

COVID-19 Is Here to Stay. How Do We Cope?

R E A D E R V I E W S

TWiP asked a few of its readers to comment on one or more of the following questions. Below are their responses.

- 1. Do you think that the Palestinian government is in a position to handle the pandemic? How would you rate its performance?
- 2. How much faith do you have in the vaccines that are starting to appear? Would you get the vaccine?
- 3. How much has the virus changed your life?

1. We do not have the resources or the infrastructure to tackle the pandemic. Therefore, I do not think it is fair to hold the government responsible for the current situation. It could raise awareness, however, and encourage the COVID-responsible behavior of wearing masks and practicing social distancing – but the government has failed completely. I am inclined to grade it as follows: N/A for the first point and 0.00 for the second.

2. I have complete faith in the vaccine and the scientists behind it. I will absolutely get vaccinated and ask my family and friends to do the same.

3. Not only have I changed, humanity has. The virus has treated everybody equally. Wealth in terms of material goods meant nothing.

Bishara Dabbah

1. Like other governments, with the prime exception of China, the Palestinian government does not possess the means to enforce decisions across the Palestinian territories that could check the spread of the virus. It's not only the ongoing Israeli occupation that hampers its work, we citizens are not helping either, as we have become fatalistic towards the spread of the virus. Some point out that the Palestinian government did a superb job in March 2020, when the first infections appeared in the Bethlehem area. But the virus has become quite intelligent in the face of the nonintelligence of people who refuse to follow safety instructions, wear masks, practice social distancing, and maintain good hygiene. We continue to hold weddings and other social occasions and pay heavily for it. Maybe we should adopt the Chinese model if we can!

2. Initially, I hesitated to be among the first to be vaccinated, but I am more willing nowadays for several reasons: First, the vaccine has been proven by manufacturers, Pfizer and others, to be 90+ percent effective; these manufacturers cannot stake their reputation on causing unwanted severe outcomes. Second, immunologists and health experts in the field say that we will get rid of the virus if more people get vaccinated; such advice would not be offered if the vaccines in preparation posed a risk to those who will be vaccinated. I trust health experts more than politicians on this!

3. In March and April 2020, the virus locked me up for over a month, six weeks to be exact. I love to walk, so I continued doing it in confined quarters. After the lockdown, I decided to “live with the virus,” so I started to go out again, working some days from the office while complying with health and safety recommendations. I rarely visit others, which I used to love, and the visits of close family members are welcome as long as everyone takes safety precautions. I stopped flying, which I did a lot before the pandemic, but keep dreaming about it. I do most of my meetings for work and keep in touch with our daughters abroad via Zoom and other social media. While in September 2020, we could not attend our youngest daughter’s wedding in Dublin, we joined them via social media. I am happy that they went ahead with their wedding as planned. *C'est la vie*. Life needs to go on, and we have to learn how to live with the pandemic – safely and wisely.

Bernard Sabella, Jerusalem



Art project by artist Amal Ramlawi.

1. No, but it is not fair to use this against a government that cannot financially sustain itself. Our medical sector strives to provide basic health services, but this pandemic has made things even worse.

2. I think the vaccine will work. But as producers said, only 90 percent. Researchers will continue to develop its level of efficiency until they are satisfactorily able to cure COVID.

3. I consider this the most important point. Now I see my old self as unhealthy. When buying from any store, I make sure I put things in my bag and sanitize everything at home. I also changed my personal contact behavior: if I can make a phone call, it can replace meeting friends. Our self-awareness has increased at home and work. We make sure any meeting room is adequately ventilated, and we practice distancing. We must use microphones, pens, cups, and even doorknobs differently. We exchange fewer things with each other. The pandemic has made us realize that health matters more than anything else.

Nader Dagher, A.M. Qattan Foundation

□ 1. The government's response is typical so far (among regional Arab countries) and can be rated as average if infection rates stay within the medical capacity. The government is not solely responsible. All stakeholders must participate in the effort, including the media, researchers, and civil society, raising awareness and fighting information disorder. This is only possible if detailed health and other (non-personal) government data are made available and lead to coordinated transparent processes that build trust and counter rumors and misinformation.

There are various aspects to handling COVID-19 beyond public, physical, and mental health. Socioeconomic and educational consequences are vital and require attention.

