional crises, the crises themselves were in fact instigated by Israel, or Israeli intervention ultimately *destabilized* a situation, or the US was concerned about the threat of Soviet regional influence. From the Six-Day War of 1967 to the Jordanian civil war of 1970–71 to Israel’s invasions of southern Lebanon in 1978, 1982, and 2006 – none of these cases clearly demonstrate how Washington’s unconditional support for Israel still serves its interests to this day. There is, conversely, a history of Israeli betrayals of the US, from its unsanctioned weapons sales to its many attempts to spy on top government officials – the most recent of which was uncovered only last year after surveillance devices evidently designed to spy on Donald Trump were discovered near the White House. In short, what David Mizner calls the “rationality of US support for Israel” comes with several asterisks attached.

The more important point is that those who take the shared interests approach spend considerable effort downplaying the effect of the lobby, and in doing so tread on extremely shaky ground. Making the case for its ultimate insignificance demands not only

providing evidence of shared interests, but also evidence that lobbying *in general* does not appreciably impact policy in Washington – an argument that fails to materialize because all evidence suggests the contrary. At a basic level, it seems uncoincidental that the largest recipient of foreign military aid is aligned with the largest foreign-interest lobby – a lobby that now spends approximately three times more than gun rights groups.

It is true that it can nonetheless be difficult to empirically assess the influence of foreign policy pressure groups, but we can gain a more quantifiable sense of the effect of lobbying if we look instead at business lobbies. One study on this, conducted in 2011, found that hiring a well-connected lobbyist is an enormously profitable investment, “comparable to the returns of the most blistering hedge fund.” Firms who lobby aggressively were even found to outperform and S&P 500 by 11 per cent per year. The lobby theory, in other words, deserves to be taken seriously not because of how Zionism works, necessarily, but because of how Washington works in reality.

The upshot therefore is not that the American left needs to start a pro-Palestine lobby, but that it needs to fight the manifestly corrupt structure of government that has given vastly outsized political influence to the wealthy. It is hard to imagine how meaningful and positive change can possibly occur, on the Palestine file and many others, so long as that structure remains in place. Even those who take the shared interests perspective would generally agree, I think, that American plutocracy must first be dismantled in order for our movement to democratically achieve a drawdown of military aid or, more ambitiously, the adoption of US sanctions on Israel. The socialist left must now either recalibrate its strategy of insurgency within the Democrats or undertake the difficult task of forming an independent third party that evades the network of Washington lobbies. In either case, the question of how to strategically undertake that fight deserves priority because it shapes the ground on which the game is played.

Staying Focused on the State

Both the means and the ends of the BDS movement have been criticized extensively, not merely by Israel’s defenders but also by some of its critics. It is true that the movement’s tactics can generate moral ambiguities, and that its objectives are ambitious.



East Jerusalem. Ronan Shenhav, 2016.

But these truths are simply reflections of the very real imbalance of power at work in the conflict and do not in their own right delegitimize the campaign.

It is demonstrative of this power imbalance that BDS's long-term objective merely for the implementation of international law has been chastised as unrealistic. The movement's original statement – which has at this point been endorsed by 173 Palestinian parties, unions, and other organizations – calls for the tactics of boycott, divestment and sanctions to be maintained “until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by: 1) Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; 2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and 3) Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.” (UN resolution 194 was passed in December 1948 and stipulated that the Palestinians displaced in that year's war “should be permitted to [return] at the earliest practicable date.”)

Although the BDS call does not explicitly endorse the one-state solution, these second and third demands are certainly consistent with the demand for a single binational state – an objective that in my view deserves the support of the solidarity movement. Given the scope of ongoing atrocities, it may seem churlish to claim that the two-state solution is not enough, but the case for it is increasingly being made on strategic, not merely on moral, grounds. It is not as though a credible two state solution has ever been offered and then rejected; on the contrary, with the ongoing expansion of settlements in the West Bank it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine with each passing year. (Moreover, polls show that Americans’ support for the one-state solution has grown significantly in recent years, to the point that it is now on par with two-state support.) Either solution would be hard-won. But there are strong reasons to doubt that a two-state solution will be a true solution, because the persistence of Jewish ethnocracy would also validate Israel’s designation of Arabs as its permanent enemy. In other words, there is no easy way to end racism, but it must be done in order for the conflict to end one way or the other; it is merely more likely to occur under a legal framework that inscribes equality rather than ethnocracy.

