

# Israelis, Palestinians Cooperate over Coronavirus

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***Despite the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, along with neighboring Jordan and Egypt, are coordinating their responses to a common microbial enemy***

With coronavirus raising temperatures in the Middle East, it nevertheless has brought together two sides that are often at odds.

Outgoing Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon told a ministerial committee on Sunday: “We are in contact [with the Palestinian Authority] because the virus has no borders and doesn’t know to distinguish between ethnic groups, religions or nations.”

The meeting, called to discuss the economic ramifications of coronavirus, indicated that Kahlon’s comments were directed mostly toward the movement of Palestinians entering Israel to work.

“The virus does not stop at checkpoints. Therefore, coordination with the PA is important to us,” the finance minister said, adding that he had been in direct contact with PA Finance Minister Shukri Bishara.

Despite a recent spike in tensions over the Trump Administration’s peace plan, which the PA has categorically rejected, threatening to sever all ties with Israel, cooperation remains good, according to Dr. Asher Salmon, director of international relations for the Israeli Health Ministry.

“We have phone calls once a day,” he told The Media Line, referring to counterparts in the Palestinian health sector. “We try to meet in person once a week and we have support in terms of supplies and expertise that we’re sharing.”

These contacts, Salman added, “eliminate political issues.”

Tareef Ashour, spokesperson for the PA’s Health Ministry, shared similar sentiments.

“Coronavirus doesn’t know borders, and to that end, the PA, Jordan and Israel coordinate in terms of the borders and arrivals,” he told The Media Line, indicating that cooperation in the immediate region is even broader.

The bulwark of both ministries’ strategies is the blacklist of nations from which arrivals pose a threat, but the Israeli Health Ministry says that movement will not be restricted between the Palestinian territories and Israel due to the virus.

“In the security checkpoints, all Palestinians with a permit can enter unless they visited one of the countries which are restricted. We have the information regarding the West Bank; it’s not a problem at all moving back and forth there.”

But, Salmon says, there are slight differences in procedure when it comes to Israel’s southern border.

Gazans and Egyptians coming into Israel from Gaza “must present a passport or a letter from the Palestinian Interior Ministry showing that they haven’t left the Palestinian territories for the last 14 days,” he told The Media Line.

PA Health Ministry spokesperson Ashour also stipulated, “In Gaza, there’s coordination with the Egyptian side.”

This comes as the public response to the spreading virus has expanded over the past few weeks. For example, the Palestinian Authority has [canceled official meetings and conferences](#), and Israel no longer accepts visitors arriving from, or who were recently in, Italy. Israeli residents who were in Italy must now be quarantined – something that Jerusalem resident Dana Meiri knows well.

“One of my friends has to stay in her house because she was in Italy.” Asked if she is dismayed, she laughs, stating her friend is “having a great time staying at home.”

In Israel, confirmed patients are quarantined at Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv. Instructions from the Health Ministry ask people who suspect that they are infected to self-quarantine at home while calling the Magen David Adom emergency medical service if necessary.

“We can’t quarantine in hotels, with housekeeping and all,” says the Israeli Health Ministry spokesperson.

Gabriella, a Tel Aviv University student who arrived recently from Montreal, told The Media Line that as a preventative measure, she “wore a mask when on the plane.” She said that she didn’t know much about the virus – only where it came from and that the university had barred the arrival of new students from China.

Across the Green Line in Ramallah, Dr. Wail Hammoudeh told The Media Line that he has had different experiences.

“People are worried so we take preventative measures,” he said.

Stating that “it’s traditional in our [Palestinian] society to hug and kiss when meeting, so I tell my patients they should wash their hands, use hand gel, try not to sneeze, cover their mouths and not cough on people.”

While the doctor mentioned precautionary behavior, he stressed that “masks do not prevent” the spread of COVID-19 and “only people who are suspected of being infected need a mask.”

Prof. Ran Nir Paz, a specialist in infectious diseases at Jerusalem’s Hadassah Medical Center who just returned from a medical mission to Japan, echoed Hammoudeh’s sentiment, telling The Media Line that “for the regular person, there is no need. They [the masks] are good for people who are sick.”

He says that while “it’s a complicated answer,” according to both “Israel and the PA, measures for reducing risk include washing your hands and sneezing into your elbows,” and only in a high-risk scenario should people avoid shaking hands.

So far, the procedures are preventative as the Palestinian Authority has reported no cases of COVID-19, but is taking precautions such as the establishment of a quarantine zone near Jericho in order to stay ahead of the disease. Dr. Salmon of the Israeli Health Ministry said that measures taken in the Palestinian territories met “the same standard” as those in Israel.

Dr. Hammoudeh told The Media Line that his protocol for dealing with any possible case is to “send them to the Palestinian Authority Health Ministry” after taking “blood samples and chest X-rays.”

So far, the virus has been relatively contained and the ministries are working together in order to limit potential damage. Main strategies have included travel advisories and traveler blacklists; it is measures such as these, and not body screens, that have proven more effective.

“We don’t believe in temperature screening. We don’t do it anywhere, in any scenario, and we don’t think it’s useful screening in controlling COVID-19,” Salmon said.

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