

On April 30 2020, PASSIA hosted a zoom conference entitled 'Coronavirus in Jerusalem: Palestinian Solidarity and the Israeli Occupation'.

After a brief overview of the legal status of Palestinians in Jerusalem and what the permit system entails, it was pointed out that Human Rights organizations and the international media have observed and called out the gap between the Israeli government's treatment of Jewish and Palestinian people in Jerusalem during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There has been severe delays in issuing testing services to Jerusalem compared to other cities in Israeli territory, and these testing facilities are often linked to certain insurance companies, which means that access is not universal.

Moreover, the areas located behind the Separation wall (including buffer zones) were left unsupervised until intervention by the Court.

Since the illegal annexation of the city in 1967, Israel has prevented the Palestinian Authority from intervening in the service of its Palestinian people, as arguments over sovereignty take precedent over the livelihood and safety of the city's inhabitants.

This, paired with the fact that East Jerusalem's 6 Palestinian Hospitals are not adequately prepared or equipped to deal with the coronavirus outbreak, has led to the spread of misinformation regarding the real number of coronavirus cases in East Jerusalem

The permit system, along with family reunification processes, have become increasingly volatile and are at risk of being revoked by the Israeli Authorities, which amplifies the vulnerability of Palestinians in Jerusalem. The speaker also mentioned the fact that Palestinians had difficulty returning home since the start of the pandemic because Israel only allows entry to its own citizens.

The conference offered an in-depth look at how the Palestinian Civil Society in Jerusalem is working to protect its livelihood. The Jerusalem Alliance is a coalition of over 80 civil society organizations that are donating time, resources and their workforce to establish a quarantine center in the city, and to raise awareness about how individuals can stay safe throughout the pandemic.

The initiative includes a call center and a service offering psychological support for those held in quarantine, and has been made possible by the solidarity and voluntarism of Al Quds's Palestinian civil society.

On the topic of sovereignty, the paradox of Jerusalem was discussed, as Israel refuses to pay attention to Palestinians in East Jerusalem even though it claims that the entire city is its 'eternal capital', while denying access to the Palestinian Authority. During the lockdown, it has fallen upon the Palestinian Civil society to

take charge of the local population and we have seen a rise in independently run initiatives like the Jerusalem Alliance.

This shows that, given the right circumstances, the local Palestinian population has the capacity to establish a shadow municipality/government in East Jerusalem. The overbearing Israeli Occupation means that governance cannot operate systematically, but rather that Palestinian organizations succeed by working around the Israeli Authorities' aggression, y responding to how the situation changes on the ground

It was also pointed out that Israel's complete disregard for the Haredim Jewish communities in the city demonstrates both its lack of demographic integrity and its racist mentality whereby services and protection is awarded first and foremost to the Zionist population.

As such, the Jerusalem Alliance has filled the power vacuum left behind by the Israeli and Palestinian Authorities during the pandemic, and the attendees of the conference questions how long could this solidarity campaign in the local civil society last. The important role of religious organizations was mentioned, especially in giving locals the necessary financial and psychological assistance to survive.

However not all members of civil society have stepped up, as the cultural sector has struggled to find its place in the current lockdown environment.

While some critics were issued towards international NGOs and specifically at the seemingly weak efforts made by the World Health Organization and the various UN bodies to assess the situation in Jerusalem's eastern neighborhoods, it was also recommended not to dismiss international assistance altogether.

A final comment was also issued on the value of women's organization, and the role that Palestinian women have had, both in the frontline as medical personnel, and within each Jerusalem household.

Overall the roundtable discussion celebrated the efforts made by the Palestinian civil society in East Jerusalem since the start of the pandemic, emphasizing especially the willingness of locals to volunteer and offer assistance to those most in need.