



Israeli violations during the Coronavirus pandemic

April, 2020

The following report illustrates Israeli violations during the Coronavirus pandemic sweeping the world.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Israeli occupation forces continued their violations against the Palestinian people in every part of Palestine and in Jerusalem in particular. They did not halt raids into cities, villages and camps, conducting arrests, confiscating land, closing institutions and targeting official Palestinian figures.

It is clear that the violations Israel perpetrated in Jerusalem stem from a permanent and systematic policy based on two focal points:

First: resistance and rejection of any show of Palestinian national sovereignty in occupied Jerusalem through every means possible, under the pretext of "breaching Israeli sovereignty". Israeli authorities also accuse Palestinians of violating the so-called "interim agreement" in reference to the Oslo Accords, which prohibits the PA from holding any activity in the city without an Israeli permit.

Second: the Israelization and Judaization of every aspect of life in Jerusalem through disrupting the demographic balance in order to impose a new reality on the ground.

Throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, Israel escalated these policies and the following measures taken against Jerusalemites.

Arrests:

During this period, arrests were focused on curtailing any efforts in Jerusalem aimed at protecting Palestinian residents from the dangers of the epidemic. Israel considers such efforts a violation of Israeli law, which culminated in the arrest of over 20 activists from various parts of Jerusalem. Some were put under house arrest and prohibited from contacting Palestinian officials in the city. Arrests included Palestinian Minister of Jerusalem Affairs, Fadi Hidmi and Jerusalem Governor Adnan Ghaith. These are two of the most prominent national Palestinian symbols in Jerusalem, which prompted Israel to use an iron fist with them, humiliating and mistreating them during their arrest. Hidmi, for example mistreated during his arrest and later said he had been violently assaulted at the detention facility. The two officials were arrested on charges of being responsible for aid distribution to needy Jerusalemite families.

According to the Wadi Helwa Information Center, throughout March until the date of this report (April 9) a total of 193 arrests were made by Israeli authorities, including four women and 33 minors. A total of 73 arrests were made in the Old City and inside and around the Aqsa Mosque Compound; 57 Palestinians were arrested in Essawiyeh, 35 in Silwan and several others in various parts of the city.

Furthermore, Israeli intelligence services summoned Jerusalem governor Adnan Ghaith, Aqsa Mosque Director Sheikh Omar Kiswani and Deputy Director Sheikh Najeh Bkeirat for questioning. They also summoned and arrested several Fatah members under the pretext of "violating Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem" and arrested three Jerusalemite activists at the Allenby Bridge en route to Jordan.

Attorney Mohammed Mahmoud, who is handling the detentions in Israeli courts, says there has been a noticeable escalation in Israeli measures against youth in Jerusalem during the pandemic. "Several preventative measures have been taken in courts since mid-March against the virus. Courts are conducted via Skype where the prisoner is connected by a phone and monitor in a special room in the prisons. There are some prisons that do not have television monitors and the sessions are conducted only by phone. This makes communication difficult between the prisoner and defense team. It is hard to fully explain what is going on in the session

to the prisoner. These sessions also lack the confidentiality and immunity between lawyer and client. However, the lawyers try as much as possible to clarify certain rights and points to the prisoner. What more, the glass partition in front of the judge is another impediment in terms of hearing what he is saying,” Mahmoud said.

He also mentioned how difficult these procedures were for the families waiting outside the courtroom since only one person is allowed in and the families are barred from speaking to their imprisoned children. He accused Israeli authorities of taking advantage of the Coronavirus crisis and their preventative measures to further oppress Palestinians, maintaining that several cases of abuse and arrest were recorded for supposedly violating these measures. A number of fines were also imposed, ranging from NIS500-NIS5000.

Confiscation of food packages and relief assistance:

Another aspect of Israel’s policy against Palestinians is focusing on measures against them instead of measures to combat the virus. Israeli authorities have actively pursued Palestinians, including volunteers and institutions which provide relief aid and food packages to poor families. They assaulted many of the volunteers, arrested them and confiscated the aid. In Sur Baher at the end of March, Israeli soldiers assaulted six volunteers, beating them and throwing teargas at them before confiscating a truckload of relief and food assistance.

