



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

# Could the Pandemic Jump-Start National Reconciliation in Palestine?

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Palestinian grassroots organizations operating under Israeli occupation are stepping up to lead the response to the coronavirus pandemic, filling a gap left by a weakened Palestinian Authority (PA). While this activism has centered more around public health than politics, the atmosphere has drawn comparisons with [grassroots organizing during the 1987 Palestinian uprising](#). Some observers are wondering whether the twin pressures from the pandemic and Israel's looming annexation of part of the West Bank, sanctioned by the U.S. administration, could jump-start a long overdue national dialogue leading to institutional reforms. Two months after a cash-strapped PA declared a state of emergency and called on Palestinian civil society and the diaspora for support, those constituencies are beginning to make demands.

At the top of the national agenda is reconciliation with Hamas and reform of the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). That does not seem to be in the immediate offing, but the situation could change. Up until now, few believed either of Palestine's two main political parties, Fatah and Hamas, were sincere about

its commitment to reconciliation. However, their calculus may be altered by Palestine's battle to contain the coronavirus's spread in the occupied territories, the potential annexation of the West Bank, and the looming financial collapse of the PA.

Whether it makes reconciliation an immediate task or takes on other priorities, the new activism's fate will depend on how Palestinian constituencies leverage the real power they have acquired during the pandemic, whether leadership and civil society continue to collaborate, or whether the public health and the security situation deteriorate in a way that prevents accommodations.

## THE PANDEMIC OPENS SPACE FOR MOBILIZATION AND SOLIDARITY

The coronavirus arrived in the occupied Palestinian territories with a PA already [in dire financial straits](#), barely able to pay public sector employees their full salaries due to Israel's withholding of close to \$200



million in [clearance revenues](#) belonging to the authority. The PA enacted strict social distancing measures to prevent the spread of the virus, halving virtually all PA [revenue streams](#). The loss is projected at [\\$2.5 billion](#), assuming the pandemic lasts only three months. In addition, [125,000](#) households in Gaza and the West Bank are now receiving financial assistance from the PA, and [40,000 Palestinian laborers](#) who had to leave jobs in Israel to shelter in place will require unemployment compensation.

The realities of the PA's leadership are stark: it governs under military occupation, lacks jurisdiction over more than 60 percent of the West Bank and over any part of Arab East Jerusalem, is subject to sharp controls on movement and access, and lacks control over economic policy tools that might help alleviate some of the financial stress. As a result, it has welcomed help from various Palestinian quarters—political factions, village leadership, the private sector, the diaspora, and civil society organizations.

With fears that Palestinian authorities were unable and Israel was unwilling to contain the virus in Palestinian areas, [Fatah activists](#) and others, mostly in coordination with the PA, enforced health directives. Volunteers with the [Jerusalem Ingathering to Confront Corona](#) established a Facebook page to help Palestinian Jerusalemites obtain food assistance, access Arabic-language information on the virus, and find testing clinics. In the Jordan Valley, where Palestinians live without running water or proper sanitation, a coalition of local civil society organizations partnered with international NGOs to provide for the basic needs of residents including personal protective equipment and hygiene items. And at Israeli checkpoints, members of the [General Federation of Trade Unions](#) assisted with Palestinian laborers going to Israeli worksites by providing them hand sanitizer, personal protective equipment, and instructions on how to avoid contracting

the coronavirus at worksites. Meanwhile, committee volunteers disinfected streets and [set up “checkpoints of love”](#) to monitor these laborers' return from potentially infected worksites. PNGO, the Palestinian NGOs Network, [liaised with international donors](#) on how they could best support a Palestinian civil society response to the pandemic.

The Palestinian private sector and the diaspora have sought out needed medical supplies and equipment from third countries. The private investment company Palestine Development and Investment Ltd. offered its St. George Hotel in East Jerusalem as a quarantine center, and Palestinian individuals and businesses donated millions of dollars to the Dignified Stand Fund to help [families struggling financially due to the coronavirus](#) and to support procurement of supplies for the PA Ministry of Health.

Various other ad hoc bodies outside of factional politics, including [national-](#) and governate-level [emergency committees](#) and [village councils](#), were established to coordinate with the PA Health Ministry on combating the spread of the virus.

The PA prime minister convened [civil society](#) and [private sector](#) roundtables to get their input on combating the virus and assessing needs, and he [suspended local NGO licensing fees](#) in recognition of the important service civil society has been playing.

## A CIVIL SOCIETY REALIZING ITS POWER IN CRISIS

Leadership's willingness to work with a reinvigorated society and its short-term management of the pandemic has generated some goodwill toward the PA (and its newfound ability to lead). But this spirit of cooperation could be ephemeral as the various sectors of Palestinian

society realize their power amid the pandemic. With Israeli annexation of a third of the West Bank coming as soon as July 1, the bodies and organizations mobilized by the virus are already making political demands. Chief among them is national reconciliation, a call that  [Hamas](#) has also recently renewed.

