



The coronavirus vaccine crisis refueled the Palestinian anti-Israeli propaganda and defamation campaign which began during the pandemic

June 24, 2021

Overview

- ▶ After two months of talks, a vaccine exchange deal was negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel committed to giving the PA more than a million doses of vaccines whose expiration date was approaching, and in October 2021 would receive from Pfizer the same number of doses, which had initially been earmarked for the PA. On June 18, 2021, when the first batch of doses was delivered, the PA cancelled the deal and returned the vaccines to Israel. The delivery apparently revealed the existence of the deal, causing a disagreement in the PA between PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh and Hussein al-Sheikh, minister of civilian affairs, as well as extreme criticism of the government, and leading the PA to cancel the deal the deal.
- ▶ The vaccine exchange deal fiasco was another aspect of the vicious Hamas-orchestrated anti-Israel propaganda campaign which accompanied the PA and Gaza Strip's efforts to combat the coronavirus. The campaign was marked by racist propaganda ranging from accusing Israel of deliberately infecting Palestinians to preventing the delivery of medical equipment and vaccines. The PA and Hamas also tried to recruit states, international organizations and global public opinion to their side.
- ▶ In reality, from the moment the virus was detected, Israel, in coordination with the PA, supported the Palestinian efforts to combat the virus. Israel's objective was to reduce the incidence of the disease and keep it from spreading throughout Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. During the first wave of Covid-19 infection Israeli-PA coordination was unprecedented. Israel filled every PA request, including hospitalizing Saeb Erekat, then secretary of the PLO's Executive Committee, in Israel. For purposes of combatting Covid-19, Israel regarded the region as a single unit, knowing that the virus did not differentiate between the PA, Israel and the Gaza Strip. Most of the Israeli-PA activities were carried out by the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), in charge of coordinating civilian issues with the international community and the PA. In this case that included informing the public about hygiene and public health measures, tutoring PA

medical teams on specific Covid-19 issues, determining entrance and exit procedures for Palestinians, delivering medical equipment and coronavirus test kits, enlisting international agencies for assistance and later, delivering vaccines and vaccinating Palestinians working in Israel and Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. It was all done knowing that according to the Oslo Accords, public health in the PA territories is the PA's responsibility.

- ▶ The PA's refusal to accept the vaccines from Israel echoed its refusal to accept medical equipment needed by the PA to combat the coronavirus which was sent through Israel from the UAE. It would appear that the PA's determination to oppose Israel is greater than its concern for the health of the public in its territories.
- ▶ In any event, after a number of waves, the spread of Covid-19 in the PA seems to be waning. As of June 2021, 313,000 Palestinians had been infected and 3,550 had died.

The Coronavirus Vaccine Crisis

Delivering vaccines from Israel to the PA

- ▶ After about two months of deliberations between Israel and the PA, a vaccine exchange deal was formulated. Israel committed to delivering to the PA more than a million doses of the vaccine whose expiration date was approaching, and would receive the same number of doses initially earmarked for the PA from a delivery of Pfizer vaccines that would arrive in October 2021.¹ That was designed to enable the PA to continue vaccinating the population without having to wait until October for vaccines. Israel had already delivered vaccines to the PA for its medical staffs and vaccinated the Palestinians working in Israel.
- ▶ According to the agreement, on June 18, 2021 Israel delivered 90,000 doses of vaccine whose expiration date was the end of June. The delivery apparently exposed the existence of the agreement. Several hours after the trucks bringing the cartons of vaccines arrived in PA, the PA announced it was reneging on the deal and returning the vaccines. PA spokesman Ibrahim Melhem and Mai al-Kayla, PA minister of health, held a press conference where they announced that **PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh had cancelled the agreement with the Israeli ministry of health** and was returning the vaccines which had already been delivered. The **reason given** was that the **vaccines did not meet the specifications** and conditions of the agreement, and would soon expire

¹ Some of the doses had an expiration date of June 30, 2021, and the rest of July 31, 2021.

(Wafa, June 18, 2021). The **real reason** was apparently **public criticism** of the deal and possibly **a disagreement between Muhammad Shtayyeh and Hussein al-Sheikh**, responsible for civilian affairs and the PA's contacts with Israel (QudsN, June 20, 2021).



The first installment of coronavirus vaccines delivered to the PA (COGAT spokesman's unit, June 18, 2021)

► The cancellation of the vaccine exchange deal was widely covered by the Palestinian media, which accused the PA of lack of transparency and exposed the terms of the agreement. There were demands for an independent investigatory commission to examine the agreement; there were also demands for the government to be overthrown (Filastin al-Yawm, June 19, 2021). **Political commentator Saleh al-Noemi** claimed that if the reactions to the agreement had not been so negative, especially on the social networks, the PA would not have withdrawn in such an embarrassing way. **Political commentator Husam Shahr**, writing in Hamas' al-Risalah, called the affair a "scandal" and strongly criticized the PA for agreeing to accept Israel's unwanted vaccines. He said it proved the PA was "fictitious" and operated at the behest of the "occupation." He added that anyone who tried to represent the deal as a win-win situation was deceiving his audience (al-Risalah, June 19, 2021).

► In response to the criticism the Palestinians **stressed that the negotiations had been between Israel, the PA and Pfizer**. Mai al-Kayla, PA minister of health, said the **agreement was with Pfizer, not Israel**, and that signing it was important because the PA government was under pressure to provide vaccines as soon as possible to ensure the opening of the new school year and to reopen the economy. She also claimed that during the negotiations the PA had rejected two of Israel's conditions, one that the agreement would not be signed in the name of the "State of Palestine" and the other that the vaccines would not reach the Gaza Strip (Filastin al-Yawm, Wafa, June 18, 2021).



Right: PA government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem and minister of health Mai al-Kayla hold a press conference in Ramallah to announce the cancellation of the vaccine exchange deal with Israel (Wafa, June 18, 2018). Left: The coronavirus vaccine exchange deal... (al-Quds, June 20, 2021).