Both Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein, another long-time critic of Israel, have offered only qualified endorsements of BDS primarily because they see the third goal as setting the bar so high that the movement will inevitably fail. Chomsky has downplayed the relevance of resolution 194, making the peculiar case that it is merely a “recommendation” in spite of its very clear phrasing as a resolution, and claiming that there is “no meaningful support for [the right of return] beyond the BDS movement itself.” Based on what he sees as the prevailing international norms, the only path “that has even a remote chance of success” leads toward a two-state solution. Insistence on the right of return is therefore “a virtual guarantee of failure.”

Similarly, Finkelstein has argued that the movement insufficiently heeds the fact of Israel’s legitimate sovereignty within its pre-1967 borders. Strategically, he claims, the movement can only expect a resolution grounded in international law, which stipulates that Israel’s military domination of the West Bank and Gaza must end, but that Israel itself, within its pre-1967 borders,

should remain intact. “If you want to use the law as a weapon or as leverage, in order to reach public opinion, you can’t be selective with the law,” he has said in interview. “If you have the right to walk at the green it’s because you have an obligation to stop at the red. The law is a package deal, so if you want to use the law, the law also says Israel is a state.”

This approach may be the correct one for a precedent-bound jurist, but it is hard to see why the movement for justice in Palestine should adopt it. Indeed its shortcomings become increasingly clear the further we move away from its own narrow juridical parameters and toward the broader perspective of political struggle. First, it is true that international legal bodies have called for a two-state solution on several occasions, yet the ultimate legitimacy of Israel in its pre-1967 borders is not so firmly set in stone as we might suppose given that Israel vastly exceeded its original UN mandate in 1948. Second, remaining limited to juridical arguments, Finkelstein ignores the fact that any form of ethnocracy contradicts what is arguably the most constitutional document within international law: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its associated laws. Third, and most significantly, Finkelstein’s suggestion that the “law is a package deal” contradicts the





Yasser Arafat impersonator in Ramallah. Ali Mustafa, 2011.

very basis of democratic change. If we finally depart from the juridical perspective, then of course we can be selective about which laws we support; the history of the modern left has largely been one of fighting for good laws and against bad ones.

Critiques of the movement's tactics are in my view even less persuasive. Chomsky has admonished that BDS "opens the door to the standard 'glass house' reaction: for example, if we boycott Tel Aviv University because Israel violates human rights at home, then why not boycott Harvard because of far greater violations by the United States?" Naturally, this very argument has been expressed by the outright opponents of BDS, who have taken umbrage in particular with the call for a cultural and academic boycott of Israel. "Even Israeli academics critical of Israel's policies toward Palestinians would presumably be subject to the boycott," complains Rutgers professor Emanuel Goldman.

In fact every version of this argument ignores, either deliberately or disingenuously, the careful distinctions made by the BDS position, which "rejects on principle boycotts of individuals based on their identity." Hence, they stress, "*Mere affiliation of Israeli*

scholars to an Israeli academic institution is therefore not grounds for applying the boycott.” Rather, an individual is subject to boycott if they are “*representing the state of Israel*” by deliberately denying or downplaying its crimes. At this level, they write, Israeli academics “should be treated like all other offenders in the same category, not better or worse.” Although I have myself been concerned at times that the boycott might result in poor decisions and alienating rhetoric, the fifteen-year track record shows that the movement has by and large avoided these pitfalls. We should therefore be more concerned with correcting false accusations like Goldman’s than with admonitions that such accusations can be made.

Still, the BDS guidelines are written primarily for small organizations, and although they express admirable nuance it is worth observing that the question of where to draw the line can be a thorny one. At worst, the interrogation of anyone’s personal politics on Palestine can lead to petty, emotionally difficult, and sometimes fruitless conflicts among allies. This is another key reason for the movement as a whole to remain primarily focused on our governments’ own policies toward Israel. Boycotts, as well as divestment, are integral, but experience has shown that they cannot apply nearly enough pressure to change the Palestinian reality. Sanctions can.