Talks between the Islamist movement and Fatah are almost as old as the 2007 split between them. Yet, the two groups have always stalled when moving from platitudes about unity to the hard details of how to govern and, even more, over the conduct and [sequencing of PA and PLO elections](#). Hamas and other factions have demanded a national dialogue to precede elections, but the Fatah-led PA leaders seem suspicious that such a dialogue would tie their hands and grant their opponents a veto over decisionmaking.

Those same hurdles remain, and, indeed, there is strong evidence that the rival leaderships still balk at laying differences aside. As the current crisis drags on, a pressured leadership might find itself torn between the possibility of collapse and the distasteful option of reconciliation—or it may be forced to grasp at the latter to avert the former.

There certainly is some vocal pressure to overcome the division. The progressive [National Democratic Movement](#)—made up of PLO stalwarts like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and other left-leaning parties and prominent political leaders—published [an open letter](#) to PA President and PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas asking him to use this moment of national purpose and solidarity to jumpstart reforms that will enable Palestinians to mobilize to end the occupation and the Gaza blockade and to prevent Israeli annexation. On top of that, a [thousand diaspora Palestinians](#) in Europe signed a petition calling for the PLO's reformation and an end to its internal divisions.

The sense of renewed agency can be felt even while Palestinians shelter in place. For example, [public outcry](#) forced Abbas to reverse course and cancel presidential decrees increasing salary and benefits to senior PA officials. Within twenty-four hours of the decrees coming to light—ironically during a press conference in which the prime minister called on certain PA officials to contribute two days' pay toward the coronavirus fund—a social media storm forced the president's hand. Not content with the reversal, the PNGO demanded a transparent review of [PA economic and financial policies](#) to confront the pandemic. In contrast, before the pandemic, it took months of protesting against the [social security tax law](#) before Abbas agreed to freeze its implementation.

## LOCAL RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

Before the arrival of the virus, the credibility of the [PA leadership](#) was at an all-time low. Even its leaders have come to regard it more as a holding operation than a step on the road to the realization of national goals. But they have no alternative to offer. At the grassroots level, there has been much discussion of alternative strategies and outcomes but little activity. That could be changing, but so far, steps have been very limited.

A crisis engendering grassroots activism and calls for national unity are not new for Palestinians. In some ways, the current round may look most like the beginning of the two intifadas, with very localized activities arising around mutual aid and support. Activism builds on—or, rather, builds—highly localized senses of social solidarity and interacts in ambivalent ways with larger political structures and movements. For those with deep historical memory, there may even be resonances with the 1936 Palestinian uprising against the British Mandate.



Those previous waves of activism had an uneven relationship with state structures and with any national leadership. While they all prioritized resistance, they defined it differently: self-help, active resistance (such as protests, marches, and boycotts), and armed resistance blended in ways that undermined coherence. Yet each round of grassroots organization often formed the backbone of a future phase of nationalist action.

Of course, there are two critical differences between the past and now. First, earlier activist waves were aimed at foreign military occupation, while mobilization now centers around pandemic response. Second, the intifadas used confrontational means, including violence, that have not yet been placed on the table despite rising Israeli-Palestinian tension and impending annexation.

But the emergent local activism, while different, may change longer-term dynamics of Palestinian politics. The intifadas left lingering effects, and the experience of 1936 shaped a generation of Palestinians. It is far too early to judge whether the current wave will have such sustained effects or what those effects will be, but there are five questions to watch.

First, what is the relationship between grassroots activism and preexisting organizations, especially Fatah and Hamas? Previous experience suggests that, on a very local level, the real nexus between the various factions and the people they claim to represent is formed in three ways: through formal organizational branches, informally associated groups (such as youth clubs), and, especially for Hamas in the West Bank, informal and even clandestine networks. In both intifadas, the national leadership sometimes found itself following such grassroots actions as much as it directed them. There is already some indication of this—as illustrated by a [recent public celebration](#) by Fatah activists that simply ignored social distancing instructions from the PA.

And this leads to the second question: Can such actions be coordinated at all? If so, for how long? Indeed, in Palestinian history this question has often been the most important, as earlier waves of activism usually began with a strong sense of common purpose that they eventually lost. United leadership, cross-factional communiqués, and coordinated strike days have often given way to rivalry, outbidding, recriminations, and factionalism. In earlier waves, activists could move more freely; in the current wave movement is much more difficult. Social media can move ideas more quickly, but the attenuation of human ties between the West Bank and Gaza is now deeply entrenched, aggravated by the mutual hostility between leaders in the two regions. It remains to be seen whether a public health crisis can be friendlier terrain than a nationalist struggle for sustained coordination.