► On June 20, 2021, the ministry of health in Ramallah confirmed negotiations had been renewed with Pfizer and Israel for the receipt of the vaccines. Mai al-Kayla announced they had a direct line of communications with Israel and Pfizer to complete the deal. She was indignant at the responses and criticism of the ministry of health, adding it had been attacked by people who were uninformed and unfamiliar with the specifics of the agreement. She said that by the end of 2021 the PA expected to receive more than four million doses of the Pfizer vaccine in three installments (ministry of health in Ramallah Facebook page, June 20, 2021).

► **The affair of the vaccines is another example of the anti-Israel propaganda campaign which has accompanied the PA and the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip's efforts to combat the coronavirus from the beginning of the epidemic.** The PA also tried to enlist countries, international organizations and global public opinion in the campaign, which from the start has been characterized by **lies, malicious defamation and anti-Semitism**. Israel, and especially the Israelis in the communities in Judea and Samaria, have been accused of deliberately infecting the Palestinian people,² although the first cases were brought in by Greek pilgrims in Bethlehem; of delaying the delivery of test kits, medical equipment and appliances for treating patients; and when the vaccination campaign began, of preventing or delaying the delivery of vaccines to the PA. **Many senior figures in the PA also repeatedly claimed that Israel, as "an [alleged] occupying power," was duty-bound to combat the coronavirus epidemic in the PA territories.**

► At the same time, the PA accused Israel of ignoring the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, who, they claimed, had been exposed to the virus.

² Usama Qawasmeh, Fatah spokesman in Judea and Samaria, accused Israel and the settlers of spreading the coronavirus in the PA territories by infecting Palestinian facilities.

► **Hamas also conducted a vicious smear campaign featuring open threats to attack Israel.** It was based on the allegation that Israel had "destroyed the Gaza Strip public health system," which meant they had no suitable medical equipment, which in turn meant they had no effective way to deal with the coronavirus, putting the lives of two million people in danger.³ Hamas figures, led by **Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau** in the Gaza Strip, also threatened that should there be a shortage of ventilators and other medical equipment, Hamas would use force against Israel and "make six million Israeli settlers stop breathing."



A cartoon by Alaa' al-Laqta. The Arabic reads, "The virus most dangerous to humanity..." (Palinfo Twitter account, March 15, 2021).

► It is important to remember that **since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis there has been Israeli-PA coordination.** PA government speaker **Ibrahim Melhem** reported that the PA and Israel had opened a joint situation room for coordinating the issue of Covid-19 at the highest political levels. He added that coordination at the borders and communications with the Israelis made it possible for the PA to take drastic steps to prevent the spread of the epidemic (Agence France-Presse, March 19, 2021).

► Israel also coordinated conditions with the PA for the continued work of Palestinians in Israel who were able to spend the night near their places of employment (while their sleeping conditions were criticized). Israel later vaccinated all the Palestinians working in its territory, transmitted 120 million shekels (about \$37 million) to the PA from the tax revenues and enabled medical equipment to flow into the Gaza Strip through the crossings, including ventilators, test kits, masks and other PPE (See Appendix A).

³ It is superfluous to point out that since Hamas seized power in the Gaza Strip, the state of its public health system and the financial hardships of the local residents do not result from Israeli's policies, but rather reflect **Hamas' fundamental order of priorities, the direct outcome of its ideology, based on the objective of using terrorism and violence to destroy Israel. Hamas' top priority is its military buildup, achieved at the expense of the needs of its civilians.**

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Aid delivered to the PA (al-Munsaq, April 12, 2020).

Appendix A

The Palestinian anti-Israel coronavirus propaganda campaign

► From the beginning, the efforts of the PA and Hamas leadership to combat the coronavirus epidemic were accompanied by a massive anti-Israeli propaganda campaign which included accusations ranging from Israel's deliberately spreading the virus to its preventing the delivery of medical equipment and test kits, and later vaccines, to the PA territories

Accusing Israel of deliberately infecting the PA population

► The PA immediately found it was difficult to prevent relations between the Palestinians (from Judea and Samaria) and Israel. A large number of Palestinians work in Israel, strong clan ties exist between Palestinians in the Hebron district and Bedouins in Israel's south, and similar ties between Israeli Arabs and the cities in Judea and Samaria.



Cartoonist Alaa' al-Laqta accuses former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of transmitting Covid-19 to the Palestinians. The Arabic reads, "Virus transmission" (Alaa' al-Laqta's Facebook page, April 7, 2021).

► The result was that the coronavirus infection crossed the Green Line in both directions. The unmonitored and uncontrolled movement of individuals east and west increased with the closure of the crossings and the stopping of Israel-PA security coordination, a tactic which was part of the Palestinian's campaign to put the blame for the coronavirus infection in the PA territories on Israel. **The campaign focused on the following specific issues:**

► **Palestinians working in Israel:** Initially the PA allowed Palestinians to remain at their places of employment inside Israel for a month or two because their salaries were an important source of income. Later, when the virus spread in both Israeli and Palestinian territories, **the PA banned Palestinians from working in Israel and ordered them to return home.** Continuing the defamation of Israel, Palestinians spokesmen claimed the

work environment in Israel had turned into "an incubator for the coronavirus." Israel was then accused of neglecting the Palestinian workers. In reality, the first source of infection in the PA was a group of Greek pilgrims who visited the holy sites in Bethlehem. Still later active cases were detected among people entering the PA territories through the Allenby Bridge, having come from countries such as Turkey, Britain and Pakistan.

► **PA figures said the following:**

◆ **PA government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem** held a press conference where he condemned what he called the "racism" of the Israel government, army and employers regarding Palestinian workers. He claimed the places designated for them to sleep were unfit for human habitation and were "incubators for the coronavirus." He also made sure to stress that the PA would protect the Palestinian workers, take care of and be responsible for them (Wafa, March 24, 2021).

◆ **Bassem Zakarna, chairman of the PA public workers' union and a Fatah representative in the Palestinian Legislative Council**, accused Israel of spreading the virus through its treatment of Palestinian workers. Israel's policy of returning suspected coronavirus cases to the PA was referred to "irresponsible." He claimed Israel had spread the virus to the PA and ruined the PA's efforts to keep it from spreading (Ma'an, March 25, 2021).



