

Life in Gaza: Dispatches From Palestine on COVID-19

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[Independent Jewish Voices](#) (IJV) is releasing a series of dispatches from Palestinians and Palestine solidarity activists reflecting on life in Gaza and the West Bank under the COVID-19 pandemic. As the world grapples with the outbreak, and as we organize mutual aid and solidarity in many cities, we must keep Palestine in both our minds and hearts.

We can inspire ourselves and draw important lessons from experiences of Palestinian life under military curfew, siege and travel restrictions. Far from drawing an equation between self-isolation and occupation, we hope to learn from the strategies Palestinians have employed for decades, and hear their advice for the world in these difficult times.

Now more than ever, Palestine must be free. The brutal siege of Gaza, and the ongoing occupation of the West Bank, are tinderboxes for the Coronavirus. The Gaza Strip just [confirmed its first cases](#) of the virus. Medical aid must get in, people must have access to testing, and Israel must end its daily restrictions on Palestinian life.

The first dispatch here comes from **Asmaa Tayeh**. Asmaa 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.

The second dispatch comes from **Weeam Hammoudeh**. Weeam 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 Palestinian context, and how uncertainty impacts people's lives and mental health.

Curfews and Mutual Aid: Asmaa Tayeh

Aaron Lakoff (AL): How are you feeling? Are you scared with the Coronavirus now in Gaza?



Asmaa Tayeh (AT): 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 5-10 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.

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

AT: We don't have the capacity or equipment to keep us safe from this virus. 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.

AL: 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.

AT: I just turned 24 today, and for 24 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.

AL: 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.

Are any protective measures being taken in Gaza? For example, are people being asked to not leave their homes?

AT: 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.

AL: Gaza has been under blockade for over a decade, and it's been such a struggle for people to meet their daily needs. How have the people of Gaza dealt with meeting their day to day needs over the years?

AT: 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 Coronavirus, 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.

AL: Do you have advice for people in other parts of the world who are facing isolation and quarantine?

AT: 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.

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.

Indeed, Asmaa is an amazing writer. You can find many of her wonderful writings on the [WANN site](#), or follow her on [Twitter](#). She also participated in a webinar for IJV with her colleague Issam Adwan from WANN in December, 2019, which you can [watch here](#).

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Curfews and Mutual Aid: Weeam Hammoudeh

Weeam Hammoudeh (WH): 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.

AL: 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.



What is the atmosphere like in Ramallah and the broader West Bank?

WH: 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.

AL: We can think of leaders like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, who balked at concerns around COVID-19 earlier on in the outbreak.

We know about the difficulties in Gaza with the blockade... what is the situation in the West Bank with hurdles due to the Israeli occupation?

WH: 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 Jerusalem, 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.

AL: How are you coping with the changes brought on by the Coronavirus?

WH: 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 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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