Despite recent setbacks in Canada and the US, very real opportunities for a democratic sea-change now exist in both countries. A total of sixty-six per cent of Canadians believe that sanctions against Israel are a reasonable course of action, and – perhaps more significantly – that includes seventy-five per cent of Liberals and eighty-four per cent of NDP supporters. Polls show Americans are also increasingly critical of Israel, and while supporters of sanctions are for now a minority, at forty per cent, they are a majority among Democrats, at fifty-six per cent. The reality of Israel’s racist atrocities has been plain to see for quite some time now, and no argument, however clever, however cynical, can possibly justify them. As ever, the time for justice is now. •

Niko Block is a Ph.D. candidate at York University. The online version of this article is at socialistproject.ca/2020/05/renewing-bds-in-canada-and-usa.



Olive grove near Nablus. Michael Loadenthal, 2006.

THE VIRAL EMERGENCY IN PALESTINE

How Israel is using the COVID crisis to enhance its repression of Palestinians

Eyal Weizman and S.C. Molavi



West Bank settlements. Ali Mustafa, 2011.

Over a dozen states, including Hungary, Ethiopia, Japan, Canada, and Botswana, have recently declared a “state of emergency” giving governments sweeping powers to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Israel did not have to do so, having incorporated emergency regulations into domestic law upon its establishment in 1948. Israel’s radical response to the global pandemic were thus built upon the powers and infrastructure designed for settler-colonial expansion and military occupation.

These measures covered a full lockdown with an intercity

travel ban enacted this Passover, including closure of the entire ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei-Brak near Tel Aviv that was experiencing one of the highest rates of infections; covert operations by the Mossad spy agency to obtain medical equipment; and attempts to deploy “digital techniques used in the fight against terror” – designed to dominate and regularly violate the privacy of millions of Palestinians – to the task of monitoring carriers of the virus.

As a sovereign power, Israel has a “legal duty” and ultimate overall responsibility for the healthcare of around seven million Palestinians, whether they are citizens or subjects living under occupation in Gaza, Jerusalem or the West Bank. It has one of the most advanced health care systems in the world, but its drastic measures are prioritizing the security of Israeli-Jewish citizens. A petition by the legal rights group Adalah to the Israeli High Court showed that real-time coronavirus updates were not made available in Arabic for its Palestinian citizens. Not coincidentally, several Palestinian localities such as Umm el-Fahm, the coastal town of Jisr Al-Zarqa and Daburiyya near Nazareth – now under virtual siege – in the north were among the most infected with testing for the virus among Arab citizens at only around ten per cent of the total testing done by the state, despite forming one-fifth of the total population.

Health Emergency

Having spent the past seven decades dividing Palestinian communities into segregated enclaves, and devising legal structures of racialized domination, it already has the architecture in place for a mass “lockdown.” But under the guise of emergency, Israel has also used the global shift in attention to continue creating new facts on the ground.

During the height of the “health emergency” the government undertook house demolitions in the Palestinian city of Kafr Qasem. On March 12, the Israeli army escorted a visit by settlers to the Sebastia archeological site in Nablus – a mythical site for the settler movement which they are still seeking to illegally annex – in defiance of the Palestinian Authority’s efforts to prevent large gatherings. On March 26, army bulldozers arrived to the town of Khirbet Ibziq in the Jordan Valley to destroy and confiscate materials to be used for a field clinic meant for its Palestinian residents.

A few days later, on March 30, and wearing hazmat suits, the army used the lockdown to raid Palestinian homes in Ramallah. The United Nations reported that settler harassment against Palestinians has amplified during the pandemic.

As we write these words, negotiations toward a new coalition government are underway, composed of the rightist, messianic, and pro-settlement bloc of Likud led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Kachol Lavan (Blue and White) headed by Benny Gantz. Seeking to present an emergency coalition purportedly to “fight the virus,” its only major planned policy is the largest land-grab in a generation – unilaterally annexing up to thirty per cent of the West Bank, including all illegal settlements and the Jordan Valley, and citing the Trump Peace Plan as support. While the state has yet to announce its plans for the millions of Palestinians whose lands will further be lost as part of this illegal annexation, its record of forced population transfer of Bedouin Palestinians there and in the Naqab may serve as a blueprint.