Prior to this, Israeli forces arrested three teams disinfecting Silwan, Suwwana and the Old City and confiscated the cleaning products being used to disinfect public and vital facilities in these areas. They also arrested four others for distributing and hanging up posters to raise awareness about the coronavirus, barring them entry into the Old City.

Violation and desecration of places of worship

This was apparent from the closure of the Aqsa Mosque Compound and barring entry to Muslim worshippers, including its guards and caretakers. At the same time, it assumed a much more relaxed policy with Jews in synagogues. They were able to move freely in their places of residence contrary to the policy imposed

against Jerusalemites whose movement was much more limited. What's more, Palestinians were heavily fined, ranging from NIS500 to NIS5000.

By targeting the Aqsa Mosque, Islamic Waqf officials say Israeli occupation authorities are attempting to interfere and impose Israeli sovereignty under the pretext of preventing the spread of the virus. In this regard, Israeli authorities closed the doors to Al Aqsa with the exception of "Hutta" and "Chain" Gates and kept "Dung Gate" open, the keys to which Israel has held since its occupation of Jerusalem in 1967, and which allows in settlers to the compound.

On March 20, Israeli authorities closed the gates to Al Aqsa and prevented anyone from entering both the mosque and the Old City just before Friday prayers. They claimed this was a preventative measure against the coronavirus. That day, according to Waqf estimates, only 500 Muslim worshippers prayed at the mosque even though Waqf authorities had taken the necessary measures and precautions against the epidemic. They had fully sanitized and disinfected the grounds and mosques and distributed instructions to worshippers before Friday. In addition, there were employees sanitizing worshippers' hands inside the compound.

Meanwhile, Israeli occupation forces cracked down on worshippers who tried to pray in the streets and allies of the Old City, firing stun grenades, striking them with nightsticks and pushing them away from the Aqsa gates. Similar incidents occurred in other areas of the city, especially Wadi Joz, Musrara, Ras Al Amoud/Silwan and outside of Dung Gate.

Israeli police also issued penalties to worshippers for praying outside of the Aqsa's gates and to youths as they walked in the city on claims they "were not abiding by preventative measures."

Israeli authorities took their policies up a notch when they raided the home of President of the Islamic Waqf Council, Sheikh Abdel Atheem Salham and issued him a penalty of NIS5000 on claims he "did not abide by police orders and allowed more than the permitted number of people to enter the Aqsa grounds." They also summoned Aqsa Mosque Director Sheikh Omar Kiswani and Aqsa Mosque Imam Amer Abdeen for questioning.

Furthermore, Israeli forces stormed the Bab Al Rahmeh prayer site and threatened to impose fines on the worshippers for "not adhering to health ministry instructions", also threatening worshippers that they would be fined if they gathered in the Aqsa courtyard for prayer.

Israeli authorities continued to issue orders banning Palestinians from entering the Old City and the Aqsa Mosque Compound. Eight Palestinian youths were banned from the Aqsa and seven from the Old City and travel ban orders were issued against four other Jerusalemites.

In order to avoid any further interference into Aqsa affairs by Israeli authorities, the Islamic Waqf , which is the caretaker of the Aqsa Mosque, closed the compound until further notice as a protective measure against the novel coronavirus. The same was applied to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher with only members of the clergy allowed entry.

Isolating the Old City:

Under the pretext of responding to the coronavirus pandemic, Israeli occupation authorities isolated the Old City from its surroundings. Approximately 40,000 Jerusalemites live in the Old City of Jerusalem and were suddenly cut off from the rest of East Jerusalem, whose Palestinian population is around 360,000. Only those who live within the Old City walls were allowed entrance while Jewish settlers living in settlement enclaves inside or outside it were allowed to enter and exit freely. This policy of isolation led to huge losses for shops owned by Jerusalemites many of whom could not reach their stores.

Figures provided by the Jerusalem Center for Social and Economic Rights and the Jerusalem Merchants Committee indicate that this constrictive Israeli policy, which has been implemented for the past three years, has led to the closure of an increasing number of shops in the Old City. Today around 300 shops are shuttered, a number which is likely to grow with this recent isolation.