Palestinian workers try to enter Israel after the lockdown on the territories (Palestine Online Twitter account, March 23, 2021).

► **Residents of the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria:** Unlike the permission given to Palestinians to work in Israel, the PA banned them from working in the Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria. (Before the coronavirus epidemic broke out there were about 73,000 Palestinians working in the settlements.) The reason given was that the Israeli communities were a source of infection. The PA also threatened serious consequences for anyone who violated the order. **Abdallah Kamil, governor of the Salfit**

district, said all contact with the settlers was forbidden, because "the settlements are a source of the coronavirus..." (Wafa, March 24, 2021). **Hamas government spokesman Ibrahim Melhem** opposed Palestinians going to work in the settlements, saying, "we issued warnings and demanded the workers not go to the settlements because [the settlements] have turned into focuses for the virus" (Agence France-Presse, May 18, 2021).

► **Arabs living in east Jerusalem: Mai al-Kayla, PA minister of health**, accused Israel of preventing Palestinian medical personnel from operating in Jerusalem, herself refusing to provide the residents of east Jerusalem with the medical services necessary to protect them from the spread of the disease (ministry of health in Ramallah Facebook page, August 8 2020). She claimed the only thing Israel had agreed to was to administer tests at the medical centers in east Jerusalem. She claimed the hospitals in [east] Jerusalem were prepared to receive patients and that she had unofficially visited [east] Jerusalem to examine the needs of its hospitals (Dunia al-Watan, August 8, 2020).⁴



Mai al-Kayla, PA minister of health visits hospitals in east Jerusalem (Facebook page of the ministry of health in Ramallah, August 6, 2020).



► **Israeli Arabs:** The PA regarded the Israeli Arabs who entered the cities in Judea and Samaria as sources of infection. The lockdown declared by the PA government included a ban on Israelis entering the PA territories. **Israeli Arabs and Palestinians interface in many locations** and Israeli Arabs often visit the cities in Judea and Samaria for shopping and entertainment. Some even spend the night there. In addition, there are Israeli Arabs who are married to Palestinians, and some of Israeli Arab weddings are held in reception venues in the PA cities or east Jerusalem.

⁴ On August 6, 2020, the Facebook page of the ministry of health in Ramallah posted a report about her visit to [east] Jerusalem. According to the report, while there she signed an agreement for collaboration with the ophthalmology department of St. John's Hospital and visited St. Joseph's Hospital. She stressed the ministry of health's support for the hospitals in [east] Jerusalem (ministry of health in Ramallah Facebook page, August 6, 2020).



Israelis go shopping in the market in Barta'a, which sits on the Israel-PA border (Facebook page of the Jalameh Crossing from the Jenin side, November 14, 2020).

Some of the cars have Israeli license plates.

- ▶ When coronavirus variants were detected in the PA territory, **Dr. Kamal al-Shakhra, spokesman for the ministry of health in Ramallah**, claimed all the variants had come from Israel. That, he claimed, was because Israel had not vaccinated the Arab citizens who entered the PA and brought the variants with them (Dunia al-Watan, April 1, 2021).

Palestinian terrorist operatives imprisoned in Israel

- ▶ From **the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, the PA placed the responsibility for the health of the Palestinian terrorist prisoners in its jails squarely on Israel**. The PA accused Israel of ignoring the prisoners and claimed there was a genuine danger Covid-19 would spread among them. PA and Hamas spokesmen demanded Israel release the prisoners, or at least the ill, women, children and the elderly. **The PA appealed to international organizations, such as the Red Cross and the W.H.O., accusing Israel of medical malpractice and demanding Israel allow the Red Cross to administer coronavirus tests to prisoners in Israeli jails**.

- ▶ **Hamas also blamed Israel** for the prisoners' condition. **Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem** called on all the international institutions to intervene quickly to ensure prisoner health. He accused Israel of responsibility for the Israeli prison system's [alleged] neglect of the Palestinian prisoners, calling any harm that came to them a red line that could not be crossed (Hamas website, March 24, 2021). **Hamas spokesman Abd al-Latif al-Qanua** said Israel was responsible for the unrest among the prisoners, and for the ongoing oppression and deprivation of their legitimate rights, the most important of which was protection from Covid-19 (Hamas website, March 25, 2021).

- ▶ On March 21, 2020 **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, gave a speech in which he said Hamas continually monitored the conditions of the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. He called on the international community and relevant organizations to act

quickly to ensure the prisoners would receive protection from the virus. He warned Israel against harming the prisoners (Hamas website, March 21, 2021).



Cartoon by Hamas-affiliated Omayya Joha. The Arabic reads, "The Palestinian prisoners between a rock and hard place [i.e., "the coronavirus hammer and the Israeli occupation"] (al-Quds al-Arabi, March 24, 2020).

► When **Kamal Abu Wa'er**, a Palestinian terrorist prisoner serving a life term, became ill with laryngeal cancer (which eventually caused his death), the PA tried to secure his release. The incident was exploited to raise the issue of the release of all the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. **Mahmoud Abbas** spoke to the prisoner's father and **told him he would issue orders for all the senior figures to begin an international campaign to exert pressure on Israel** to ensure Kamal Abu Wa'er received proper treatment and release (Wafa, July 15, 2020). **Mai al-Kayla**, PA minister of health, said her ministry was waiting for an answer from the Red Cross for a way to allow Palestinian medical staff to administer coronavirus tests to prisoners in Israeli jails (Wafa, July 16, 2020).

► Mahmoud Abbas sent orders to **Saeb Erekat**, at the time secretary of the PLO's **Executive Committee** (who later was infected with coronavirus, treated in Israel and eventually died of coronavirus-related complications), to send official communiqués to the UN secretary general, the office of the head of the UN Human Rights Council, the head of the International Red Cross Committee, the foreign ministers of Russia, China, the UAE and Britain, and the secretary generals of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The communiqués dealt with the [alleged] dangerous situation created by the spread of the coronavirus and condemned the [alleged] medical malpractice in Israel's prison system (Wafa, July 18, 2020).

