**Between Ramallah and Jerusalem**

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Kalandiya checkpoint was crowded and gridlocked, as it always is on Tuesday morning. Roadside vendors are selling the huge cabbages, the baladi cabbages, which are now in season. With all the exhaust fumes all around, it is less pastoral than it might sound. On the concrete barriers separating the lanes rest kettles whose owners sell a cup of tea or coffee for half a shekel. I am touring Ramallah with Elior Levy, the Palestinian affairs correspondent for Yedioth Ahronoth and Ynet.

It is a sunny day before the first snowflakes land, both on our side and on theirs. Until this week, everything closed at 5:00 PM, Elior said, because of the coronavirus. On the weekends everything is closed, and that is a big deal here. This week they are easing the restrictions; they will close at 9:00 PM. Schools were largely closed. In Gaza, Hamas dealt with the pandemic as it deals with its rivals—with clubs. They enforced a real curfew. In the West Bank, it depends where. There is limited enforcement in the big cities; in the villages it is different. “I was at an event in my village,” one Palestinian told us, “they slaughtered a cow in honor of a graduation. There were a thousand people there, can you imagine?”

One look at international comparison tables demonstrates something unusual: In the West Bank, even in Gaza, there is a sharper decrease in the rate of infection than in Israel. And that is despite the fact that only a select few received the vaccines. We will come back to that. Elior comments that it is not like in Israel. The event is managed personally by Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh and his health minister, Dr. Mai al-Kaila, who is held in high esteem. She is a physician. “Of course, Abu Mazen’s bureau tries to diminish her,” a source in Ramallah said to us, “because she is successful. That’s how it is here.” Not just here, I commented.

Ramallah looks good, relatively speaking. On Al-Irsal Street in the center of the city more car agencies have opened. Near the Palestinian Investment Bank stand a few officials smoking. There are people wearing masks, but not the majority. The cafés are open. The appearance of the city center is misleading. Poverty has greatly worsened this year. At the falafel stand, an (excellent) portion is sold with just two falafel balls; the vendor spreads them with a knife so that they cover the entire pita. Most of the people with whom we conversed would not speak on the record; they apologized in advance and explained that they continued to live and work in the PA territories, and there was no tolerance for public criticism.

The PA is currently focused on diplomatic revival attempts. After years of Donald Trump and the public divorce from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, after the American money dissipated and the donations from the Gulf dried up, the Palestinians feel that they may have an opportunity for change. Abu Mazen is trying to reconcile with the Saudis, and dispatched his ambassador to the UAE anew. Despite the fact that they refused to accept him, the pleading is expected to have an effect. “The PA understands,” an associate told us, “that the Middle East has changed. Enough, you can’t be everyone’s enemy. Abu Mazen issued emotional statements when Israel and the Gulf states began to draw closer. He cursed, and there were also terms such as ‘betrayal’ and ‘knife in the back.’ He understands that this was a mistake.”

Along with this, Hamas has identified Fatah’s need for a sense of movement, for some kind of progress, and surprisingly agreed to elections in the territories under Abu Mazen’s terms: elections, held at separate dates, for president, for the Palestinian parliament and for the Palestinian National Council. Hamas may support the candidacy of Marwan Barghouti, from inside an Israeli prison. Most commentators believe that if Barghouti decides to run—that is the prevalent prediction—Abu Mazen will not permit the presidential election to take place. Hamas, for its part, does not intend to pursue the path of a Gazan coup.

“The movement has matured,” a Palestinian observer in an office in the city center said to us, “Hamas understands now that it’s preferable for them not to take the post of president. Not even to [take over] the government. The money will dry up immediately, because Israel will not transfer taxes (that it collects from the Palestinians who work in Israel—NE). There will not be salaries. They don’t want to win. What they want now is legitimacy. They are banking on the long term.” They have cause for confidence.

Work continues for expanding and renovating the muqataa. As time passes, said Elior, it looks more and more like a veritable palace. “Abu Mazen is strongly hated,” said another source, who made sure first that his name would not be made public. “The most hated he has ever been. People say that he is a failure in everything he has done, from the (peace—NE) process to the pandemic. The settlements are strangling us. It has become crowded, impossible. It’s impossible to build in Area C. [There is] corruption. They brought vaccines here. Who got them? Ostensibly, medical teams. In actual fact, the families of cronies. Those fools, they posted pictures on Facebook [of themselves] being vaccinated! Only God is saving us from the coronavirus here. Not the PA.”

The speaker was not being accurate; it is not God, but rather age. The Palestinians’ median age is 20, and as explained in the previous section, this is the most important parameter for predicting hospitalization and mortality. The source relates that he has an elderly mother. He is unable to obtain a vaccine for her, of course. There is now talk in Ramallah about how to arrange a way of being vaccinated in East Jerusalem. A spot check performed by the Palestinian Health Ministry found that the British variant, as in Israel, is starting to dominate the morbidity. This could have very severe consequences in the near future. The vaccination situation among the Palestinians is very poor; the Palestinians received a gift of ten thousand Russian vaccines, and purchased another hundred thousand. They are supposed to receive AstraZeneca vaccines, but no one knows when they will arrive.

Nidal Foqaha is the Palestinian director of the Geneva initiative. Elior and I sat in his office in central Ramallah. He has diabetes and is in a high-risk group, but who knows when he will be vaccinated. Perhaps in April, he said in frustration. “There is a British variant here now. Where did we get it? After all, we don’t travel anywhere. We got it from you, from Israel. I understand, it’s a pandemic. It’s international. It’s no one’s fault. But there are tens of thousands of Palestinian laborers who enter Israel every day to work. It’s in your interest just as it’s in ours. This is a basic principle of cooperation. In the end, all of us, Palestinians and Israelis, live here without hermetic separation. And there are two and a half million Palestinians here. Our rate of confirmed patients can sometimes reach 25 percent.” Israel has hundreds of thousands of Moderna vaccines, and many more will arrive. It isn’t giving them to Israelis, except in the IDF, apparently as part of a quiet agreement with Pfizer. “You have vaccines that aren’t in use,” said Foqaha, “why don’t you share them with us?”

This is a question that not only Foqaha is asking; international diplomatic pressure on Israel to help vaccinate the Palestinians is mounting, in direct proportion to the reports around the world praising the pace of the vaccination drive in Israel. Health Minister Yuli Edelstein raised the issue with the prime minister this week, and proposed to enable the vaccination of the Palestinians working in Israel—at least 70,000. The main argument was the exposure to the Israeli public, and the available stocks of Moderna vaccines. But Edelstein also speaks in closed-door meetings about real commitment to workers who are not involved in terrorism and have been coming to work in Israel for many years. The decision will end up in the hands of the prime minister; it is interesting to consider how he will act when the elections are underway. Ours, but also theirs.