Flags of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine fly in the West Bank Town of Ni'lin. Yoram Sorek, 2019.

Furthermore, the Israeli security apparatus has also worked to limit Palestinian attempts to take measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 in their neglected and policed communities. In the early hours of Friday April 3, Israeli police violently arrested Fadi al-Hadami, the Minister of Jerusalem Affairs for the Palestinian Authority, in his family residence in the Suwana neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem. His supposed “crime” was setting up disinfection stations and acting to instruct people to remain home. Two days later, on April 5, the Palestinian Governor of Jerusalem, Adnan Ghaith was arrested in the early hours by Israeli police officers decked in protective surgical masks and plastic gloves from his home Silwan, also in East Jerusalem, for similar “crimes.” Though they were combatting a health crisis affecting the whole country, their official charge was “Palestinian activity in Jerusalem,” considered “illegal” by Israel as it seeks to keep Jerusalem under its exclusive control.

In Gaza, where three decades of isolation and multiple major

Israeli military incursions systematically eroded essential health infrastructure, the Israeli Ministry of Defence decided earlier this month to restart spraying toxic herbicides using crop-dusters along the border. At Forensic Architecture, we have already documented the ways in which this destructive practice weaponizes the wind to carry herbicides hundreds of meters deep into Gazan lands, devastating the livelihood of farmers and potentially causing major health risks to nearby communities.

As the Israeli siege in Gaza has led to the socio-economic suffocation of its almost two-million residents, recommended practices of self-isolation, social-distancing, and access to clean drinking water, are near-impossible.

While so many around the world are starting to imagine “end-of-times” scenarios gearing up to a radical transformation of liveable conditions – in particular for working-class, racialized and indigenous communities – the situation already on the ground in various parts of Palestine shows us what such scenarios may look like. Indeed, the United Nations had already warned that Gaza will be “unlivable” this year.

The pandemic sharpens the demands of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle, making it increasingly relevant to other societies worldwide. That it exposes, more than ever, the interdependencies of all people, our collective health and well-being, means that, rather than being grounded in domination and surveillance, effective responses to this pandemic must involve dismantling racialized systems of inequality. •

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Rubber bullet fired at Palestinian teens. Ali Mustafa, 2011.

A PORTENT FOR COVID-19

Sarah Algherbawi



Paramedics in Gaza. Syeda Amina Trust, 2014.

With coronavirus stalking the earth, we in Gaza have braced for maximum impact. Overcrowded, impoverished and under an Israeli blockade that has left our health services decimated, a full-blown outbreak here would be a disaster.

This is not hyperbole. In fact, we already know what a deadly concoction we face in Gaza, because it nearly happened just a few months ago.

Disaster struck the al-Louh family in Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip on 7 December, when 30 relatives contracted measles. All of them were transferred to al-Aqsa hospital.

The extended al-Louh family lives in one building – eight

units over three floors – housing some 50 individuals, not uncommon in Gaza’s crowded and limited environs. The first infected person recorded with the disease was a child aged 4. But the virus spread like wildfire among relatives: in all 17 children, eight men and five women were infected.

Over the course of a month, members of the al-Louh family – from infants to adults – fought the virus. They were mostly successful. Karam, 31, married with a child, lost his battle. According to his doctor, Reem Abu Arban, Karam suffered an underlying health condition that compromised his immunity.

It was a family tragedy compounded by its spread through everyone, old and young. Members of the family did not want to speak to the media, but one relative, the mother of one of the infected children, did agree to speak to The Electronic Intifada on condition of anonymity.

“Within three days, most of the family was infected. We didn’t know it was measles, we thought it was a normal flu.”

The woman said she was deeply distraught when her only child, nine at the time, caught the virus.

“At the beginning, doctors told us that his condition was very dangerous. But after five days of medication he started to improve. Thank God, he’s healthy now and has returned to normal.”

Sudden Outbreak

Measles is a highly infectious virus that leads to serious and sometimes fatal complications. The infection is usually transmitted through direct contact or through the air and settles in the airways before spreading to the body.

