



Palestine COVID-19 Update

December 23, 2020

Background

Even as immense progress toward a vaccine is being made, COVID-19 continues to spread across Palestine. Contraction of the virus among Palestinian leadership is revealing just how deeply COVID-19 has penetrated Gaza and the West Bank.¹ Coupled with the social and economic issues already pervasive in Palestine, Palestinians are in more need of emergency assistance than ever. Gaza in particular is struggling with shortages in medical supplies and equipment, prompting fears from many that the healthcare system is on the verge of collapse.² Limited resources trickle through the blockade, which has wide ranging impacts on the health of Gaza's citizens.

Access to clean household and potable water is currently one of the foremost challenges for Gazans. Recent figures suggest that less than four percent of water in Gaza is drinkable.³ As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect people around the world, access to clean water poses an undeniable threat to public health. Without potable water for personal hygiene and sanitation, the communities of Gaza could see a dramatic increase in COVID-19 infections. This inability to practice positive hygiene habits is further exacerbated by the population density of Gaza, the third highest of any country or territory in the world, which makes social distancing practices all the more difficult.⁴

The West Bank also faces barriers to hygiene and sanitation efforts, as overcrowding is still common. Strict housing regulations and home demolitions, particularly in Area C and around Jerusalem, have forced Palestinians into crowded home environments.⁵ Without sufficient housing, social distancing measures are extremely difficult to enforce and put immense strain on WASH services. While COVID-19 infection rates are lower than in Gaza, the division of the West Bank into [areas A, B, and C](#) prevents effective coordination of resources.⁶ Plans for a vaccine rollout, and for a generally coordinated public health strategy, will likely face logistical roadblocks.

COVID-19 has also had a secondary impact on the global economy, and Palestine has been no exception. As the novel coronavirus causes businesses across the world to shutter their doors, the West Bank experienced a very low growth rate of 1.15%⁷ and,

¹ [NPR: Gaza's Leader Gets Coronavirus as Cases Surge](#)

² [BBC: Gaza Health System Days from Being Overwhelmed](#)

³ [Failing Gaza: Undrinkable Water](#)

⁴ [Business Insider: What Gaza Situation Would Look Like in US](#)

⁵ Mohammed Alkhadi, "Health System Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Conflict Settings: Policy Reflections from Palestine" *Global Public Health* no. 8, vol 15 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1781914>.

⁶ [OCHA: West Bank](#)

⁷ [Covid-19 Devastates Palestine's Shattered Economy](#)

according to the World Bank, Gaza's economy is predicted to experience at least an 8% contraction before the end of 2020.⁸ A significant increase can also be expected in the number of Palestinians living below the poverty line. The overall poverty rate for Palestine is expected to reach 27.5% with unemployment rates of 14.8% and 49.1% in the West Bank and Gaza respectively.⁹

Cases on the Rise

At the onset of the global pandemic, strict preventative measures on behalf of government authorities in Gaza, in coordination with Israel, initially prevented wide scale spread of COVID-19. These measures included compulsory quarantine for individuals returning through both the Rafah and Erez crossings, PCR tests for everyone in quarantine, ending school activities and reducing work hours, banning large gatherings, and publicly encouraging people to stay home.¹⁰ In July, coordination efforts came to an end, which, paired with the erroneous belief that the worst had already passed, allowed the caseload to expand dramatically.¹¹ As of this writing there are more than 35,000 confirmed cases, climbing daily by 800 to 1,000 new cases.¹² In early December, the Gaza government implemented strict lockdown procedures, limiting movement at night and on weekends and between governorates and establishing a 21-day quarantine for those infected by the virus.¹³ The Palestinian National Authority's Ministry of Health (MoH) has noted that essential supplies are running low, including testing kits, which are crucial for contact tracing. The MoH noted that the bulk of the caseload is concentrated in the heavily populated North Gaza governorate and Gaza City, which have accounted for over 20,000 of nearly 30,000 cases.¹⁴

