



COVID, Vaccinations, Israel and the Palestinian Population

Updated March 5, 2021

On March 4, 2021, Israel reached out and began vaccinating Palestinian workers who regularly cross into Israel. The pilot program began at the Ephraim Crossing, with approximately 150 vaccinations administered per hour by Magen David Adom, the country's national ambulance service. The move represented the latest step by Israel to win the battle against COVID for its own population, while also trying to assist others in the region.



Pictured: Israeli vaccinations center for Palestinian workers

Overview and Recent Updates

Like the rest of the world, Israel is struggling to contain the coronavirus pandemic as it moves forward with a national vaccination campaign. As of March 2021, some 785,000 Israelis have been infected with the virus and more than 5,797 have died¹. Israel has responded by administering around 150,000 doses of vaccine a day to its citizens, first focusing on older and at-risk populations before moving to a general vaccine rollout². This has resulted in a higher proportion of the population being vaccinated than anywhere else; approximately 51% of the total population have been vaccinated with at least one dose, and 37% have received both doses³.

A number of international organizations, however, have accused Israel of withholding vaccinations to millions in the Palestinian territories. The arguments range from the reasonable – that Israel could be doing

¹ https://datadashboard.health.gov.il/COVID-19/general?utm_source=go.gov.il&utm_medium=referral

² <https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-virus-infections-hit-highest-rate-in-months-as-152000-vaccinated-in-a-day/>

³ https://datadashboard.health.gov.il/COVID-19/general?utm_source=go.gov.il&utm_medium=referral

more to provide vaccinations and related care to those in the West Bank and Gaza – to outright canards that Israel is purposefully infecting Palestinians with the virus⁴. Amnesty International UK has gone as far as stating Israel is engaging in ‘institutional discrimination,’⁵ against Palestinians.

While Israel’s initial vaccination rollout plan targeted Israeli citizens – including Arab Israelis and Palestinian residents of Jerusalem – now that the vaccine is in greater supply, the Israeli government is working on assisting vaccinating Palestinians in the territories. To that end, beginning in early February, Israel transferred 5,000 doses to the Palestinian Authority⁶. These vaccinations were first given to healthcare workers, a restriction most countries worked under when first rolling out the vaccination. Israel has also committed to vaccinating all Palestinians who have work permits in Israel, around 120,000 people⁷, and this campaign has just begun.

FAQs

Who is responsible for vaccinating Palestinians?

Following the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) assumed responsibility for the healthcare, including vaccination responses, of its citizens. Article 17 of the 1995 Oslo agreement reads: “Powers and responsibilities in the sphere of Health in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will be transferred to the Palestinian side, including the health insurance system⁸.” As such, the Palestinian Authority runs all healthcare for Palestinian citizens, including all vaccination programs. Israel does not interfere in the Palestinian health system.

During a pandemic or other public health crisis, under Oslo, both governments are required to share information and coordinate their responses. To that end, Gerald Rockenschaub, the head of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) office in the Palestinian territories, has confirmed that the WHO is in talks with the Israeli Ministry of Health and COGAT “to ensure the smooth delivery and distribution of vaccines when they do arrive⁹.”

Early in 2021, Palestinian officials have made contradictory statements as to whether the PA had asked Israel for vaccines. Its Foreign Ministry said in one statement that Israel, as an “occupying power,” was obliged to provide vaccines to the Palestinians¹⁰, while other officials stated that it had not requested vaccines from Israel¹¹, and that the PA had rejected vaccines that were offered to them by Israeli NGOs¹².

Where does this leave Palestinians in the territories?

According to Ali Abed Rabbo, director general of the Palestinian Health Ministry, the Palestinian Authority only began approaching drug manufacturers in early January 2021, to purchase vaccinations. He also stated that a recently resolved Palestinian financial crisis, “brought on by a months-long Palestinian Authority boycott of Israel,” had left little funding available and meant it was behind other nations in negotiating for vaccines¹³.

⁴ <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/pa-blames-israel-for-coronavirus-cases-in-west-bank-636009>

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/israel-denying-covid-19-vaccine-palestinians-institutionalised-discrimination>

⁶ <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210131-israel-to-give-5-000-doses-of-covid-19-vaccine-to-palestinian-frontline-health-workers>

⁷ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-authorizes-plan-to-vaccinate-over-120000-palestinian-workers/>

⁸ <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/is-israel-legally-obligated-to-provide-palestinians-with-vaccines-660220>

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-palestine-coronavirus-vaccine-b1784474.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-vaccine.html>

¹¹ <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/when-antisemitism-goes-mainstream-analysis-654206>

¹² <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/coronavirus-vaccinating-palestinians-is-in-israels-interests-netanyahu-657583>

¹³ <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/31/952364150/as-israel-leads-in-covid-19-vaccines-per-capita-palestinians-still-await-shots>

The PA has since purchased millions of doses of the Russian-produced Sputnik V vaccine¹⁴. The West Bank and Gaza are also set to receive vaccinations through the United Nations-backed COVAX program, which is helping to provide vaccinations to poorer nations. In addition to vaccines provided by Israel, the PA is also now also receiving both free and heavily subsidized vaccinations and other medical supplies from China, India, and the EU¹⁵. With various deals combined, the PA believes it will immunize around 70% of the population¹⁶.

What about Palestinians living in Israel?

Israel is committed to vaccinating all its citizens. Anti-Israel activists have attempted to argue this is not the case, with Jews being favored for vaccination over Palestinians living in Israel. They have focused particularly on Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem, contending Israel is “neglecting” this population¹⁷. A major tenet of this argument is that there is a significantly lower rate of vaccination amongst East Jerusalem residents than their Jewish counterparts.

In reality, there are five clinics devoted to vaccinating in this neighborhood, along with pop-up drive-throughs. According to health officials who know the area, “the key problem as one of willingness, not merely one of access. Conspiratorial thinking about the virus, spread on social media, has penetrated deep into East Jerusalem¹⁸.” Although usually trusting of Israel’s healthcare, falsehoods about the vaccine, as well as the virus itself, have had a serious impact on this population¹⁹. Israel, concerned about leaving pockets of unvaccinated segments of the population has stepped up marketing and health-promotion campaigns among its Arab population to try to achieve higher vaccination rates in those communities.

For additional information on international legal aspects, see [here](#).

¹⁴ <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/palestinians-receive-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-657776>

¹⁵ <https://www.jpost.com/international/china-and-india-to-send-vaccines-to-palestinians-660443>

¹⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-hope-for-vaccines-by-march-knock-israel-for-not-providing-doses/>

¹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/18/first-coronavirus-death-in-east-jerusalem-amid-israeli-neglect>

¹⁸ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-distrust-rampant-east-jerusalem-palestinians-shirk-covid-vaccine/>

¹⁹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-east-jerusalem-vaccine-turnout-climbs-but-lags-behind-infection-rates/>