Expansion and acceleration of settlements

It is clear that Israeli authorities have been exploiting this pandemic to continue settlement projects in Jerusalem and in the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories. This includes approval for the construction of tens of

thousands of housing units in the settlement of “Atarot, north of Jerusalem, approval to start construction in the “E1” settlement project in Tur, Zaayem, Essawiyeh and Ezzariyeh where over 10,000 housing units will be built, approval for the construction of hundreds of thousands of settlement units in “Givat Hamatos” south of Jerusalem and the establishment of a new settlement neighborhood in Beit Hanina. Plans have also been put in place to build a wall separating the village of Sheikh Saad from Jabal Mukkaber. Meanwhile, Israeli authorities are floating a plan to push Shufat camp and Kufr Aqab out of Jerusalem’s municipal borders as a means of dealing with the concerning “demographic problem” in the city.

Impeding the work of health centers

While Israel rushed to stymie coronavirus outbreaks in its own residential and settlement centers in Jerusalem, it assumed a policy of discrimination when it came to Palestinian Jerusalemites. Israeli forces purposely delayed the opening of Covid-19 testing centers in Palestinian areas. Furthermore, the majority of Jerusalemites do not speak Hebrew, the language spoken in the various Israeli health insurance funds, not to mention that over 40,000 Jerusalemites do not have access to Israeli health care services under the pretext that they live outside of the unilaterally-designated Jerusalem municipal borders.

This policy came in tandem with the crisis already felt by the Palestinian health sector in Jerusalem, reflected in the lack of necessary equipment and medical supplies in the six East Jerusalem hospitals, making them incapable of accommodating dozens of potential Covid-19 patients. The current patients have been distributed in nearby hotels for monitoring while hospitals only have 60 beds available, not to mention the lack in medicines and medical staff they suffer from.

Discriminatory measures against the prisoner movement

The medical negligence towards Palestinian prisoners during the pandemic is evident by how prison services failed to take the necessary precautionary measures in response to the coronavirus. What’s more, they continued to prohibit anyone from being informed about the conditions of quarantined prisoners in the Megiddo Prison. Israeli prisoner services also banned the entry of over 140 products from the prison commissary, including basic food products such as meat,

vegetables, fruit and spices. Cleaning products and disinfectants necessary for prisoners to protect themselves from Covid-19 infection were also banned.

Mistreatment of Palestinian laborers

There have been several testimonies about Israel's mistreatment of Palestinian workers inside the Green Line, including returning workers to the Palestinian territories after suspecting they contracted Covid-19. Last month, Israeli soldiers dumped a Palestinian laborer showing symptoms of Covid-19 at the Beit Sira checkpoint without providing him with any treatment. This behavior was repeated at the Hizma military checkpoint, north of Jerusalem. Laborers are returned to the Palestinian territories on an almost daily basis without being tested, which has resulted in the spread of the virus in Palestine. At the same time, Israel unofficially opened its crossings to workers as a way to circumvent Palestinian preventative measures. They offered laborers incentives such as higher daily wages, thus exploiting their difficult living conditions and avoiding any legal obligations towards them.

Uprooting residents from their land and homes

At the height of the Coronavirus crisis, the Israeli "civil administration" continued with its policy of confiscating Palestinian land, homes and tents. Some of these facilities were being used as emergency clinics to meet the needs of locals. On March 26, Israeli occupation forces raided Khirbet Ibzeiq in the northern Jordan Valley, confiscating steel rods and canopies designed for setting up eight tents, two equipped as clinics and four as emergency shelters for residents who were forced out of their homes. Two other tents were to be used as a mosque. Israeli forces also confiscated a corrugated-iron trailer that had been in the area for over two years, an electric generator, sand and cement bags and four loads of brick to lay the ground inside the tents.

In Ein Diyok, west of Jericho, Israeli forces demolished three buildings which Jerusalemite farmers use as seasonal residences.

In Hebron, Israeli forces tore down a wall separating Wadi Haseen from Wadi Nasara in preparation for closing the entire area and in Deir Ballout in the Salfet area, they demolished a farm room and water well.

It should be noted that in contrast to its measures taken in the occupied Palestinian territories, the Israeli government suspended all demolitions inside Israel during the state of emergency.