Measles remains one of the leading causes of death among young children globally, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

The al-Louh infections were among 965 suspected cases of measles and 549 confirmed cases in Gaza between June 2019 and 10 February, according to the WHO.

In addition to Karam, the outbreak caused one other death. Gaza began a program of indicator-based public health surveillance in 1986. Since then, only in 2000 had there been one confirmed case of measles.

Health ministry officials said they suspected the measles had



Mural in Nablus. Mohammad Hijjawi, 2017.

been imported. According to the WHO, vaccinations for measles in Gaza is a largely successful project with a 97 per cent coverage rate between 2009 and 2018.

Majdi Dhuhair, director for preventive medicine at the health ministry, said he suspected the last outbreak came from abroad.

“Some neighboring countries have cases of measles as a result of individuals not committing to the international vaccination program. We believe that it reached Gaza with travelers.”

Nevertheless, not everyone in Gaza gets vaccinated. That seemed to be the case with the al-Louh family, Dhuhair said.

Spread

The Ministry of Health launched another vaccination campaign during the first week of 2020 for all children between six months and one year.

In addition, the ministry vaccinated some 3,000 health workers across Gaza after two doctors and 25 nurses were infected with measles as a result of direct contact with patients.

Among the infected health workers was a three-months pregnant doctor. The doctor – who has remained anonymous – had to isolate until she recovered. Vaccinations cannot be admin-

istered to pregnant people.

Two former colleagues also surprised me by answering a social media plea for contacts for anyone infected.

Aysar Nasrallah, 31, and his brother Ahmad, 29, both contracted measles. It started with Ahmad, who went to hospital complaining of severe pain in his bones. There, a blood test revealed he had measles.

“We don’t know how Ahmad was infected,” said Aysar. “He stayed in bed for 16 days and red spots spread all over his body.”

After Ahmad recovered, the same symptoms emerged in his brother. “I didn’t know how measles transmitted from one person to another, and it didn’t occur to me that I would be infected as I play sports and eat a healthy diet.”

On the Brink

While the 2019 Gaza measles outbreak was probably imported, and fairly quickly brought under control, Gaza’s health sector offers little cause for confidence as Covid-19 silently stalks the earth.

Devastated after 13 years of blockade and sanctions imposed

Ali Mustafa, 2011.



by Israel, the lack of drugs, protective equipment and isolation and emergency beds is a chronic reality in Gaza.

Human rights activists and health experts have long feared a humanitarian disaster should a pandemic take hold in Gaza.

Few professionals were surprised by the measles outbreak. All fear the corona pandemic. Munir al-Bursh, head of the pharmacy department at Gaza's Ministry of Health, said the overall collapse of Gaza's health sector only makes the spread of additional diseases "more likely."

Half of all vital medicines are simply not available in Gaza, according to the Ministry of Health here, and half are at less than a month's stock, according to the UN.

Officials blame Israel because the occupying power has a legal responsibility for the well-being of Palestinians in Gaza. But they do not hold blameless Egypt and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, said Ashraf al-Qedra, health ministry spokesperson.

Both Israel and Egypt impede Palestinians from Gaza from seeking medical treatment abroad, al-Qedra said. The never-resolved rivalry between Hamas and Fatah, the faction that dominates the West Bank PA, has caused financial assistance from the West Bank dwindle. Al-Bursh said the PA spent less than 10 per cent of a \$40 million health budget on Gaza in 2019.

But even if official hands are tied by a chronic lack of resources and no political progress, whether with the PA or with Israel, some in Gaza did learn lessons from the 2019 measles outbreak.

In Deir al-Balah, the al-Louh family member who spoke to The Electronic Intifada is happy her son recovered from measles. But she fears even more the contagious coronavirus. She is exercising absolute caution.

"I was very close to losing my child that time," she told The Electronic Intifada. "Now, with coronavirus, I am obsessed with trying to protect him, especially because Gaza's health sector is so poor." •

Sarah Algherbawi is a freelance writer and translator from Gaza. This article was originally published by Electronic Intifada at electronicintifada.net/content/portent-covid-19/30076.

Gaza street. Marius Arnesen, 2009.



