

From the Editors



THIS ISSUE GOES TO PRESS as many the world over live in a pandemic-induced state of the permanent temporary: stricken by widespread economic and social distress and unclear as to what the future holds; suspended in time without an end in sight and uncertain about what the “normal” we return to will be. For some, this condition of cyclical and ongoing crisis is a rupture. For many, and particularly for Palestine and the Palestinians, it is a way of life. Violent upheaval, collective trauma, confinement, and dispossession are not exceptional interruptions but rather markers of the temporal and spatial suspension that constitute everyday life.

One such poignant marker is Israel’s vast carceral system of surveillance, arbitrary detention, and imprisonment. Since 1967, over 20 percent of Palestinians in the occupied territories have been detained in this system.¹ Today, there are at least 4,300 Palestinian so-called security detainees and prisoners held in Israeli jails.² Over 300 of these are held without charge or trial under administrative detention for indefinitely renewable six-month periods.³ In the first six months of 2020, Israeli forces arrested 2,330 Palestinians.⁴ This past year alone, they have arbitrarily arrested and administratively detained over 80 Palestinian university students and at least 5 schoolchildren.⁵ Night raids—like the one in Bethlehem in July 2018, when Israeli forces shot fifteen-year-old Arkan Mizhar and arrested eleven others—are commonplace.⁶ And today, detainees and prisoners are exposed to the deadly Covid-19 virus in an Israeli prison system where they are denied the social distancing and personal protective equipment that are afforded to Israeli Jewish prisoners.

The interruption of basic services, even amid a global health crisis, is yet another marker of the Palestinian condition. On 21 July this year, Israel’s Civil Administration tore down a building in Hebron that Hazem Maswada had donated to build a coronavirus testing center. Israeli bureaucracy issued the demolition order that targets new buildings within ninety-six hours. Maswada, the Hebron municipality, and the St. Yves human rights organization had each lobbied to have the order rescinded, to no avail. At the time, Hebron was the epicenter of the pandemic in Palestine; the very next day after the demolition, the Ramallah-based Ministry of Health reported 154 new cases of Covid-19 in the district, with 60 in the city itself.⁷

These and other facets of the public health emergency as it affects the Palestinians are the focus of this Pandemic and Palestine special issue. Curated by Danya M. Qato, it includes a range of analysis that takes readers from refugee camps to prisons throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as in the diaspora. As Qato explains, the pandemic has laid bare the devastating forces of racism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy in impeding clinical medicine and public health. The special Covid-19 file, and Qato’s introduction, invite us to rethink our approaches to the health of Palestinians, whether by examining global structures of power or by imagining a different future.

It is not just the health and welfare of Palestinians that are in the balance. The history and landscape of Palestine are also daily targets. In July, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced it had “restored” to its original site a fifth-century baptismal font dating back to the Byzantine period. The operation took place at around 3:00 A.M., when Israeli forces “retrieved” the artifact from its location in the village of Tuqu’, near Bethlehem,

where it had stood for centuries and was repeatedly photographed by researchers of the Ecole biblique et archéologique française de Jerusalem as far back as the nineteenth century.⁸ The head of COGAT's Antiquities Unit welcomed the operation, claiming falsely that the font had been stolen some twenty years prior from an archeological site adjacent to the illegal settlement of Tekoa. He pledged to "continue working tirelessly to preserve the sites and the archeological relics throughout Judea and Samaria, and to prevent antiquities thieves from looting the history of the region."⁹ It is these daily acts of violence and dispossession, which are part of an ongoing colonial structure of repression and control going back decades, that we must vigilantly attend to—resisting the compulsion to focus on the seemingly formative current events that consume our intellectual and political imaginations.

The threats of "annexation" with which the Trump-Kushner-Netanyahu team have occupied our imaginations are one example. Certainly, we must pay attention to these policy announcements that threaten to further dispossess and subjugate the Palestinians and further shrink the land of Palestine. Yet, we must be just as alert to guard against the glare they create in order to attend to historical continuity. Israel occupied and attempted to erase a part of Palestine in 1948. It went on to occupy the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967. Today, after seventy-four years of assiduous colonization, there is no place where Israel begins and Palestine stops.

The Oslo process was built on the premise of the "two-state" solution. On the ground, this ostensible solution translated into intensifying settlement expansion and land confiscation. The liberal voices, who are now recovering from their infatuation with the two-state premise and posing "one state" as the way forward, are missing some key points.¹⁰ First, Palestinians and Israelis have been talking about this for a long time, so they are welcome to the conversation. Second, Palestinians and Israelis have been living in a one-state condition¹¹ since at least 1967. As Lana Tatour has put it, however, the problem is not 1967, but rather 1948, and Zionism as a racist settler-colonial project.¹² The point is not about one state, two states, or many states. The point is decolonization: ending the subordination of one people to another.

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ENDNOTES

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- 10 Peter Beinart, "I No Longer Believe in a Jewish State," 8 July 2020, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/opinion/israel-annexation-two-state-solution.html>.
- 11 Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *The One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
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