

The COVID-19 crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories and AEI's response

Bethlehem, 19/4/2020

The corona virus crisis is not just a threat to many people's lives but also opens up a worldwide debate about what kind of society citizens want. Neoliberal capitalism's tendency is all too often to value the 'economy' above people's lives. With the present crisis it becomes clear that much of civil society across the world is united in valuing human life and human dignity as sacred and that matters of health should gain priority and support. As a church-based organization operative in the occupied West Bank, AEI follows the social teachings of the churches and of the Vatican in its call for help and solidarity with those most vulnerable in the present health crisis, and for international solidarity and coordination between countries and governments to effectively deal with the crisis. Among other things this requires the immediate cessation of wars and violent conflicts, as called for by UN secretary general Guterres. Yet there is no cessation of the conflict in Palestine/Israel but rather an intensification of colonization in a situation where the population and the Palestinian Authority are under even greater pressure than before.

When the first coronavirus patients appeared among tourists in Bethlehem early March, the Palestinian Authority responded quickly with a lockdown in Bethlehem and later the entire West Bank, so that the number of patients there is now around 320, low compared to Israel, where it is 13,265. The Palestinian population under the PNA has shown itself grateful to the PNA health ministry for its fast response.

Bethlehem and the West Bank are still in lockdown throughout the month of April, which means that people are in principle required to stay at home except for essential errands. Police at central roads and crossings check passing cars. Traffic between the cities is virtually at a standstill, as is the traffic between Israel and the West Bank. The so-called "checkpoints of love" in the West Bank are generally operated well, and police show themselves respectful, according to many local witnesses. Like in other countries, the medical workers are regarded as real heroes not only for treating the corona virus patients but for continuing their work despite being disproportionately exposed to virus infections.

Another local health policy that is appreciated is the provision of tests free of charge to those coming from abroad with symptoms of the virus or suspected of being previously in contact with those infected.

When speaking about medical priorities it needs first to be said that the situation in Gaza remains extremely fragile, with the potential rapid spread of the virus in tightly packed refugee camps. Public health care has reached a near collapse in recent decades as a result of Israel's

siege there. Fortunately, the number of coronavirus patients in Gaza is still small but any outbreak would create a dramatic large-scale emergency. In a statement of 5/4/2020, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) condemns the statements of the Israeli Defense Minister, Naftali Bennett, on linking the entry of medical supplies into the Gaza Strip to combat coronavirus with the return of Israeli soldiers held by Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip since 2014. PCHR stresses that this “bargaining” constitutes a flagrant violation of Israel’s obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

Medical facilities in the West Bank also do not have the means to receive a substantial number of COVID-19 patients. Hospitals in East Jerusalem are “collapsing” according to the Jerusalem mayor, and not equipped to treat COVID-19 patients. In fact, the number of virus cases is presently disproportionately increasing in the East Jerusalem suburbs not in the last place due to the systematic neglect of the health sector there.

Some medical supplies have reached the PNA from abroad. There is limited cooperation with Israel which transferred a few hundreds of medical toolkits. As with previous medical support by Israel to populations in south-Lebanon or Syria this support looks primarily an exercise in PR.

What after the closure?

The PNA at present faces a great dilemma in combatting the virus. It is good to remember that the PNA is not a real government in full control. It is not in control of areas C – over 60% of the West Bank - nor in East-Jerusalem, annexed by Israel. It has not full authority in the West Bank cities and surroundings. Fatah and Hamas have still not made substantial steps towards reconciliation, which practically means that Gaza is under control of Hamas. The PNA has limited credibility among the population in the West Bank even though president Abou Mazen’s clear rejection of the recent US “Deal of the Century” has received wide support, like now the PNA Ministry of Health’s policies with regard to the COVID-19 crisis.

The PNA’s policy of prolonging the lockdown for a considerable time is understandable as there are no appropriate systems in place. While the PNA obliges hotels in Bethlehem to open up rooms for any future patients, it faces like many developed and developing countries basic questions about shortages in test kits, supplies of protective clothing, medical equipment, hospital beds as well as an insufficient number of qualified nursing staff and doctors. It is not at all sure that Israel will take over coronavirus patients who cannot be treated in the occupied Palestinian territories. There is also no system in place of testing, tracking and isolating cases – a condition for any opening up of society. It is difficult to imagine the wide and effective use of apps in the West Bank, as proposed in Israel and other countries.