REMAKING THE POLITICS OF PALESTINE SOLIDARITY IN CANADA

Hammam Farah

A little over a year ago, Arab YouTube celebrity Nas Daily held a talk at McGill University in Montreal, hosted by the McGill Arab Student Network. The event page on Facebook quickly drew controversy, as Palestinian students from various Canadian campuses descended into a protracted back-and-forth with the event organizers. Commentators highlighted Nas's role in whitewashing Israel's crimes against the Palestinians. For a Palestinian social media celebrity, who enjoys exposure to 10 million followers, Nas presents a dangerously narrow view of the conflict that minimizes Israel's responsibility. It was thus of little surprise that Palestinian human rights clubs at McGill and Concordia University (also in Montreal) scrambled to release statements of condemnation. Still, in the end, the event was held to a packed audience.

This episode was emblematic of the growing trend in the Canadian-Arab community to engage in cultural and professional event programming to the exclusion of politics and education. Just as Nas tries to avoid the unavoidable by turning the deeply unequal political relationship between Israel and the Palestinians into a cultural misunderstanding between Jews and Arabs, Arab associations in Canada, both existing and newly emerging, across the neoliberal landscape find themselves in the awkward position of having to make being resolutely non-political a point of pride. Inevitably, this means avoiding those engaged in political organizing out of fear of the shame that follows such interactions.

The Erasure of Politics

This curbing of politics has enormous consequence for the Palestinian diaspora in Canada. We are witnessing an attempt to re-

define our Palestinian identity – from one based on our collective project of political emancipation and resistance that began with the pre-1948 revolt against the British Mandate, and developed throughout the post-Nakba Palestinian revolution, to an identity that sees our national symbols like the kuffiyeh or the olive tree denuded of their historical and political meaning. Our culture of exile and resistance in daily life is being “made safe” for the social integration of our elites’ ongoing integration into Canada’s ruling classes, while the exploitation and oppression suffered by the majority among us – here in Canada and in Palestine – deepens.

An online search of local Arab community events in Canada turns up an endless array of galas, seasonal mixers, networking events, professional-development conferences, more networking events, youth connects and entrepreneurial- and personal-branding workshops. These copycat events are hosted not by only one, but numerous competing Arab associations and “professional associations.” Any “political” programming involves having Arab youth meet representatives from each of the three major Cana-

Gaza Freedom March in Toronto. Asmaa Dee, 2009.





Demonstrators in Montreal. Flickr / “scottmontreal”, 2008.

dian political parties, as if being presented with career options or consumer goods rather than opportunities for meaningful political engagement.

Similarly, on university campuses there have been several attempts in recent years, both successful and unsuccessful, to form Palestinian student associations that prioritize narrow identity-related concerns and entertainment through food and dance. In one such case, a Palestinian student association replaced a Students Against Israeli Apartheid chapter, and initially kept overtly political events at arm’s length in its programming.

This was simply not the case a decade ago. Arab students displayed an acute awareness about the role of American and Israeli foreign policy, of capitalism and imperialism, in shaping their lives. They prided themselves on their understanding that injustice in the Middle East is tied to injustice everywhere. These prior generations of Arab students had a sense – grounded in an internationalist framework – of the need to organize against injustice

by building solidarity.

To be clear, we know that promoting cultural expression is imperative in the struggle to defend ourselves against attempts to wipe us from the historical record. But, during my time as a student at York University and activist in the anti-war movement, Palestinian identity was defined by cultural symbols imbued with meaning derived from a socialist political framework focused on building solidarity in the struggle against war, imperialism, and capitalism – the championing of a better world for all. The same cannot be said for the experiences and worldviews of many Palestinian students today.

The phenomenon of political erasure is by no means limited to the Arab community. It corresponds to the integration of the professional middle and upper classes of immigrant communities into the ruling (small “l”) liberal elite that is central to Canadian identity and the liberal democratic state.

While Canadian multiculturalism has largely succeeded in integrating a narrow layer of the ruling political and economic classes in immigrant communities to act as power brokers (often of even an old clientelist kind), inequality within these communities, and within Canadian society more generally, has continued to grow apace. And as inequality grows, the interests of these elites moves further away from the interests of the working-class members of these communities. The result is that there is now a pronounced convergence between the interests of elites in immigrant communities and the interests of those of long-standing in the Canadian ruling classes. At the same time, there is a pronounced divergence between these interests and the interests of the majority of people in their own communities.