Palestine's West Bank has also experienced a significant increase in COVID-19 cases, having established its own lockdown on December 11 covering Nablus, Bethlehem, Tulkarem, and Hebron.¹⁵ As of December 23, the World Health Organization reported 108,461 COVID-19 cases, including 16,342 cases identified in East Jerusalem.¹⁶ Distribution plans for a vaccine are still forthcoming, though the prevailing strategy among major health institutions is that healthcare workers and residents of long-term care facilities should be the first recipients.¹⁷ As a member of the WHO's COVAX initiative, Palestine had planned to receive sufficient doses of the vaccine to inoculate up to 20% of the population, but the limited number of dosages available paired with the logistical problem of getting them to Gaza poses a serious hurdle to this effort. Furthermore, there are no set-in-stone plans for Israel to provide Palestine with any of the eight million vaccines it has ordered from Pfizer. In fact, there is only one freezer in

⁸ [World Bank: Palestinian Economy Report](#)

⁹ [Gaza Unemployment Rate in the Second Quarter of 2020.](#)

¹⁰ [Unique Situation of Gaza Dealing With COVID 19](#)

¹¹ [UN: Breakdown in Coordination](#)

¹² [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in the occupied Palestinian territory](#)

¹³ [Gaza on the Brink of Worst Health Crisis in History](#)

¹⁴ Palestinian National Authority Ministry of Health, "Daily Report for COVID-19 Virus" (Dec. 15, 2020).

¹⁵ [Palestinian Districts in West Bank Go into Full Lockdown](#)

¹⁶ [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in the occupied Palestinian territory](#)

¹⁷ [CDC: In Countries Where Resources are Limited, Who Gets Vaccinated First?](#)

Palestine that can keep the vaccine at the temperature it requires, and that's in Jericho.¹⁸ Russia has reportedly reached out to the Palestinian Authority with an offer of four million doses of its Sputnik V vaccine (a viral vector vaccine that was adopted before phase III testing concluded); however, there have been no formal assurances.¹⁹

Weather conditions, exacerbated by trends in global climate change, are another ongoing issue in Palestine. Due to the considerable climate disparities between Gaza and the West Bank, access to electricity and internal heating are a necessity in the face of what will likely be a volatile winter. Personal hygiene could become difficult to maintain in light of limited water and electricity access. Many homes in Gaza are unequipped to deal with the harsh conditions of winter, including flooding and cold weather, leading to increases in sickness that would be disastrous alongside a spike in COVID-19 cases.²⁰

Medical Capacity

Recent reports indicate that medical facilities in Gaza and the West Bank are dipping to critically low levels of essential items. On December 7th, reports indicated that the sole testing laboratory in Gaza ran out of testing kits in addition to other equipment shortages. Fortunately, shipments from the WHO arrived with more kits; yet the problem of constrained resources dominates Gaza's COVID-19 response, as the number of imported kits were enough to test 28,000 out of the 2 million people in the Gaza Strip.²¹ ICU beds and essential medicines are also in low supply, as Gaza's strained health facilities struggle to accommodate its densely packed population. Furthermore, there is the lack of sufficient equipment to store the Pfizer vaccine at the necessary temperature. With the only freezer in Palestine being located in the West Bank at Jericho, any vaccine resupplies to Gaza would face restrictions due to the blockade. The transport of the vaccine itself requires ample supplies of dry ice, which are lacking in developed countries,²² not to mention water supply challenges in Palestine.

With limited bed space, a shortage in medical staff, and a shrinking inventory of equipment, hospitals are becoming dependent upon what little inflows of equipment are coming from the outside. Dr. Basim Naim has noted that Gaza's needs include oxygen masks, ventilators, PPE and protective suits, hygiene materials, a wide variety of basic drugs, and equipment for medical labs.²³ Access to these materials will be essential for the continued work and safety of Gaza's embattled healthcare workers. The West Bank is likewise experiencing shortages, though Palestinians in the West Bank will continue to have access to pharmacies during the lockdown period. Combined, both Gaza and the West Bank have accumulated more than 143,000 cases and over 1300 deaths since the start of the outbreak.²⁴

