

A Lethal Brew: Israel's Racism and the Pandemic

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While reporting from Israel/Palestine has focused on Israel's difficulties in forming a new government and on measures being taken by Israelis to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic, the story behind the story is the role anti-Arab racism has played in these developments. Anti-Arab racism, which defined Israel's founding and shaped its seven decades of existence, is now presenting the country with a challenge that will determine its future.

Racism is the reason why the Blue and White bloc led by Benny Gantz was ultimately unable to form a government, thereby giving Benjamin Netanyahu yet another term as Prime Minister. While the Gantz-led anti-Netanyahu forces won a majority of seats in the Knesset, 15 of those 61 seats were held by the Arab-led Joint List. After Gantz was given the nod to form a government, Netanyahu intensified his campaign of anti-Arab incitement against Gantz, claiming that partnering with the Arabs was akin to making an alliance with "terrorist supporters." In doing this, he was taking a page from the playbook he and the late Ariel Sharon used in the mid-1990s to incite against then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. They called Rabin's government an illegitimate "minority government" because he relied on Arab Knesset Members to reach a majority. They also called Rabin a terrorist supporter and denounced the peace accords he reached with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

It soon became clear that Gantz did not have the votes he would need to form a government since 10 of the Jewish members of his putative coalition refused to consider forming a government that relied on Arab support. Seven of this group were from the Yisrael Beiteinu party, which has called for "transferring" Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens to the West Bank, while the other objectors were from Gantz' own party.

After still more twists and turns, Gantz surrendered to Netanyahu, agreeing to form a coalition government with Netanyahu as Prime Minister. While all the terms of the coalition have not yet been nailed down, one early concession made by Gantz has been to accept Netanyahu's demand for Israel to formally annex the Palestinian territories' Jordan Valley and the settlement blocs that Israel has built on occupied Palestinian lands.

There are two new arguments being made by pro-annexation Israelis. The first is that because Donald Trump may not be reelected in November, Israel must act by summer's end to insure US support for the move. The second is that with coronavirus wreaking havoc across the Middle East, fortifying the West Bank's Jordan Valley is important to protect Israel from disease and chaos.

This latter argument is both explicitly and implicitly racist, in that it makes the case that to

ward off complications that come from next door, Israel must annex the West Bank thereby consolidating its repressive Apartheid-like hold over a Palestinian Arab population that is roughly equal in numbers to Israel's Jewish population.

To understand the future being envisioned by Israel's right-wingers, one need only look at the recent policies being pursued by Netanyahu's interim government toward Israel's Arab citizens, who are 20 per cent of its population, and the more than 4.5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

At the end of March, Israel opened drive-through coronavirus testing stations throughout the country. None, however, were initially placed in Arab communities. When Israel finally established lock-downs to control the spread of the virus, the lock-downs did not include Arab population centres. So while Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens are on the front lines fighting the pandemic, about one-fifth of all Israeli doctors and one-quarter of all nurses are Arab, their communities are horribly underserved. Experts, therefore, dismiss reports indicating low infection rates among the Arab population since these most likely are the result of a lack of testing. According to an Israeli press account, as of early April, only 6,500 Arab citizens of Israel had been tested as opposed to over 80,000 Israeli Jews.

The situation confronting Palestinians in occupied territories is, of course, significantly worse owing to the persistence of the occupation. The Israeli military continues violent nightly raids on Palestinian towns and villages, more than 200 in the last month alone. These raids are accompanied by beatings, shootings and arrests of scores of Palestinians. Added to this are the unchecked incidents of settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. These have also accelerated in recent weeks, with 20 especially violent attacks occurring last month. There are also reports from Israeli human rights groups of Israeli troops confiscating medical supplies and materials that were intended to build a needed field hospital in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority, which is already reeling from economic shortages, will now face the additional hardship of the tens of thousands of Palestinian laborers who have been forced to give up their jobs in Israel and return to their West Bank homes. The conditions to which they were subjected while in Israel had become deplorable as a result of the coronavirus lockdowns. They were denied wages, food, and medical care. And, as they have returned to the West Bank, the number of cases of individuals infected by the virus has risen in the territories.

All of this has placed an unbearable burden on cash-strapped Palestinian medical services. Early on, when Israel imported 100,000 Coronavirus testing kits, the Israeli press reported that they sent a few thousand to the West Bank and only a few hundred to Gaza! The result, of course, is that while the virus will spread, and probably already has in the occupied lands, the reported numbers will be low because of a lack of testing. And then there is the problem of capacity. The entire West Bank has about 200 ventilators and Gaza has around 80 ICU beds, 72 per cent of which are already in use.

The Trump Administration has only added insult to this injury. This week, they rejected an appeal from Congress to send emergency medical support to the Palestinian Authority, while at the same time they found the funds to purchase one million surgical masks and other supplies for the Israel military.

In the end, the confluence of anti-Arab racism and the coronavirus pandemic will have

consequences. The pandemic knows no boundaries. While the Israeli right-wing imagines that annexing and fortifying the Jordan Valley will seal off Israel from disease and chaos, in reality they are sealing their own fate. They are serving to hasten Israel's march to becoming a full-fledged apartheid state and because coronavirus does not discriminate, Israel's callous disregard for Arab human life will only ensure that the disease will continue to spread and take an ever-increasing toll on both Arabs and Jews alike.

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