► **Omar Awadallah**, head of the UN and special agencies department in the Palestinian foreign ministry, announced, following orders from Mahmoud Abbas, that they had begun international activity. A request, he said, would be sent to the W.H.O. to appoint a commission to investigate the health of the prisoners and the conditions of their

incarceration, and to bring the issue before the UN Human Rights Council (Wafa, July 16, 2021).

► **When Israel began its campaign to vaccinate the population, the PA and Hamas accused Israel of preventing the Palestinian prisoners from receiving the vaccine, saying Israel was responsible for vaccinating them.** The Fatah movement also placed full responsibility on Israel for the lives of the Palestinian prisoners, especially in light of the spread of the coronavirus in the prisons and in view of Israel's alleged refusal to vaccinate the prisoners.⁵ The **Palestinian National Council** called for sanctions to be imposed on rotating Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister Benny Gantz for Israel's refusal to vaccinate the Palestinian prisoners (Wafa, January 14, 2021). **Mai al-Kayla** met an International Red Cross Committee delegation and asked them to exert pressure on Israel to vaccinate the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and to provide them with what they needed to ensure their health (Dunia al-Watan, January 14, 2021).

Accusations of refusing treatment and delaying the delivery of medical equipment

► In addition to accusing Israel of deliberately infecting the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria with Covid-19, the PA also accused Israel of delaying the delivery of medical equipment and test kits to the PA territories. For instance, the PA government accused Israel of delaying the delivery of 100,000 test kits at Ben-Gurion International Airport, and the UN was called on to help deliver them to the PA.

► **Ibrahim Ramadan, governor of the Nablus district**, and **Mai al-Kayla** held a press conference on July 15, 2020, where they accused Israel of delaying the delivery of **100,000 test kits waiting at Ben-Gurion International Airport**. They were surprised, they said, that Israel would delay the delivery, adding that the UN was working to transfer the medical equipment from Israel to the PA (ministry of health in Ramallah Facebook page, July 15, 2021). Meeting with the governors and directors of the health services of the PA districts, Mai al-Kayla said that 100,000 test kits, bought on the global market, had arrived at Ben-Gurion International Airport and **could not be delivered to the PA because security coordination had been stopped** (Wafa, July 15, 2021).

► During an online meeting to mark International Health Day, **Mai al-Kayla claimed Israel ("the occupation") was the main obstacle to be overcome by PA in order to provide**

⁵ The Israeli media reported that the prison services began vaccinating prisoners on January 17, 2021, after 83% of prison workers had been vaccinated.

medical services to the villages, towns and refugee camps, especially in Area C. She said that despite the difficulties, the ministry of health invested most of its efforts in providing medical services to the entire Palestinian public, and thanked the W.H.O. for its assistance and support (ministry of health in Ramallah Facebook page, April 14, 2021).

Other accusations regarding the vaccines

► When the fervor for acquiring vaccines and inoculating the population began, the PA exploited the international momentum for an anti-Israel propaganda fest. **The PA accused Israel of evading its commitments and not making sure the Palestinian population was vaccinated. The PA foreign ministry** accused Israel of "medical apartheid" and announced that as an "occupying power" Israel had to supply the Palestinian people with vaccines. The foreign ministry alleged that by not giving the Palestinians vaccines Israel was discriminating against the Palestinian people and depriving them of their right to health. The ministry claimed that according to Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which reads, "... the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining, **with the cooperation of national and local authorities**, the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory, with ...the adoption and application of the prophylactic and preventive measures necessary to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics...",⁶ Israel had to provide the Palestinians with vaccines and vaccinate the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. The ministry called on the international community to exert pressure on Israel to meet its responsibility (Wafa, January 9, 2021).

► **Senior Palestinian figures** also claimed Israel was responsible for supplying the Palestinians with vaccines:

- ◆ **Palestinian foreign minister Riyad al-Maliki** claimed it was Israel's responsibility to supply the Palestinian people with vaccines in accordance with international law, and the Palestinians had sent communiqués relating to the issue to the heads of state of several countries (Palestinian TV, February 24, 2021). On another occasion he accused Israel of exploiting the hardships of the international community and using blackmail to secure a promise of coronavirus vaccines. He claimed that was how Israel bought the countries' trust and support, manifested when those countries opened their embassies in Jerusalem. He also claimed the Palestinians' hardships had

⁶ Wikipedia, ITIC emphasis

worsened during the coronavirus epidemic because Israel had neglected its responsibility as an "occupying power" to meet the needs of the Palestinian population, and refused to provide them with vaccines (al-Hayat al-Jadeeda, April 2, 2021).

◆ A meeting of **Fatah's Central Committee** chaired by **Mahmoud Abbas** called on the international community to help provide vaccines for the Palestinians, stressing it was Israel's responsibility as "occupying power" to provide them (Wafa, February 25, 2021).

◆ **Mai al-Kayla, PA minister of health**, claimed Israel arbitrarily prevented the delivery of 2,000 doses of the vaccine to the Gaza Strip in violation of all international norms, laws and agreements (Wafa, February 15, 2021).

► In addition to claims Israel was duty-bound to vaccinate the Palestinian population, the ministry of health in Ramallah made independent efforts to acquire the vaccine. Asked by an interviewer if Israel had to provide the PA with medical assistance, Mai al-Kayla claimed the Fourth Geneva Convention required it. However, **since the Palestinians defined themselves as an independent country, the PA government intended to rely only on itself** (ministry of health in Ramallah Facebook page, February 24, 2021). Nevertheless, the Palestinian foreign ministry claimed that the PA's independent search for vaccines did not absolve Israel of the responsibility to provide them, as required by international law (Wafa, January 9, 2021).