Income

A short-term crisis may come with the return of many thousands of Palestinian workers who work in Israel and had to stay there in recent weeks. The total number of workers from the West Bank with and without permits may be not less than 200.000. With the beginning of Ramadan towards the end of April, many will return to be with their family. Workers are in mutual contact at checkpoints and meet people both in Israel and the West Bank. There is no regulation nor any testing of workers who without permits cross the hills of the southern West Bank, often in areas C outside PNA control, guided by unscrupulous profit-making middlemen who coordinate their passage with Israeli employers. There have been cases where Palestinian workers who caught the virus were left abandoned outside their Israeli workplace, such as near a West Bank settlement.

The future is pressing and uncertain. Economically, most companies in the West Bank have barely any reserve and face bankruptcy without the government support as provided in other countries. Local companies currently pay no or a much reduced salary. There are no unemployment benefits and insufficient medical insurance. Unemployment was already high before the coronavirus outbreak, at the very least some 20% in the West Bank. In the Bethlehem area the tourism sector, on which over 60% of the population is dependent, has been hit hard. It is foreseen that the coming two years few tourists and pilgrims will visit Bethlehem. The PNA will not financially help the sector. In a media conference (19/4/2020) the Minister of Tourism said she wants to promote domestic tourism as soon as when it is safe to do so, also towards Palestinians living in Israel, and to make more use of the tools of virtual tourism (films etc.) for international marketing afterwards.

As always, the family is the safety net for reduced income, and sometimes civil society initiatives or religious institutions. The PNA has distributed only a symbolic number of food packages; most have been distributed by civil society organizations and charities.

While society is kept closed for the coming time, the PNA allows certain industries which would face collapse when left abandoned to re-open though they have to be monitored and employers risk a large fine when not abiding by the rules.

At the aid level, the Palestinian Authority expects revenues to considerably drop in the coming time, up to 50%. It is highly uncertain whether the EU, Japan or Gulf States will keep the Palestinian Authority afloat in the coming years. If the crisis is prolonged, the question comes up: How can the Palestinian Authority manage a crisis of this magnitude when it is itself threatened in its financial survival?

Israel and settlements

Meanwhile, it is striking that the negotiations in recent weeks between Netanyahu and Ganz about a new Israeli government were not so much about the best ways of fighting the COVID-19 crisis, what one would expect, but mainly about how to politically guide and internationally

sell the annexation of (parts of) the West Bank following the opening which the US “Deal of the Century” offered to Israeli advocates of annexation.

That this received so much attention in the negotiations has to do with the assumption of the Israeli right that the period from now to November, when the US elections take place, is crucial to create *fait accomplis* on the ground while the world is engaged in other matters.

Some commentators write that for all intents and purposes Israel has in any case already annexed the West Bank, and that the legalization of the annexation at least exposes the matter.

According to human rights reports, incidents of vandalism by settlers have significantly increased during the last few months, since the announcement of the American plan. Reports from March and April are still coming in about hundreds of fruit trees in the West Bank cut or uprooted by settlers, and of vandalism and intimidation. Also, dozens of Palestinians have been arrested by the military in recent weeks, taken from their homes by soldiers sometimes in full anti-virus protection gear. The thousands of Palestinians in Israeli prisons are of course extra vulnerable to the virus, and lawyers and human rights groups have called attention to those prisoners’ plight.

With Gaza even a more serious case, as indicated, Palestinian society in the West Bank is also under the triple pressure of occupation, economic meltdown, and medical emergency - without real buffers to absorb the shocks. The question is whether it can handle that level of pressure.

Society’s response

Having said this, it has to be emphasized that there is mutual help and solidarity everywhere, inside and outside the families. This varies from temporarily not collecting rent or giving meals to people who live alone or have no family, to organizing food deliveries from one city to another. Emergency committees are active in the towns and villages. One sees various circles of care and concern. While the main concern of course goes toward close family and friends, the emotional concerns extend to relatives and acquaintances abroad, as so many Palestinians have family all over the world. Experiences with lockdown are exchanged, including humorous incidents. The internet is of course becoming increasingly important.

As we know from elsewhere, tensions in the homes have intensified as a result of lack of income, anxiety about the future, and the living together in crowded spaces. Human rights organizations have pointed to an increase in gender-based domestic abuse. As streets are abandoned, and the police’s focus is elsewhere, thefts have increased too. Arrests of Palestinian citizens by Israeli soldiers are adding to the stress. While the TV and radio generally give reliable information about isolation and protection measures, the widely used social media provides a more mixed picture. Social media are important to overcome isolation at home but

at the same time encourage the circulation of unproven theories or falsehoods about the virus and protection measures.

