

Palestine in the Time of Covid-19

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The Palestinian people suffer from the Covid-19 pandemic like all other peoples, but with their own specificities. They suffer like other impoverished populations, from a disease that is expensive to avoid and cure.

But they also suffer like a colonized people, heavily discriminated against, inside Israel's borders, in the military-occupied West Bank, and even more so in the blockaded Gaza Strip.

Like in most countries outside of the regions of Asia initially affected, Palestinians did not begin to worry about the coronavirus until the beginning of March 2020.

The first accounts arriving from Palestine were humorous: they came from Gaza and claimed that it was "the safest place in the world", since the blockade would actually protect them from the infection.

Pretty soon, however, prominent academics pointed out that if the virus ever entered Gaza, a tragedy would be difficult to avoid. Gaza is indeed deprived of all means to cure it, such as basic medical supplies and equipment, few masks or test kits, in addition to having problems of fuel shortage and water quality, among many others.

These conditions are not due to underdevelopment, or the blockade, but mainly to the planned destruction of Palestinian infrastructure by the Israeli army during its many wars on Gaza, including the bombing of 17 hospitals during the 2014 war...

Within the 1948 borders of Israel, the situation has not changed much for Palestinians. They are still treated as second-class citizens and, in such a crisis, their health will be taken care of only after that of people living in Jewish neighborhoods, mainly because these are where good hospitals are located.

The new Nation-State law requires that all official texts, including emergency instructions during the pandemic (among which the famous barrier gestures), must only be written in Hebrew. For Palestinians whose language is Arabic, there is no emergency plan.

Furthermore, it is clear that the daily racism that has existed in Israel for 70 years does not disappear. For example, even during the health crisis, the destruction of houses and fields in the Bedouin areas of the Negev desert continues (1).

The most debated consequence of the Covid-19 epidemic in Israel was the implementation of surveillance of people, through their mobile phones, without the need for government security services to seek court authorization (2).

We should note that other governments have followed this "Shock Doctrine", described by Naomi Klein (3), that consists in taking advantage of the crisis to launch mass surveillance programs of their citizens. Often these governments use Israeli software originally developed to illegally spy on Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu also took the opportunity to increase his authoritarian and military powers. While Jewish citizens of Israel complain that democracy is in decline, and that their civil liberties are being eroded today, this had never been discussed when the liberties of Palestinians were at stake.

Within Israel's borders, as everywhere else unfortunately, the worst place to live is the prison, and

particularly where Palestinian prisoners are locked up. In overcrowded jails, the risk of disease transmission is very high.

Several recent events have prompted prisoners to question deliberate and repeated medical negligence on the part of the Israeli authorities (4).

For example, while family and lawyer visits are prohibited, the first infected prisoners in Ashkelon, Ramleh and Moscobiya prisons were infected by Israeli doctors or prison guards. The lack of hygiene products, masks or gloves also raises the question of a deliberate plan to spread the disease in prison which, combined with other health problems and notoriously bad medical treatment, will lead to a high death rate.

Many Palestinians living in the West Bank come to work in Israel every day, after a long and complex journey through militarized checkpoints, mainly for very poorly paid jobs.

In mid-March, when the Israeli government decided to restrict the movement of people, it asked that 25,000 Palestinian workers remain within the 1948 borders for the duration of the lockdown, far from their homes.

Of course, these workers never received protective equipment and rarely benefited from the accommodation that had been promised to them. In addition, each time one of these workers is suspected of being infected with the coronavirus (even a simple fever), he is brought back to a checkpoint in a military vehicle, and thrown to the ground, on the Palestinian side, without any medical treatment or being treated like a human being (5).

Again, it is questionable whether Israel's strategy, in addition to wanting to avoid any new contagion within its borders and to refuse to treat Palestinians, is not to deliberately spread the virus in the West Bank, knowing that it would cause chaos and death.

In the West Bank, the daily horror suffered by Palestinians is even more difficult to bear, as people first try to worry about their health and that of their neighbors. But how can a community take care of its health while the occupying army continues to raid its homes, or confiscates food packages for quarantined families (6)?

They even attacked and damaged the house of the Palestinian Government Minister of Jerusalem, Fadi al-Hadmi, before taking him to prison, beating him and forcing him to wear a dirty mask, bearing traces of dried blood (7).

How cynical can this army be when, in addition to destroying houses, it also destroys... a clinic? This happened on March 26 in Khirbet Ibziq, where a bulldozer, two trucks and an Israeli military jeep confiscated a tin shack, an electric generator, poles, sheeting, concrete blocks, and bags of sand and cement, intended to build a field clinic (8).

Palestinian land in the West Bank is often located close to illegal Jewish settlements. Following the general focus on the disease, and the movement restrictions of the Palestinians, Israeli settlers took advantage of the Shock Doctrine to uproot hundreds of Palestinian olive trees, steal cattle, destroy houses and barns, attack people and annex even more Palestinian land... (9)

In early April, there were approximately 8,000 cases of Covid-19 in Israel, 200 in the West Bank and 12 in Gaza. The West Bank and Gaza apply more strict containment rules than in Israel.

With always this same Palestinian humor, Gazans have asked Europeans: "So what is it like to be locked up? We have been locked up for 13 years..."

Indeed, even if the comparison does not last very long, the lockdown necessarily brings to mind Gaza, like any other prison in the world. Gazans also told the Israelis: "We would dream of lockdown conditions like yours."

The inequality in the region is indeed immeasurable. Not only does Israel refuse to let medical supplies reach Gaza, but on March 28, the Israeli army fired several missiles at this strip of land of 365 km², where two million people live in great precariousness, and await with anxiety the arrival of

the virus... (10).

Notes :

- (1) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-israel-shut-down-authorities-continue-evict-bedouin>
 - (2) <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-to-stop-coronavirus-spread-shin-bet-can-track-cellphones-without-court-order-1.8677696>
 - (3) <https://naomiklein.org/the-shock-doctrine/>
 - (4) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-israel-jails-palestinian-inmates-fear-lives-filthy-and-crowded>
 - (5) <https://www.pchrgaza.org/en/?p=14353>
 - (6) <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-attacks-palestinians-they-fight-covid-19>
 - (7) <https://imemc.org/article/jerusalem-minister-i-was-forced-to-wear-a-dirty-mask-with-signs-of-dried-blood-on-it>
 - (8) https://www.btselem.org/press_release/20200326_israel_confiscates_clinic_tents_during_coronavirus_crisis
 - (9) <https://medium.com/@thepalestineproject/israeli-settlers-uproot-hundreds-of-olive-trees-near-bethlehem-71e5a757d0be> ;
<https://www.palestinechronicle.com/jewish-settlers-increase-attacks-on-palestinian-farmers-in-jordan-valley/> ;
<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-palestine-israel-settlers-exploit-lockdown-annex-land>
 - (10) <https://imemc.org/article/israeli-soldiers-fire-missiles-into-gaza-4>
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VIDEO : Contre-feux, Résistance sociale et syndicale en Palestine

En cette période de confinement, les télévisions tournent à plein régime. Mais on peut aussi prendre un peu de temps pour regarder autre chose. S'informer et partager en famille en regardant « Contre-feux, Résistance sociale et syndicale en Palestine ». C'est discuter et expliquer aux enfants la réalité du quotidien du peuple Palestinien qui vit un « confinement permanent » et relativiser quelque peu ce qu'est notre confinement temporaire. Les images avec les enfants ont de l'écho auprès des nôtres. FP

<https://vimeo.com/345343417>

P.S.

<http://www.laboursolidarity.org/Palestine-in-the-Time-of-Covid-19?lang=en>