► On March 8, 2021, Israel began vaccinating the Palestinians working in Israel who held valid work permits. The effort was led by the Israeli ministry of health, the COGAT in collaboration with the IDF's Central Command and the border crossings authority at eight crossings simultaneously. More than 150,000 Palestinians workers have been vaccinated (Israeli ministry of health website).



Vaccinating Palestinians who hold valid work permits for Israel (COGAT Facebook page in English, March 8, 2021). Left: Magen David Adom spokesman's unit, March 8, 2021).

Appendix B

Accusations against Israel from the Gaza Strip

Hamas

- ▶ Even before active cases had been detected in the Gaza Strip, **Dr. Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in Gaza**, met with the director of the W.H.O.'s office in the PA territories and claimed Israel was responsible for the medical and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. He called on the UN to take responsibility for the Gaza Strip and meet its urgent medical needs as quickly as possible (Filastin al-Yawm, March 22, 2020). The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar quoted " Hamas sources " as saying they had urged the Egyptian and Qatari mediators to deal with the economic situation in the Gaza Strip in light of the medical emergency. They made it clear to the mediators that **they were capable of igniting the Israel-Gaza Strip border** and creating a situation Israel did not want. The "resistance," [i.e., the terrorist organizations], they claimed, could **send half of Israel's population running to bomb shelters**, which **would double the number of active coronavirus cases**, and lead to Israel's "losing control of the situation" (al-Akhbar, March 21, 2021).
- ▶ A few days later the first two active cases of Covid-19 were detected in the Gaza Strip and Hamas reacted by immediately charging Israel with responsibility for the dismal condition of Gaza's public health system, its non-functional infrastructure and the shortage of medications and medical equipment. Hamas falsely accused Israel for what it called the "systematic destruction of the public health system and humanitarian services in the Gaza Strip." It was all the result, Hamas claimed, of the [so-called Israeli] "siege" and the conduct of the "Zionist occupation," which endangered the lives of two million Gazans, who had to combat the spread of the coronavirus under difficult medical and humanitarian conditions.
- ▶ The Gazan leadership also accused Israel of preventing the delivery of medical equipment to the Gaza Strip.⁷ The ministry of health in Gaza told the ministry of health in

⁷ Following Hamas' baseless claims, **General Kamil Rukun**, the **COGAT** at the time, posted a video to the social networks addressed to the residents of the Gaza Strip. He stated **that Israel had not rejected any request for delivery of medical equipment to the Gaza Strip**, that Israel was helping the public health system in the Gaza Strip and that Israel **had enlisted the help of the international community**. He said dozens of ventilators had been delivered as well as PRC machines which increased the number of tests that could be administered on a daily basis, as well as dozens of oxygen

Ramallah, the W.H.O. and other international organizations that they had almost run out of testing materials. The ministry of health claimed Israel was responsible for the situation because it did not allow them to be delivered to the Gaza Strip. The ministry of health also said that when Israel did allow deliveries they only allowed small quantities to enter the Gaza Strip which were barely sufficient for a few days (Dunia al-Watan, December 6, 2021).

Muhammad Hamad, head of the administrative department of the ministry of health in Gaza, claimed Israel was the main obstacle to the delivery of the oxygen stations and containers of liquid oxygen they had been awaiting for months (Filastin al-Yawm, December 26, 2020).

► **The Gazan campaign was also accompanied by threats against Israel.** The main threat was that if Hamas lost control over the effort to combat the spread of the virus in Gaza Strip, **they could make Israel provide them with everything they needed by using force, including rocket fire.** On April 2, 2020, **Yahya al-Sinwar**, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip, gave a speech in response to a statement made the Israeli defense minister on April 1, 2020, which the Palestinians interpreted as conditioning help for the Gaza Strip on the return of Israel's MIAs. Al-Sinwar said that "if our coronavirus patients can't breathe, we will see to it that six million Israelis can't breathe. If our people don't eat, we will teach [Naftali] Bennett a lesson. **When our people need ventilators and medications, we will take what we need from him, as 'protection,' and he knows we can do it.**" Despite the threats there was no particular change in the security situation along the border, with most of Hamas' attention focused on combatting the spread of the virus.



Yahya al-Sinwar [right], "We will make six million settlers stop breathing when our people need ventilators and medical equipment..." (Hamas website, April 2, 2020).

stations and inhalation devices for use in both hospitals and homes, medications and medical equipment (Radio Kol Hi, November 25, 2020).

► Other statements included the following:

◆ **Senior Hamas figure Khalil al-Haya shifted responsibility for the spread of Covid-19 in the Gaza Strip to Israel** (Hamas website, March 23, 2020). He also said Hamas would not agree to the death of any Gazan from Covid-19. He claimed Israel ("the occupation") bore full responsibility for providing everything the Gaza Strip needed to combat the coronavirus. **He threatened Hamas would take "other steps" if Israel prevented the Gaza Strip from combatting the disease** (Hamas website, April 19, 2020).



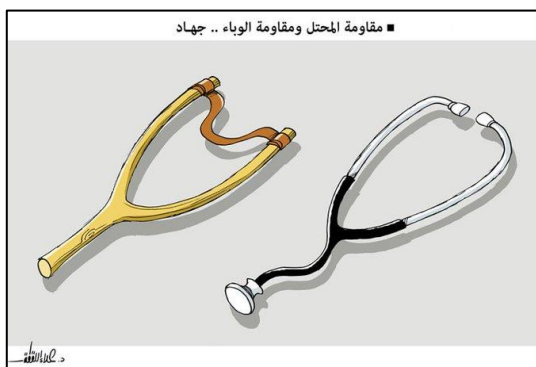
Khalil al-Haya during the interview (Shehab Facebook page, March 23, 2020).

◆ On March 21, 2020, **Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau**, who was not in the Gaza Strip at the time, gave a speech in which he claimed the "siege imposed" on the Gaza Strip had to end once and for all, and its continuation endangered two million people. He said Israel ("the occupation") was responsible for everything that might happen [as a result of the coronavirus epidemic] (Hamas website, March 21, 2020). On another occasion, speaking for his Gazan audience, he said the Gaza Strip faced three great, simultaneous challenges, which were the [so-called] "siege," the coronavirus and the "aggression" of the Israeli army. He claimed Israel bore full responsibility for the situation and it had to lift it the "siege" immediately and allow medical necessities for combatting Covid-19 to be delivered to the Gaza Strip (Shehab, August 26, 2020).