Abed Khooli, data scientist and open data advocate

□ 1. The Palestinian government is trying its best to handle the pandemic despite facing resource shortages and constraints imposed by Israel. Prime Minister Shtayyeh himself oversees the situation and follows up closely on a daily basis, indicating commitment at the top level of leadership. Of course, the government could do better if responsibilities were decentralized and local government units empowered.

■ 2. I trust science and scientists and believe that countries and international companies are trying their best to make sure that the vaccine will be effective.

■ 3. The virus has changed my life dramatically. My interactions with my friends and family have been reshaped totally. I started a range of health and safety measures that I will continue for a long time.

Hazem Kawasmi, director of operations, Municipal Development and Lending Fund



□ 1. Considering the limited resources to which the Palestinian government has access, I believe it did a good job early on by imposing highly restrictive measures that enabled control of the pandemic. The government guidance was clear but, unfortunately, like countries worldwide, it faces two issues: economic ramifications and government inability to provide real support to the most affected – and the people who took the situation lightly and refrained from adhering to the simplest recommendations.

■ 2. I have good faith in any vaccine for which I can see reliable scientific reviews and endorsement by specialized global agencies. Yes, I would get vaccinated.

■ 3. The pandemic has affected me significantly, like most people worldwide. Most important is the continuous anxiety of possibly being infected and infecting people close to me who might have serious health issues. It affects our business drastically. It limits my social life and has created a new reality to which I must adapt. It has also enabled me to reflect, not taking anything for granted anymore. I have been closer to my small family, particularly during the lockdown, and recognize that we can make virtual platforms work for rather than against us.

Lana Abu Hijleh, country director, Global Communities Palestine



□ 1. The PA responded quickly and forcefully during the first phase of the pandemic in early 2020, mainly in the West Bank. It even extended its support to East Jerusalem testing facilities when Israel failed to do so sufficiently, faced with a growing number of affected Palestinians. Even the WHO praised the PA for its rapid steps in closing infected areas and producing and distributing public awareness materials. Palestinians greatly respected these steps and keenly followed the daily official reports. The PA's efforts to bring back Palestinian students studying abroad were also appreciated by their families and the wider society.

Citizens began to question the government's ability to deal with the growing spread of the virus; but the shortcomings are caused primarily by the PA's lack of control over its borders, the movement of Palestinian workers from and to Israel, and its inability to provide support and enforce its containment measures in the sealed-off Gaza Strip. Now, some doubt whether the PA has the willingness and sufficient medical infrastructure to face a severe second wave, in light of the recent increase in COVID-19 cases.

■ 2. The news about the vaccines gives hope to people worldwide. I am ready to get vaccinated if the WHO approves it. But the news of competition among powerful governments and the practical requirement to keep the vaccines at -80 degrees Celsius dispel that hope. In our highly polarized world, there is a huge imbalance of power. In the West Bank and in Gaza in particular, the lack of stable electricity and the poor infrastructure raise justified questions regarding our possibility to access and administer the required vaccines. In the discourse on the fundamental right to health for all, we witness with concern the enormous competition for survival between those who are rich and those who are poor or between white people and people of color worldwide.

■ 3. The virus has turned my life upside down. As a working mother, I still find it difficult to convince my children or elderly parents that I am overwhelmed with office work and cannot meet their needs for food or socializing – even though I am

still in my pajamas. The accepted catchphrase “social distancing” has been most concerning; it denotes an important measure to limit the spread of the virus, but I would have preferred the term “physical distancing” because we humans remain “social beings.” It is the essence of our humanity, even if we cannot continue to be *physically* close. Online meetings have filled our daily lives; they are tiring and frequently frustrating yet keep us socially close, engaged, and on top of our work. They enable us to deliver needed services and voice our ongoing demand to end the Israeli occupation while we seek freedom, good governance, and human rights.

Terry Boullata, East Jerusalem



■ 3. I was once an avid traveler and intensely gregarious, but COVID-19 has moderated my penchants and led to a sedate, introspective state of mind. I have reconnected with myself. On my walks in nature, a newly acquired daily routine, the romantic metaphysical poetry of Keats, Wordsworth, Blake, and Baudelaire and the paintings of Turner, Corot, Constable, and Caspar David Friedrich were my companions. Inspired, I painted profusely. As spring gave in to summer, my country rides revealed new horizons wherein I could pursue my ethnographic fieldwork and document Palestinian cultural heritage. As I've been liberated from my disposition to travel, COVID-19 has provided a refuge in which I live, intensely painting, researching, and writing.