Omar Alghabra, a well-known Arab politician in the Liberal Party, for example, has more in common with the narrowing segment of upwardly mobile middle class and wealthy Canadians in the Greater Toronto Area than he does with poor and working-class Arabs here. It doesn't matter that Alghabra comes from a humble background. The point is that now that his interests are now also aligned with the political elite in the Liberal Party, and he can no longer afford to stand up in the same ways for those in his community who are struggling to make ends meet. Community elites will tend to refuse to support causes or policies that

may pose a threat to their own interests or those of their friends and colleagues – whether supporting the unionization of workers that they employ, or supporting Palestinian human rights through political actions that disrupt economic transactions. The focus on cultural expression without political expression fits the needs of upwardly mobile elites, but not the poor and working class people that are the backbone of the Palestinian diaspora community.

The withdrawal of many Palestinians in Canada from political activism, and the retreat into the world of professional politics, managerialism, NGOs, and cultural expression, inevitably has the effect of weakening the bonds of solidarity that have proven crucial to rendering the oppression of Palestinians as increasingly visible to mainstream audiences. If our community elites succeed in peddling representation and entrepreneurship as realistic substitutes for political organizing, it risks hitting the solidarity movement's greatest strength – its existence as a forum where Palestinians and non-Palestinians work together toward a struggle fundamental to our common liberation.

Demonstrators in Montreal. Flickr / “KMo Foto”, 2014.



BDS and Solidarity with Palestine

The failure of community elites to not only advance the national struggle, but also to improve the conditions of Palestinians in Canada means that the task moving forward must be to organize a political alternative based on the interests of the majority. That can only be done once the organization of workers *here* is acknowledged as a condition for meaningful solidarity work. Activists in the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement should be commended on their success in contributing to the sea change in the discourse surrounding Palestinians over the last decade. Great strides have been made in the realm of public opinion in Canada, particularly in the union and social movements, and amongst many First Nations communities. But the reality is that activity confined to the student movement, and conducted by professionals in the NGO sector, is vulnerable to institutional pressure and careerism.

These limits partly explain why the BDS movement has yet to convert its discursive victories into substantive ones, and currently lacks the muscle to compel a real, material change in state policy towards Israel.

Initiating the next phase of the Palestine solidarity movement will require going beyond BDS resolutions – which have been passed by many major organizations, including unions, to great fanfare, only to be left languishing, packed and hidden away, for lack of power to enforce them. Only by working closely with organizers and rank-and-file activists in the labour movement in Canada, as our predecessors in the movement against apartheid in South Africa did, will we be able to build enough power to promote meaningful international solidarity. Such power is necessary to make political elites, both in the Palestinian community and Canadian society at large, act in our interests and halt the drift towards anti-solidaristic attitudes and de-politicized cultural expression. •

Hamam Farah is a board member of the Palestinian Canadian Community Centre and longtime BDS activist in Toronto. The online version of this article is at socialistproject.ca/2020/05/remaking-politics-of-palestine-solidarity-in-canada.

JOINT STATEMENT ON ISRAEL'S OBLIGATION VIS-A- VIS WEST BANK AND GAZA

In the face of potential COVID-19 outbreak in the Gaza Strip, Israel is obliged to take measures to save lives, permitting the entry of medical equipment and supplies, to meet patients' needs.

With over 250 identified COVID-19 Palestinian patients in the West Bank and potentially dozens in the Gaza Strip we, the undersigned organizations, express grave concern in the face of a potential human catastrophe. The Palestinian healthcare system, with a dire lack of equipment, medicines, and expertise, will be unable to deal with this outbreak. We therefore urge the Israeli authorities to live up to their legal and moral obligations and assist the Palestinian health systems – in Gaza and the West Bank – both with combating the pandemic and caring for those patients who are in critical need of continuous health care that is unavailable in the Gaza Strip.