◆ **Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum** said the "Israeli occupation's continuing siege" of the Gaza Strip was "aggression and a crime against humanity," especially in light of the coronavirus. He claimed the Israeli "occupation" would bear the consequences endangering Gazan lives. What was necessary, he said, was to end the "siege" immediately, **to supply everything the Gazan population needed and everything necessary to combat the coronavirus** (Hamas website, March 24, 2020).

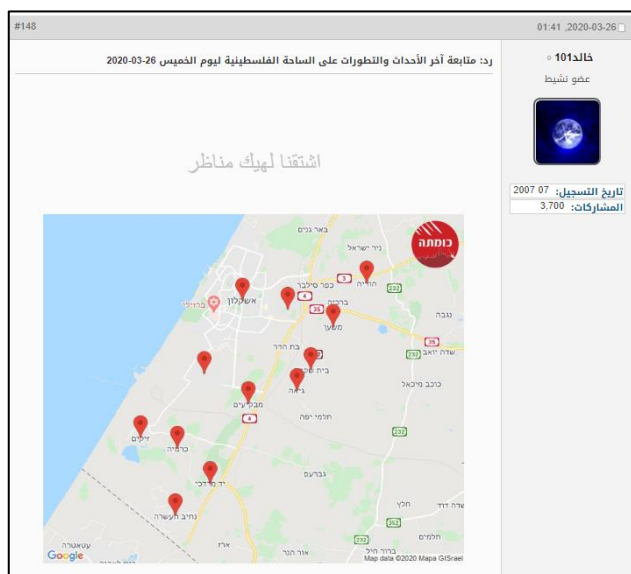
He later issued a call to the human rights organizations, humanitarian organizations, the international community and the W.H.O. to act immediately **to end the "oppressive siege" imposed by the "Israeli occupation" on the Gaza Strip**, and to provide everything necessary to combat the virus (Hamas website, August 25, 2020).

◆ **Musheir al-Masri, speaker of the Hamas faction** in the Palestinian Legislative Council, said the government in the Gaza Strip had increased its efforts to halt the spread of the coronavirus but the "siege" imposed by Israel contributed significantly to their inability to cope with the problem. He said first the "siege" had to be lifted, then the Gaza Strip would be able to overcome other difficulties (al-Aqsa, November 29, 2020).



Cartoon by Alaa' al-Laqta. The Arabic reads, "The struggle against the occupation and the struggle against the epidemic..jihad" (alresala.net Twitter account, March 25, 2020).

► A Hamas forum (Paldf) user named Majed al-Zeitoun wrote that if the number of cases [of coronavirus] increased they would ask the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades (Hamas' military-terrorist wing) to enlist all its "soldiers" and strike the "entity" [i.e., Israel] with all its force. They did not want to die of Covid-19, he wrote (Paldf, March 26, 2020). He also posted a map of Israeli communities where red alert rocket fire warnings had been issued, writing "We miss seeing this..." (Paldf, March 26, 2020).



A Hamas web user longs for red rocket fire alerts in the locations marked (Hamas forum, May 26, 2021).

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and other terrorist organizations

► **PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhlah also threatened Israel** during the epidemic, saying Israel had to choose, its population could either run for the bomb shelters or lift the "siege" and release the [Palestinian terrorist] prisoners (al-Aqsa, April 5, 2020).

► **The Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip** issued a joint statement declaring Israel ("the Zionist occupation") fully responsible for the lives of the Palestinians, adding they would not remain silent in the face of the "oppressive siege." They threatened that unless Israel lifted the "siege" and allowed the delivery of all medical and other necessities for combatting the virus they would act against Israel (Dunia al-Watan, August 27, 2020).

Appendix C

Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) Combats the Coronavirus Epidemic in the Palestinian Arena⁸

Overview

- ▶ The coronavirus epidemic broke out at a time when international commitment to invest in and donate to the Palestinian public health system was relatively low. However, today it can be said that the Palestinian public health system successfully overcame its difficulties and instability during the initial phases of the epidemic and successfully halted its spread.
- ▶ From the outbreak of the epidemic Israel coordinated with the PA to combat the virus, limit infection and prevent a wide outbreak in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip because, among other reasons, it was in the mutual interest of both sides. Coordination during the first wave of the disease was unprecedented, and Israel responded to every PA request. Israel, knowing the virus did not distinguish between Judea and Samaria, Israel and the Gaza Strip, treated the entire region as one unit. Most of the coordination was conducted by the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which was responsible for civilian affairs in the Palestinian arena, in coordination with the PA and the international community.
- ▶ Aid for the Palestinians focused on four areas: professional aid through training, guidance and providing procedures and instructions; coordination with the international community and enlisting its assistance to improve the capabilities of the public health system; coordinating and providing assistance; and informing the public about how to conduct their lives under the coronavirus guidelines.
- ▶ The COGAT cooperated with the international community to combat the virus and minimize its spread in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. Regular meetings were held and weekly reports were given on efforts invested and progress made to bring international assistance to areas with potentially negative effects on the entire arena. The situation was assessed weekly in cooperation with the international community for an exact picture of infection in the PA arena. The processes for the confirmation and release of donations for the Palestinian public health system were also made more efficient.

⁸ Based on data and assessment from the COGAT unit.

► The COGAT enlisted the international community to transfer funds for medical assistance and support for the Palestinian public health system. To combat the epidemic the international community transferred **one billion dollars** worth of aid to the PA (Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip).