Ali Qleibo, artist and anthropologist

□ 1. No, the government cannot. It cannot obtain enough tests, and people refuse to comply with government rules.

■ 2. No, we will not get vaccinated. But it would take more space to explain our family's particular health circumstances.

■ 3. Completely. Our entire immediate family is in the United States, and they have not met our new baby. The Israelis have leveraged the virus to deny travel (and especially reentry to Palestine for my foreign wife), so even once we managed to secure permission to leave, after a four-month effort, we knew we would not be able to come back home. Our business stayed closed from March until November, and our son took his first-ever yearbook photo wearing a mask. That might sound silly, but we must think about the long-term effects on our children: They don't see smiles at school. That's huge.

Saleh Totah, owner of Café La Vie

□ 1. The Palestinian Authority has not been able to deal well with the pandemic. First a complete lockdown of three months, and then no clear rules and coordination to control the situation, nor any support for the people affected financially by the lockdowns and lack of tourism.

■ 2. We are not medical experts, so it is hard to say whether vaccines will be good. And the problem will be mainly with equal distribution worldwide and whether it will be affordable for everyone or depend on your wealth to have access to it. Testing is still in its first stage, and we would rather wait to see more results before getting vaccinated.

■ 3. Our life and business changed a lot due to the pandemic. We would have been out of debt last summer if COVID-19 had not happened. We did not have any income for four months and had to cancel several events. Instead of finally being able to save some money, we have incurred more debts. We did not manage to travel and see my wife's family in Holland and haven't done many things or seen a lot of people. But we try to stay positive. We have spent more time together at home as a family, which is very precious time. My wife managed to continue studying, and her happy achievement is the podcast *Stories from Palestine* with a new episode every week. We live exactly on the Green Line (in Beit Safafa) and have experienced the lockdowns on both the Israeli side of the wall, where we live, and on the Palestinian side, where we have our businesses and where the kids go to school. We have had to deal with a lot of restrictions and uncertainties. I think we have learned to be extremely flexible, to deal with disappointments, and to focus on what *is* possible and not on what isn't, to appreciate small things.

Tariq Elayyan



□ 1. It took time for the Palestinian government to decide how to handle the pandemic after the first COVID-19 cases were detected in Palestine, but its immediate response with a total lockdown was a good step. It proved efficient in containing its spread early on, giving it time to prepare the medical system to handle the situation, treat patients, and prepare a plan to screen new cases and trace their contacts. But soon after the reopening, control was lost.

■ 2. I think there will be an effective vaccine because the ongoing efforts will produce several successful options. But I am concerned about its safety and will not get vaccinated until a few months or even years have passed and its efficiency and safety have been proven.

■ 3. The pandemic has changed my life. My work as a physician in outpatient care was affected. I saw fewer patients and did more consultations and follow up online and by phone (telemedicine). This was a new approach and has resulted in slower care for the patients. The number of doctor visits has been reduced for two reasons. Parents are afraid of catching the virus in a crowded clinic, and the economic situation is deteriorating, leaving some people unable to pay for doctor visits or medication – so they try other ways, such as consulting a pharmacist and getting over-the-counter medicines directly from the pharmacy. As has been observed worldwide during the pandemic, patients have arrived at hospitals sicker than usual and in some cases in larger numbers because of the delay in outpatient-sector care. For example, more diabetes type 1 cases have needed admission because the patients have developed ketoacidosis.

The health system as a whole has changed in Palestine, as have the state's priorities; it has been more ready to invest in the health system.

On a personal level, I have fewer social interactions and am placing more focus on my nuclear family and my core group of friends.

Najwa Abdulhaq, pediatrician, Ramallah

- 1. Yes, I think the government is doing a good job.
- 2. I have faith in the vaccines, and I would get vaccinated.
- 3. It has made a big difference as it has impacted the way we do our work and disrupted daily activities, and the travel restrictions have prevented me from seeing my family abroad.

Salam Kanaan, country director, CARE Palestine (West Bank/Gaza)



■ Art project by artist Amal Ramlawi, photos by Majdi Fathi.



■ Photo courtesy of UNDP/PAPP.