¹⁸ [Palestinians Left Waiting As Israel Is Set to Deploy Vaccine](#)

¹⁹ [Washington Post: Israel is Starting to Vaccinate, but Palestine Will Have to Wait Months](#)

²⁰ [Relief Web: Why Thousands of Families Fear Winter in Gaza](#)

²¹ [Fines for Lockdown Violations and Wider Closures as Covid-19 Surges in the West Bank and Gaza](#)

²² [Possible Dry Ice Shortage Looms Over COVID Vaccine Distribution](#)

²³ [Al Jazeera: Gaza Declares Covid-19 Disaster](#)

²⁴ [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in the occupied Palestinian territory](#)

Chronic illness is also a concern in light of the spread of COVID-19 and the straining of healthcare resources in Gaza and the West Bank. Chronic illness and pre-existing conditions put people at heightened risk of complications from the virus, which is doubly concerning as hospitals run low on space with which to implement social distancing. Furthermore, rising numbers of COVID patients increase the partitioning of limited equipment, as few ventilators are left to treat non-COVID patients. Currently, there are roughly 100 ventilators in Gaza, with the WHO only able to bring in 10 new ventilators in early September. This capacity would only allow them to treat hundreds of patients, not thousands, according to the WHO.²⁵

Key Challenges

Water and energy provisions are important concerns as Palestinians hope to continue essential functions in light of COVID-19 restrictions. The two concerns are largely intertwined, as additional electrical output is often needed to decontaminate water that has been heavily polluted.²⁶ Anera's WASH programs, which include provisions for personal hygiene, water sanitation, and flooding prevention, have been adapted to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Gaza

Regarding health needs, there are serious concerns rising over shortages of essential supplies required to combat the spread of COVID-19 and a steadily rising infection rate has led to greater lockdown restrictions. With the current regulations in [Gaza](#), businesses can operate only from 8am to 5pm, daily curfew is 6:00 pm, and there is a full lockdown on Fridays and Saturdays. Essential businesses including health clinics, bakeries, and grocery stores may operate on weekends. Similarly, the West Bank announced a two week lockdown on December 10th, imposing limitations on movement between governorates.²⁷ Distribution efforts, and efforts to provide general services, will need to find a way to accommodate these measures and prevent mass crowdings, which is already difficult given the population density of Gaza and the West Bank.

The blockade surrounding Gaza effectively limits the flow of essential resources, ranging from medical supplies and equipment to food to electricity. A recent UN report indicated that the blockade may have cost Gaza as much as 16.7 billion dollars in economic development, as well as an increased poverty rate, between the years of 2007 to 2018.²⁸ Paired with the economic contraction caused by COVID-19, it begs the question as to whether the Palestinian Authority will have sufficient resources to enact an effective and wide-ranging distribution plan for the vaccine. Poor working relations between the governments in the West Bank and Gaza, in addition to excessive restrictions on Palestinian's ability to travel, makes coordination all the more difficult. The re-introduction of quarantine measures, though necessary, have possibly exacerbated the problem.

²⁵ <https://www.who.com/news/health/gaza-locks-down/6VRF64JWF5IZEPJ3HF4AHQTV64/>

²⁶ [EU Promises Vaccines and Clean Water for Gaza](#)

²⁷ [France 24: West Bank Lockdown](#)

²⁸ [UN News: Report Finds that Gaza Suffered \\$16.7 Billion Loss from Siege](#)

West Bank

The West Bank continues to have its own challenges around COVID-19, primarily related to differing levels of preparedness and access to equipment that vary between cities. Four governorates were completely closed from December 10 -17 (Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus and Tulkaram); however, residents of Hebron protested against the lockdown, causing widespread arrests. Palestinian in the West Bank were also told to be prepared for random testing at checkpoints, with those refusing the test being barred from entering Israel. Hebron remains critically underserved in terms of PPEs, oxygenators and basic medicines, while Ramallah and Nablus have a steadier pipeline to equipment and services.