Making information available to the population

► Throughout the epidemic videos and pamphlets providing information were published with guidelines on how to prevent the spread of the virus. Public health guidelines were issued to protect public health during the Muslim holidays of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, and recommendations were made to prevent gatherings, mass prayers, weddings and funerals. Information and updates were given about testing centers and other relevant issues, and **hundreds of publications** were uploaded to the social networks to raise awareness, including videos, infographics and graphs providing recommendations from the Israeli ministry of health. Videos were made in studios and in the coronavirus wards in hospitals in east Jerusalem, where doctors treating Palestinian patients and personnel responsible for coronavirus wards were interviewed with the objective of raising public awareness to the dangers of the disease and providing information about how it was being combatted. Guidelines were also issued for travelers going abroad, and information was provided to returning travelers about the need for isolation.



Right: Social distancing and disease prevention during the holidays. Left: Information about how long the virus can survive on surfaces (al-Munsaq)

Activities of the al-Munsaq ("coordinator") .pdf information platform during the coronavirus crisis

- ▶ Throughout the crisis the COGAT information unit provided continuous information for the Palestinian population in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip about the coronavirus and how to protect themselves against it. The al-Munsaq platform, which had a following of 700,000, most of them Palestinians, issued important information in Arabic for the Palestinian population, providing instructions for self-protection and personal hygiene, rules for isolation and preserving public health, explanations about the virus, its symptoms and transmission. Regular updates were issued to the COGAT's digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter account and the Arabic unit website) which included information about changes in internal travel, regional and general lockdowns, the status of the border crossings, information about issuing permits and about public services. Throughout the months of the epidemic the unit conducted an information campaign which included publications, original al-Munsaq information videos, as well as information about special circumstances such as events during Ramadan.
- ▶ Arabic translations were made for the Palestinians of information and procedural instructions from the Israeli ministry of health, the IDF Home Front and Magen David Adom. A concerted effort was made to bring the information to the Palestinian population in the best possible and most effective format to keep the virus from spreading.
- ▶ All changes relating to the employment of Palestinians in Israel during the coronavirus epidemic, including instructions for extended stays in Israeli territory, were accompanied by detailed explanations on the al-Munsaq page to facilitate the understanding of the changes. The vaccination of Palestinians working in Israel, which was carried out at eight crossings and in industrial zones, was accompanied by a campaign explaining exactly how the process would work, making the information available to the Palestinian public in the most convenient form.
- ▶ In addition, articles were continuously posted to the various COGAT platforms containing information relevant to the epidemic, the economy, public health, agriculture, etc. Hundreds of posts were uploaded in various forms, including videos, animations, pictures taken in real time, live reports, graphics, infographics, etc., which were followed by millions of people.



Information about the need for masks and gloves (al-Munsaq)

Judea and Samaria

The coronavirus outbreak in Judea and Samaria

► The PA, including its civilian and security institutions, were enlisted to combat the spread of the coronavirus. From the beginning of the crisis the PA instituted measures to ensure social distancing, isolated the districts from one another, coordinated the activities of the Palestinian security forces in the rural areas, imposed quarantines and in some of the red zones imposed lockdowns as well. During the first wave the Palestinian public was generally satisfied with the PA's handling of the crisis and cooperated with the decisions involving lockdowns. The damage done to sources of income when businesses were closed was also received with understanding because the Palestinians worried about the consequences for public health if the virus spread.

► The turning point came during Ramadan and the Eid al-Fitr holiday in 2020 (April-May), which initiated the second wave. Some of the limitations were removed, businesses reopened for shoppers, and the schools and mosques were also gradually reopened. Public compliance with public health guidelines was weak and instructions were not always followed. The development of the second wave raised public concerns about daily life and income, and public health guidelines were only partially implemented. A lockdown was imposed on some towns and villages where active cases were detected. Hebron and the villages around it were areas of extensive infection. Stopping coordination with Israel caused the PA significant difficulties in deploying its forces, supervising the movement of Palestinians working in Israel and filling the void left by stopping coordination with the Israeli ministry of health. However, even when coordination was stopped, **Covid-19 was considered an exception.**

► The second wave was a formidable challenge for the PA because it peaked during the winter. The level of testing was low and did not reflect the true rate of infection. In December 2020 there were about 12,000 active cases and about 1,000 Palestinians had died. The hospitals found it difficult to cope with the rise in infection, and hospitals in Bethlehem and Tulkarm reported full occupancy; patients from those districts were transferred to other hospitals. Public faith in the health-care system dropped.

Israel's civilian policies

► Throughout the entire coronavirus epidemic the COGAT had to balance between reducing infection and preserving the fabric of Palestinian society. Many projects in various fields continued uninterrupted while public health policies were adhered to.

► **The crossings between Israel and the PA were closed during the coronavirus crisis** to limit the transmission of infection. Every day more than 100,000 Palestinian workers enter Israel who could find themselves unemployed when the crossings close. **During the coronavirus epidemic the entrance of Palestinian workers was authorized** as was their staying overnight for long periods of time, coordinated with their places of employment. In addition, with a full understanding of their economic importance, throughout the epidemic an attempt was made **to continue the operations of the commercial crossings. Medical treatment did not stop and anyone who had a medical emergency could enter Israel.**

► **One of Israel's most important actions was vaccinating the Palestinians who worked in Israel.** They contribute 16% of the PA's GNP, and vaccination enabled them to continue working and contributed to the beginning of Palestinian herd immunity.

► The decision to vaccinate Palestinian workers was made in February 2021 with the objective of reducing coronavirus infection in both Israel and the PA. The vaccines were produced by Moderna and Palestinians were vaccinated in Israeli territory at the crossings and industrial zones. The first round of vaccinations began on March 4, 2021 and lasted until March 8; approximately 107,000 Palestinians were inoculated. The vaccinations were administered by Magen David Adom workers, with the exception of two teams from the staff of Israel's Shiba government hospital. The second round of vaccinations began on April 4, 2021 and lasted until April 29, so by the end of April 104,212 Palestinians had received two doses of the vaccine, and 3,000 only one.