At such a critical moment, we call on Israel to lift the 13-year closure on Gaza so that *inter alia* Gaza can equip itself with the necessary medical supplies – both to combat COVID-19 and to care for patients who would usually seek to leave the Strip as their treatment is unavailable locally, notably cancer patients. Where medication and equipment are unavailable because of budgetary shortages of the Palestinian health system, Israel should help ensure the supply of the missing materials, to the greatest extent possible. Moreover, Israel should remove barriers to movement of goods and any other impediments on trade and economic activity that harm public health, as well as help to actively maintain a steady supply of electricity and fuel so that hospitals and the general population can maintain reasonable levels of hygiene.

Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention specifically provides that an occupier has the duty of ensuring and maintaining the “adoption and application of the prophylactic and preventive measures necessary to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics”. We already know that that there is an alarming lack of equipment, including personal protective equipment, consistent with local shortages and compounded by the long-term restrictions imposed by the

blockade, as well as insufficient numbers of trained healthcare workers in both Gaza and the West Bank. In addition to its own citizens and residents, Israel must also fulfill its duty to all protected persons living under its effective control, including in Gaza, and take active steps to ensure that they have adequate access to medical care.

We call on relevant international organizations to call on Israel to fulfill its duties and responsibilities to assist the Palestinian health system and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including:

- a) Ensuring that the relevant medical equipment and supplies are provided to the greatest extent possible.
- b) Giving assurance that it will allow safe and swift access to Gaza and the West Bank for medical personnel, humanitarian actors, medicine and medical equipment and other inputs critical to maintaining civilian health infrastructure such as hospitals and clinics, as well as, when appropriate, patients needing to leave for urgent treatment.
- c) Lifting the closure on the Gaza Strip to enable the proper functioning of its health system in face of the coronavirus pandemic.
- d) Working in close regional cooperation for the safety of all. •

Signatories

Adalah - The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel
 Al Mezan Center for Human Rights
 B'Tselem
 EuroMed Rights
 Gisha - Legal Center for Freedom of Movement
 Human Rights Watch
 Lawyers for Palestinian Human Rights
 MEDACT
 Medecins du Monde France
 Medical Aid for Palestinians

Medical Human Rights Network IFHHRO
 Medico International
 Medico International Switzerland
 Oxfam
 Physicians for Human Rights
 Physicians for Human Rights Israel
 The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER)
 The World Organization against Torture (OMCT)

The online version of this statement is at [hrw.org/news/2020/04/07/joint-statement-israels-obligation-vis-vis-west-bank-and-gaza-face-coronavirus](https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/07/joint-statement-israels-obligation-vis-vis-west-bank-and-gaza-face-coronavirus).

Other Resources on the Struggle in Palestine

- Al-Haq: Defending Human Rights in Palestine – alhaq.org
- BDS Movement – bdsmovement.org
- B’Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories – btselem.org
- Palestinian Center for Human Rights – pchrgaza.org
- UN Humanitarian Affairs for Palestine – ochaopt.org
- The Electronic Intifada – electronicintifada.net
- Independent Jewish Voices – ijvcanada.org
- We Are Not Numbers: Palestinian Youth Tell the Human Stories Behind the Numbers – wearenotnumbers.org

About the Socialist Project

The SP is a Toronto-based organization that supports the rebuilding of the socialist Left in Canada and around the world. Committed to the development of a more free, democratic, humane and sustainable society than the one we live in, the SP opposes capitalism out of necessity and supports the struggles of others out of solidarity. We support struggles aligned with working class emancipation, anti-oppression, democratic self-determination, planetary sustainability, and peace.

You may contact us at info@socialistproject.ca or visit our website at socialistproject.ca.



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- Labour Committee (2007). *The Crisis in Manufacturing Jobs*.
- Hugh Armstrong, et al (2005). *Whose Health Care? Challenging the Corporate Struggle to Rule Our System*.
- Carlos Torres, et al (2005). *The Unexpected Revolution: The Venezuelan People Confront Neoliberalism*.
- Leo Panitch (2005). *Whose Violence? Imperial State Security and the Global Justice Movement*.
- Sam Gindin (2004). *The Auto Industry: Concretizing Working Class Solidarity: Internationalism Beyond Slogans*.

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Back cover: Ronan Shahev, 2017.