Third, will grassroots activism translate into a political agenda? It is, of course, not hard for most Palestinians to describe what political outcomes they reject and to express their nationalist aspirations. But at present, the absence of any political strategy has afflicted all aspects of Palestinian political life. And Israeli actors—who have a stranglehold over so much of Palestinian daily economic and social life—have already shown themselves to be both alert and allergic to [Palestinian health measures](#) metamorphosing into anything with a nationalist or political flavor.

It is difficult to envisage that any political agenda arising from below could guide action above unless it is formally endorsed by an accepted national body in some way—otherwise it will likely dissolve under some external or internal pressure. But the national structures in the PLO (such as the PLO Executive Committee) and the PA (especially after the elimination of the parliament) that would endorse any verbal formula are tightly controlled by the current leadership in Ramallah—a control existing leaders are reluctant to put up for

negotiations. Hamas, leftist groups, and independent political figures are thus renewing pressure to build more consensual processes, and they have a series of PLO and Palestinian National Council resolutions that address the need for national unity (providing some formulas for more consensual decisionmaking) on which to rely. The president is the weakest he has ever been physically, fiscally, and politically, with polls showing a [majority wishing him to step down](#), so it may be difficult for him (or his successor) to hold out.

Fourth, what kinds of debates are emerging among Palestinians? For instance, public authorities have generally earned high marks for their responses thus far. But as things continue, some may complain that local efforts are enabling the occupation, prove the irrelevance of the PA and its Ministry of Health, or show the ongoing need for such structures. These debates will likely become far sharper as annexation looms and attention moves back to political considerations. As the pandemic recedes, Palestinians will turn their attention to the utility of continued security coordination with Israel; whether the PA leadership has built up credibility with the people after years of boxing out critics; whether the PA can be retooled—as the agent of the PLO—and support the national struggle on the ground in the occupied territories; and whether the PLO can be revitalized to meet the demands of its constituent members and those seeking to be brought in under its umbrella.

Finally, when the pandemic recedes, what lingering trust or mistrust is likely to remain? Which institutions and leaders will emerge as having shown their worth and which will lose credibility?

## CAN OUTSIDERS DO ANYTHING CONSTRUCTIVE?

Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank seems poised to move from de facto to de jure status. And it is connected with a less visible but equally formidable threat to Palestinians: rejection by much of the emerging Israeli leadership—and of the current U.S. administration—of dealing with Palestinians as a national community. Those leaders prefer instead to see Palestinians as a set of inhabitants in West Bank towns and villages along with a sealed enclave in Gaza. A generation of Israeli policy that at least paid lip service to a negotiated solution with Palestinians is thus being jettisoned, and the strong international consensus accepting Palestinians as a national community is being undermined by Israeli and U.S. policy. This is already proving deeply corrosive for any long-term conflict management, much less conflict resolution.

Of course, such an approach might be safely pursued amid the current atrophy of Palestinian national institutions, but it offers deeply unjust and unsatisfactory arrangements to those alive now and virtually bequeaths to future generations not merely injustice but intermittent and ugly conflict. The atomization of Palestinian society and politics may prove to be in nobody's long-term interest even if it serves some short-term goals of some Israeli actors.

International action matters here. To the extent that Palestinian activism can be protected and even engaged and that Palestinian national institutions can re-emerge, they may be able to produce leaders in the future who will be able to move from managing affairs during the pandemic to providing some guidance to the national movement and acting authoritatively on Palestinians' behalf. The efforts described here are largely Palestinian

in nature, but international players can nurture them by being open to national reconciliation, by engaging with and supporting Palestinian civil society, and by encouraging official PA leadership to do the same.

The United States has opted not to be an actor in the internal Palestinian arena, insisting that Palestinian leaders accept the approach proposed by President Donald Trump or leave the table. This leaves other international donors—particularly European actors and international organizations—in a position to pivot toward a different set of priorities for supporting more positive outcomes.

In a 2018 paper, Nathan Brown called for shifting the focus of assistance from short-term support for a two-state outcome to helping make [Palestinian social and political institutions](#) more resilient over the medium and long term. The purpose would not be simply humanitarian but to keep Palestinian institutions viable, both at a grassroots level and as a national community, to make it possible for future leaders to negotiate on their behalf. Such an approach would engage more deeply and fully with Palestinian society at the grassroots level, avoid favoring specific leaders or movements out of short-term calculations, broaden conceptions of security to include Palestinian needs, and prioritize human development.

The restrictions imposed by Israel, the divisions of Palestinian leadership, and the resort of many Palestinians to coping strategies may ultimately prevail over the hopeful signs now in evidence. But the possibilities for some positive changes in Palestinian political life—changes that hold intriguing possibilities for those wishing a better future for all in the region—now seem more real than they have for many years.

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## NOTES

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