► In addition to vaccinating Palestinians, Israel also did the following:

- ◆ Held about 30 formal and informal meetings with Israeli and Palestinian health workers for deployment to treat Covid-19 in Judea and Samaria and to monitor the ongoing level of infection.
- ◆ Teams from Magen David Adom and the Tel Hashomer Hospital held 11 tutoring sessions for PA medical personnel



Tutoring Palestinian medical personnel, March 2020 (al-Munsaq)

- ◆ Ordered cooperation between Israel's district health offices in order to achieve a comprehensive picture of infected Palestinians discovered in Israeli territory, and ordered the information sent to the relevant authorities.
- ◆ Assisted the PA in acquiring medical equipment and purchasing vaccines.

Coordination and providing aid

- Deliveries of vaccines to the PA coordinated by Israel (as of June 1, 2021).

Date	Donor	Doses	Manufacturer
04.02.21	Russia	10,000	Sputnik
17.03.21	COVAX (UNICEF)	40,140	Pfizer, AstraZeneca
29.03.21	China	100,000	China
30.03.21	India	25,000	AstraZeneca
12.04.21	Russia	48,000	AstraZeneca
19.04.21	UNICEF	43,000	AstraZeneca
May	Russia	20,000	Sputnik
24.05.21		105,3000	Pfizer
25.05.21	COVAX	56,160	Pfizer

- Throughout the crisis the coordination and liaison administrations in Judea and Samaria, along with the civil administration and health coordinator, worked together,

insofar as was possible, to help prevent the spread of the epidemic in Judea and Samaria, **including establishing coronavirus wards in the hospitals in east Jerusalem.**

► Seminars were held for Palestinian personnel in Judea and Samaria and Israel with the support of the civilian administration, the civilian administration health coordinator and the Israeli ministry of health. Medical information was shared and medical equipment was delivered, including coronavirus test kits, PPE and medications. There was also cooperation in transferring patients and coronavirus carriers for treatment.

► The various coordination and liaison administrations were always prepared to deliver medical equipment donated by the international community to Judea and Samaria. In May 2020 they helped deliver **two million masks, half a million latex gloves and one hundred ICU beds** to Judea and Samaria through the Allenby Bridge. The same week the delivery of 500 test kits for Judea and Samaria was coordinated, as was the delivery of respirators for hospitals in Nablus and Hebron.



Delivering PPE, medical equipment and test kits to Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip (al-Munsaq)



Coordinating the delivery of sanitizing products to Judea and Samaria, March 202 (al-Munsaq)

The Gaza Strip

The coronavirus outbreak in the Gaza Strip

► The coronavirus was a serious medical challenge for the Gaza Strip because its public health system was weak and suffered from material shortages, and the PA's attention was not focused on the Gaza Strip. The first wave of coronavirus in Gaza was between March and July 2020. The first active cases were detected in March 2020 among returning Gazans at the Rafah Crossing. In April 2020 cases were being detected in the quarantine centers and the Turkish Hospital was opened. In May 2020 there was a significant rise in the number of cases, and in June and July infection tended to stabilize and preparations were made to open the Rafah Crossing.

► The second wave of Covid-19 began in August 2020 when the virus began spreading beyond the quarantine centers and preparations were made for a general lockdown. Active cases were detected in several Gaza Strip districts and contact tracing attempts were made. Infection peaked in October 2020 and restrictions were imposed on travel within the Gaza Strip. In November 2020 a concentrated effort was made to administer tests, and more restrictions were imposed. In December 2020 a full general lockdown was imposed on weekends and a night curfew during the week. In January and February 2021 infections stabilized and began to decline significantly, leading to the easing of restrictions.

Israel's civilian policies

► Every day hundreds of Gazans exit the Strip through the Erez Crossing, seeking medical attention in Israel or Judea and Samaria. Businessmen also exit and reenter, enabling commerce which greatly profits the Gaza Strip economy. When Covid-19 spread through Israel, Judea and Samaria, and wanting to prevent it from spreading from place to place, Israel closed the Erez Crossing to the passage of businessmen. Patients receiving treatment in Israel or Judea and Samaria could continue exiting and entering Gaza as long as no coronavirus restrictions were placed on movement inside the Strip.

► The COGAT unit did everything in its power to make it easier for patients during the crisis and formulated new procedures for coordinating the delivery of medications to the Gaza Strip for patients who in the past had left the Gaza Strip for medical treatment.

Coordinating the delivery of assistance

► Throughout the coronavirus crisis an effort was made with international organizations to raise the capability of the public health system in the Gaza Strip to combat the disease. Israel delivered medical equipment, materials for Covid-19 laboratory testing and medications to the Gaza Strip, including for the chronically ill.



Delivering medical equipment and test kits to the Gaza Strip, February-March 2020 (al-Munsaq).

► Thanks to Israel's assistance, today the public health system in the Gaza Strip is in good condition and has improved its capabilities regarding to both the coronavirus and other medical issues. On the other hand, there are many facets of the health system, not specifically related Covid-19, that need improvement, particularly in the areas of medications and equipment for treating cancer, cardiac and renal patients, and complex operations. The public health system in the Gaza Strip was improved thanks to Israel's efforts in enlisting the assistance of the international community and the PA to deliver aid to the Gaza Strip in coordination with Israel. That meant coordinating the delivery of coronavirus equipment from international sources to the Gaza Strip, including PPE, masks, swabs and other medical equipment.

► **Improvements in the Gaza Strip public health system**

	At the start of the epidemic	Today
Coronavirus testing capabilities	200 tests per day	2,800 tests per day
PCR machines	2	12
Ventilators	96	218
Oxygen masks	A few dozen	280 oxygen masks, 27 of the CPCP face masks
Oxygen stations	An isolated few	82
ICU beds	260	452

► **Coordinated transfer of vaccines to the Gaza Strip (updated to June 1, 2021)**

Date	Donor	Doses	Manufacturer
17.02.21	PA	1,000	Sputnik
21.02.21	PA	20,000	Sputnik
11.03.21	PA	40,000	Sputnik
17.03.21	COVAX (UNICEF)	21,300	Pfizer, Astra-Zeneca
19.04.21	UNICEF	28,800	AstraZeneca
25.05.21	COVAX	46,800	Pfizer