In addition to COVID-19 restrictions in the [West Bank](#), in early December, there were over 20 demolitions, seizures or forced movement of people from their homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem by the Israeli Defense Forces, which cited lack of proper building permits as its justification. More than half of the targeted structures were seized without prior notice, a practice that has been increasingly on the rise. The targeting of structures amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic remains of serious concern, with the vulnerability of people affected further compounded by the onset of winter.

Solutions

Anera has identified several key areas of intervention that will be essential in the short term to combat the overlapping, interconnected crises. In each case, an accurate needs assessment to identify gaps is necessary. With vaccines rapidly approaching viability for widespread use, distribution will eventually become a priority for Anera and other organizations working in Palestine. As of this writing, vaccinations have started in many countries. Anera's evolving response plan, including access to vaccines, includes working closely with its medical donations partners to determine which vaccine is most appropriate for distribution in Gaza and the West Bank, as a lack of cold storage options in Palestine will limit the vaccine options available.

Cash Assistance

Cash assistance – in the form of vouchers for food, hygiene, and other necessities – is critically needed for the most vulnerable to have access to adequate nutrition and personal health items. In order to meet some of these challenges, Anera has aimed to reduce food costs through voucher programs. In October, Anera distributed vouchers from reliable local vendors to 2,700 vulnerable families (16,556 total people benefited in the targeted areas, including 3,574 refugees) in Gaza with a grant from Islamic Relief USA.²⁹

Medical Supplies and Equipment

In response to shortages of both chronic medications and COVID-19 related medicines and medical supplies, Anera has organized 13 shipments of medical aid for Gaza and 11 for the West Bank since the pandemic began, with more continuing to arrive. Donated

²⁹ [Anera: Palestinian Families in Gaza Can Now Buy the Food They Need](#)

items include essential drugs for patients with long-term illnesses, ranging from inhalers to cancer drugs, in addition to medical equipment and PPEs. Anera will continue to regularly supply our dozens of partner clinics and hospitals with these items. Funds for shipments of medications as well as local procurement will continue to be a critical need in 2021.

Vaccine distribution will become one of Anera's major priorities once they are mass produced. Vulnerable populations, such as the elderly, essential workers, and hospital workers will need to be vaccinated in order to slow the spread of the disease and allow the Palestinian people to begin rebuilding. Given that the frontrunner vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna must be kept at sub-zero temperatures, there is some question as to whether these will be distributed effectively among the population. Due to the limitations of distributing vaccines from the lone cold storage facility in Jericho, the public may have to wait until more conventional vaccines are approved and for Israel to approve vaccine imports to Gaza. In the meantime, Anera will continue to provide partners in the West Bank and Gaza with hygiene kits and PPE ranging from face shields to protective suits in order to reduce the spread of the virus as much as possible.

Energy and Food

Gaza's energy needs are dire, especially in light of the pandemic, as sparse fuel and electricity access affects health facilities, schools, and conditions at some of the quarantine centers that are critical to efforts to prevent further outbreaks of COVID-19. Families will need cash vouchers for fuel and other winterization measures in the coming months. Anera has worked on a number of alternative energy projects in Gaza and the West Bank, including a solar power initiative that uses the region's sunny climate to make up for limited access to electricity.³⁰

Anera has also responded to food insecurity in Gaza through distributions of food parcels and programs that bolster families' capacity to provide for themselves. Our greenhouse program provides a number of services to small family farmers that helps them to grow their own produce, while making good use of limited space and working within COVID restrictions.³¹

Water, Sanitation, and Health (WASH)

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, public health messaging has stressed the importance of good hygiene. WASH programming in Gaza has always been a major priority for Anera and continues to be as COVID-19 spreads across Palestine. Anera's [current WASH program](#), funded by IRUSA, will install new water and sanitation networks, rehabilitate wells, and build storm water drainage systems while conducting community awareness sessions on COVID-19 prevention.

³⁰ [ANERA: Sustainable Energy in Palestine Through Solar Power](#)

³¹ [ANERA: Greenhouses Make a Difference in Gaza](#)