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Forging a Path to Peace in The Time of Coronavirus

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Brief Analysis

The world was caught unprepared by the COVID-19 outbreak, which has unleashed an unprecedented global crisis and left more than one hundred thousand people dead and many more in grave condition. The pandemic shows no signs of abating and the most recent assessments project tens of thousands of more deaths before it eventually subsides. The uncertainty and isolation of the pandemic has provoked widespread fear and anxiety, particularly among countries with inadequate health care systems that failed to take the outbreak seriously in its early stages—[Israel is no exception](#).

The coronavirus outbreak in Israel coincided with Israel's yearlong political standoff, aggravating an already precarious situation. These two crises against the backdrop of the Israel–Palestine conflict have shaped how Israel and the Palestinian Authority have endeavored to trace, treat, and test for the disease, as well their ability to enforce a full-scale lockdown, a 'Stay at Home' directive, and the compulsory use of face masks.

On the one hand, the Israeli government is struggling to enforce a lockdown in its [ultra-orthodox neighborhoods](#). The community only constitutes around 12 percent of Israel's population but has been disproportionately affected by the outbreak, accounting for approximately 75 percent of the total number of infections in Jerusalem. This disparity is in part because many members of the community tend to live in crowded areas with large families and some religious leaders have downplayed the severity of the crisis. Around the start of the Passover holiday, a ministerial committee agreed to seal off Jerusalem neighborhoods with the highest number of cases; 12 of the 17 neighborhoods that are now placed under strict lockdown are majority ultra-orthodox areas. The move to shut down these neighborhoods has been criticized by its residents for unfairly targeting Israel's religious communities—highlighting the long-standing tensions between Israel's religious and secular Jews. Additionally, pressures are mounting on the government to ease the lockdown all over the country mainly for economic reasons.

On the other hand, the [Arab-Israeli minority](#), along with Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, felt neglected by the late arrival of medical equipment and mobile coronavirus testing stations to Arab neighborhoods and East Jerusalem. So far, the Arab community in Israel has reported fewer cases than expected, but experts in the community attribute the low numbers to the lack of testing stations. Earlier this month, Israel began to address the unequal test distribution by sending additional mobile testing stations to Arab communities. And as more people are tested, the number of confirmed cases has risen. The Israeli government has also been criticized for overlooking potential language barriers. For example, the government application for unemployment benefits and Health Ministry forms for declaring government-imposed quarantine [have not yet been made available in Arabic](#). As taxpayers and Israeli citizens, Arab-Israelis expect to receive equal treatment during this crisis.

For the both peoples, the Israelis and the Arabs, fears about the spread of coronavirus have also led to the ability to fall prey to rumors and conspiracy theories. Both have gained momentum on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in which Israel is being accused of creating this epidemic globally. Social networks began spreading rumors of a wicked conspiracy theory that the Israeli government is using the thousands of Palestinian workers in Israel to spread the deadly virus among the Palestinian population in the West Bank to annihilate the Palestinian people.

Both sides accused each other of using the crisis to advance their political agendas. As people increasingly turn to television and the social media to find solace and seek information in these times of isolation, they instead witness a 'war of words' that has given rise to doubts and mistrust among the public—especially with regards to viewing the publicized cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority as suspicious attempts at normalization.

This led Palestinian leaders to deny any type of cooperation with Israel to fight the Coronavirus. These fears do not reflect the reality of the cooperation between officials. On March 24, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OCHA) released its first COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report, which stated that “the Palestinian and Israeli authorities have maintained close, unprecedented cooperation” and that the Israeli government facilitated training workshops for Palestinian medical teams, donated over 1,000 testing kits, and sent thousands of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian Authority (PA) also accepted \$25 million in previously withheld tax money to ease the economic impact of the pandemic on Palestinians.

Yet, the positive impact this cooperation can have will be dampened if the public does not acknowledge this cooperation as reality. Israel and the Palestinian Authority have a historic experience in working together on security, trade, and civil matters, which has made the current cooperation easier. However, Israel also has a major opportunity to better its image among Arabs and Palestinians alike and discredit the current rumors. To relieve major doubts and improve its image, Israel should adopt a humanistic official policy regarding the release of Palestinian political prisoners, especially those who suffer from a chronic illness, women, and the elderly.

