

Netanyahu relies on vaccine to beat pandemic in Israel while offering just 5,000 doses to the Palestinians

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Nearly 3.5 million of Israel's eligible citizens, those 16 years or over—have received at least one shot of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, at 60 percent the highest rate in the world.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, which operates an apartheid regime as the human rights organization B'tselem recently acknowledged, is refusing to make similar arrangements for the five million Palestinians living under its military rule in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Even as the pandemic ravages the Occupied Territories—West Bank has reported 1,557 deaths and Gaza 531—decimating the already inadequate Palestinian health care system, Israel has sent just 2,000 doses of a promised 5,000 to the Palestinian Authority (PA) for frontline healthcare workers, with 300-500 doses to be sent to Gaza.

Vaccines, which the PA has ordered from Russia, are unlikely to be delivered in any number for many weeks, while vaccines from AstraZenica are supposed to arrive later this month. In the meantime, the PA is seeking additional supplies via the World Health Organisation's COVAX initiative. Even so they will at best be sufficient for less than 10 percent of the population.

Netanyahu is staking his political survival on Israel's successful vaccination rollout, paying premium prices for the vaccine and—in breach of privacy laws—handing over the anonymized but detailed data collected by its health-care network over to the company. He is aiming for 90 percent of those over 50 years of age to be vaccinated by the end of this month and promised Israelis they would be COVID-free by late March.

He wants to be seen as the man who banished the virus in the elections on March 23, the fourth in less than two years, under conditions where unemployment is soaring,

the average standard of living based on income fell by 22.7 percent in 2020 and the economy is staring into the abyss. Facing years in jail if convicted of bribery and corruption to secure favourable news coverage, his freedom depends on retaining the premiership with a sufficient majority to pass legislation that will allow him to evade trial.

His refusal to supply the Palestinians with the vaccine is a violation of Israel's responsibilities under the 1949 Geneva Convention for the health of the Palestinians living in the areas it controls, including the obligation to ensure medical supplies and preventative measures “to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics.”

Furthermore, while Israel agreed under the Oslo Accords to co-operate on issues involving healthcare and epidemics, it in practice reneged on its obligations to the extent that the Palestinians have long endured problems importing medical equipment—with Israel's opaque security permit system making it difficult for those in need of life-saving medical care to seek treatment in Israel or abroad.

Health Minister Yuli Edelstein arrogantly declared, “It is our interest, not our legal obligation, but it is our interest to make sure that Palestinians get the vaccine, that we don't have Covid-19 spreading” and said that “first of all we can also look into the so-called Oslo agreements, where it says loud and clear that Palestinians have to take care of their own health.”

Describing the Palestinians as Israel's “neighbours,” Edelstein turned truth on its head, telling *Sky News*, “I think that we've been helping our Palestinian neighbours from the very early stages of this crisis, including medical equipment, including medicine, including advice, including supplies.” He added, “I don't think that there's anyone in this country, whatever his or her views might

be, that can imagine that I would be taking a vaccine from the Israeli citizen and, with all the goodwill, give it to our neighbours.”

Israel refused to vaccinate the 4,400 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, in crowded conditions with poor hygiene and a lack of fresh air that made social distancing and basic hygiene impossible. According to a Palestinian report, 189 prisoners have tested positive for the virus, but received “deplorable treatment.” It was only after President Reuven Rivlin intervened that Edelstein reversed the policy.

UN human rights experts have called on Israel as the occupying power to ensure swift and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for the Palestinian people. “Morally and legally, this differential access to necessary health care in the midst of the worst global health crisis in a century is unacceptable,” they said.

The UN’s Human Rights Council, set to convene February 22, is expected to issue a resolution condemning Israel’s failure to vaccinate Palestinians.

Irrespective of Netanyahu’s hoopla over his vaccination programme, with Israel reporting more than 706,000 cases of the infection—more than 70,000 of which are currently active—and 5,233 deaths, there are several factors that have begun to lower expectations that it will emerge quickly from the pandemic. Not least, the failure to eradicate the disease among the Palestinians in the occupied territories, many of whom travel into Israel and the settlements to work, will ensure its continued transmission.

While the number of hospitalisations has begun to decline from the peak in January following the implementation of the country’s third limited lockdown, this is still around the level of the September peak and double the peak in April.

The decline is largely within the over-60 population, most of whom have been vaccinated. According to a government study, 44 percent of cases diagnosed in Israel last week were among those younger than 19, with just 6.2 percent in those aged 60 and older. The result was that hospital beds freed up by older patients were being filled by those under 50 and ever younger patients. This increase is being attributed to the emergence of new and more virulent strains, including the variants discovered in the UK and South Africa.

The incidence among children is particularly worrying, as those under the age of 16 are excluded from vaccine trials and cannot be inoculated until further research is conducted.

Although vaccines are now being offered to everyone over the age of 16, the pace of inoculations has slowed dramatically, a senior official in Clalit, one of country’s largest health providers, said, accusing social media of “fake news” and promoting vaccine skepticism.

Israel’s Palestinian citizens and the Haredim, the ultra-orthodox community, who make up some 20 percent and 12 percent of the population, have been vaccinated. The Haredim have been hit hard by the coronavirus, not least due to their impoverished and overcrowded living conditions—almost half of whom study full-time while their wives work in low-paid jobs and look after their large families—and refusal to implement social distancing measures that conflict with their religious beliefs and practices.

The ultra-orthodox communities, whose religious leaders are a key component of Netanyahu’s right-wing government, have received various exemptions from the lockdown restrictions, including permission to keep their schools open that have increased tensions between the secular and religious communities. The city of Bnei Brak and other towns with large ultra-orthodox communities recently witnessed violent clashes with police trying to enforce lockdown and social distancing measures in the face of large gatherings for prayers, weddings, and funerals.

Irrespective of the rate of inoculation, Dr Sharon Alroy-Preis, who heads the Health Ministry’s public health services explained, “Since there are 2.5 million children [of Israel’s 8.7 million population] who cannot be vaccinated, we likely will not reach herd immunity, even if the entire rest of the population gets vaccinated.”

The situation is set to deteriorate further as the Netanyahu government puts profits before lives. It began lifting its third partial lockdown on Sunday even as its hospitals were struggling to cope with 1,144 coronavirus patients in serious condition, compared to 949 serious cases at the start of the third lockdown. The third lockdown, which began with a rate of positive tests at 4.9 percent, ended with a positive test rate of 9.4 percent, the second began with 9.4 percent and ended with 4.5 percent and the first with 3.7 percent and ending with just 1.7 percent.



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