Every family has to deal with mental health issues and with practical issues how to protect the vulnerable. Note that there are only few care homes in Palestine, the elderly are usually taken care of within the families. A regrettable phenomenon which affects Palestinian society has been the negative labeling of infected patients, sometimes resulting in group stereotyping and a lack of proper attention and care.

Another phenomenon which affects the sense of community has been the lack of coordination with regard to food distribution or financial handouts. Some areas have been disproportionately affected by the lockdown, such as the center of Bethlehem and other cities where control is strict - even to the point that shops which secretly open up are threatened to be filmed and put on Facebook. At the same time, outside the city centers control appears to be more relaxed even though there the same closure regime is supposed to apply. This strengthens the feeling that areas are differentially treated without justification. Furthermore, citizens feel that considerably more can be done to protect the safety of the health workers and other frontline workers, as well as their mental health. Some indicate that the crisis is not so much about the virus but about preserving solidarity in the community in the face of an uncertain present and future.

AEI

In this unprecedented time, AEI takes its responsibility in confronting the challenges by helping to strengthen the value base of Palestinian society, and looking for ways how it can adapt to the new circumstances. *Sumud* as a complex of national characteristics that strengthen values of citizenship and public health is relevant as never before. *Sumud* is about bringing people together for the common good, caring for the vulnerable, keeping the community together, and upholding the value of respect for each other as well as for land and nature.

AEI's work in and beyond spring 2020 contains three emphases under the influence of the coronavirus emergency:

1. Learning more deeply about the impact of the various crises at both Palestinian and global levels, and finding rays of hope.
2. Developing tools and looking for ways which help the society under great pressure to adapt.
3. Doing advocacy for public health and especially the health needs and rights of vulnerable groups and communities in society, in line with the social teachings of the church.

Learning about the new situation and its crises, looking for hope

Sumud education in times of an epidemics reflects upon values of citizenship and neighborhood - in general and in the area of Moslem-Christian living together in particular. The following activities are receiving special attention in AEI's present educational projects:

- Staff and students, women and children are presently collecting diverse stories about citizens' initiatives to confront the crises. They include stories of daily heroism, solidarity and courage.
- AEI women's groups are creating a family safety network of mutual support.
- Youths do interviews how Palestinian experiences of curfews and sieges – by themselves gross violations of our human rights - have fostered over time the inner strength of families and communities, and the ability to improvise. (One Israeli told a Palestinian from Bethlehem recently that she never had realized how impactful curfews are!)
- Learning about/the development of new types of rituals, customs and artistic or cultural initiatives to better attend to each other, in a culture in which one is traditionally physically close to one another but now obliged to live under a regime of social distancing.
- Crossing walls and borders to mutually reflect upon common experiences worldwide, and to learn how communities elsewhere deal with the interlocking public health and economic crises, and how other emergencies such as related to the climate crisis can be dealt with in the future.

Adapting to unprecedented circumstances

- Getting experience with new mechanisms and methods of online meeting and learning, including an assessment of experiences until now. This includes technical issues, how online learning impacts upon students, parents and the society, to what extent it limits or enhances creativity and critical thinking. AEI will develop new methods and techniques of intercultural exchanges during a series of summer workshops, collecting information how youths and teachers best can presently operate online.
- Joining the debate with other civil society organizations how to educate Palestinian citizens and school youths about COVID-19, its prevention, and the dilemmas of social distancing and isolation/lockdown. AEI will pool information and give advice about how the school system can adapt to the new reality of social distancing when schools re-open.
- Teachers developing lesson plans in practical citizenship and voluntarism in the new circumstances in which a combination of joy and education will remain essential.
- The development and adaptation of an early warning and response system (EWRS) to confront conflicts, human rights violations and health crises in the communities. The EWRS will initially be set up with young women in the Hebron area to deal with conflicts inside and outside the community.

Advocacy and protection

- Advocacy interventions to create better access to the Palestinian health sector for vulnerable groups and to build a network of supports, especially for
 - (a) women and children facing domestic violence
 - (b) elderly who are alone and not mobile
 - (c) citizens living under direct occupation in areas C or H2/Hebron.
- AEI will also do advocacy on the social teachings of the church. Many people in Bethlehem presently ask: “Where is God?” Yet they tend to look for charity in the limited sense of money or food handouts, as an indication of the presence of God on earth. Instead we wish to plead for a strong unity between the different Christian denominations in the area in taking a stand to protect the rights of the vulnerable and encourage citizens, of all religions and background, to be pro-active in responding to the circumstances, such as by getting involved in income generating projects and relevant training.

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