Many human rights organizations have pressured Israel for the immediate release of its more vulnerable prisoners given the well-known propensity for coronavirus clusters to spread among prison populations, while also reminding Israel to safeguard the health of those remaining in jail cells. In late March, Fatah and the Palestinian Commission and Ex-Detainees Affairs issued a joint statement that called on international and human rights organizations to continue to pressure Israel to release prisoners that may be at a higher risk of infection. At the same time, Fatah has also pressured for the release of its members from Hamas prisons in Gaza, noting that this step could end divisions among Palestinians.

A move on Israel's part to release some prisoners would not be unique in the region—the virus has prompted many other countries in the Middle East to release its prisoners to reduce the risk of infection in overcrowded jails. [Jordan](#) released thousands of people from its jails, mostly jailed for civil debts. Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria also announced pardons for thousands of inmates. Detainees have been released even in autocratic countries across the region; according to official reports, [Iran has released more than 80,000 prisoners](#), including some political detainees. Even Syria has taken steps to do so, though it has released only a few hundred people from its severely overcrowded jails. Activists have still expressed concern for the health and wellbeing of prisoners that remain in these jails. Regrettably, in the two latter countries, thousands of journalists and activists remain incarcerated.

Nevertheless, Israel has been presented with a major opportunity amid its challenges. Responding to the current crisis will certainly not be simple or easy, but Israel has a great deal of leeway to determine what its post coronavirus state will look like. Israeli politicians must decide whether it will allow its current humanitarian cooperation with the Palestinian Authority to shape a new policy towards Palestinians or if it will revert to the same trends of incitement and enmity that have shaped the conflict for decades.

On the other side, Palestinian leaders must accept that there are benefits to working together with the other. "Normalization is to make the status quo the norm," wrote a Palestinian scholar on his Facebook page. For some Palestinians and their supporters, he adds, 'normalization' is *"any" friendly or respectful interaction with "any" Israeli in "any" way.*" Normalization has also been defined as going back to the original state of affairs which existed before the conflict. But in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict such a definition does not fit. The term has also been defined to mean 'moving from a state of conflict to a normal state of peace.' Here, there is an unfounded assumption that this definition of normalization implies acceptance of injustice and occupation. This interpretation is adopted by the anti-normalization school, championed by the BDS, to give the term normalization a negative connotation to win followers among the Palestinian and Arab masses. Consequently, it is crucial to have a common definition among all to decide whether to support normalization or support a boycott.

To peacemakers, the term normalization refers to the building of trust, understanding, tolerance, and coexistence through dialogue and cooperation to unify the Palestinian-Israeli anti-occupation peace camp and to undermine the "have it all" extremist conflict camp on both sides. Normalization within this framework aims to pave the way for a comprehensive peace based on justice, recognition, acknowledgment, and end of the conflict, incitement, enmity, and hatred. That is the goal of normalization. Its objective is not to empower the status-quo but to transform it into a better reality. That is why normalization would carry a positive connotation. While in the pre-Oslo Accords period, normalization would have been justly described as a collaboration with the enemy to preserve the occupation status-quo, in the light of the Oslo peace process, it carried a different and more positive content of shifting the occupier-occupied, oppressor-oppressed Israeli-Palestinian relationship, to partners in peace relationship.

The requirements of quarantine have another silver lining—they have given all those at home a chance to reflect and wonder if the post-coronavirus world should be the same as the one before. Should we go back to the conflict, enmity, and radicalism that shaped our world before the pandemic or should we take heed and create a more humane and peaceful world we will be proud to leave as a future legacy to our grandchildren?

All people involved have a renewed responsibility to continue the spirit of collaboration into the post-coronavirus world. Unquestionably, the negative impact of this pandemic will be much less if both sides are in one camp fighting it together. There is perhaps nothing more powerful than the proof coronavirus has provided of the necessity to work together and join hands to save lives for the benefit of all. Only by leaving behind the antagonism, animosity, hatred, and stubbornness that has characterized the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would we be able to come together in peace.

In remembrance of the victims who fell fighting the pandemic and to honor their memories, we should all take this time to meditate about building bridges to a better peaceful world.

Throughout the Middle East region, we should stop resorting to military power in resolving our conflicts and give priority to dialogue and diplomacy. Our rationality and common sense call upon us to set aside our differences in the face of this common enemy.

Most importantly, the lesson to learn is to convert our collective narratives of demonization, exclusion, and segregation around a shared narrative of belonging and attachment to our shared values. Creating this new world will mean adopting moderate views that would accommodate and tolerate one another. We do not need to be infected with this virus to appreciate the sanctity of life and to realize that we are better off living in peace than in conflict—Israelis and Palestinians now have a golden opportunity to lead the way. ❖



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