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Jerusalem During the Pandemic: Disease, Colonialism and Hope



These are challenging times. The whole world is facing the Coronavirus pandemic, that is threatening the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, as well as the global economy and life as we know it. These challenges are doubled for people within colonialist contexts.

This is the case in Palestine in general, and Jerusalem in specific. On the one hand, Palestinians in Jerusalem fear the spreading of the virus in their communities, and its grave effects on the economy in Jerusalem, as it depends mainly on tourism. On the other hand, they continue to face the already existing - and continuing - challenges of the Israeli occupation and its policies in the occupied city: challenges that even a pandemic has failed to stop.

At the same time, and as usual, the relentless Palestinian grassroots community continues to mobilize and create hope in the midst of all these challenges. In this newsletter, we will share the story of the grassroots initiative “Be the Aid to Your Brother” that is aiding families in Jerusalem through this pandemic.

Empty Streets, Closed Shops

The Palestinian economy depends highly on tourism. For centuries, pilgrims and tourists visited the city, stayed in its hotels and shopped in its markets. Moreover, April is usually the high season of tourism as pilgrims come for the Easter holiday. That is why the closure that the pandemic is imposing on cities around the world is

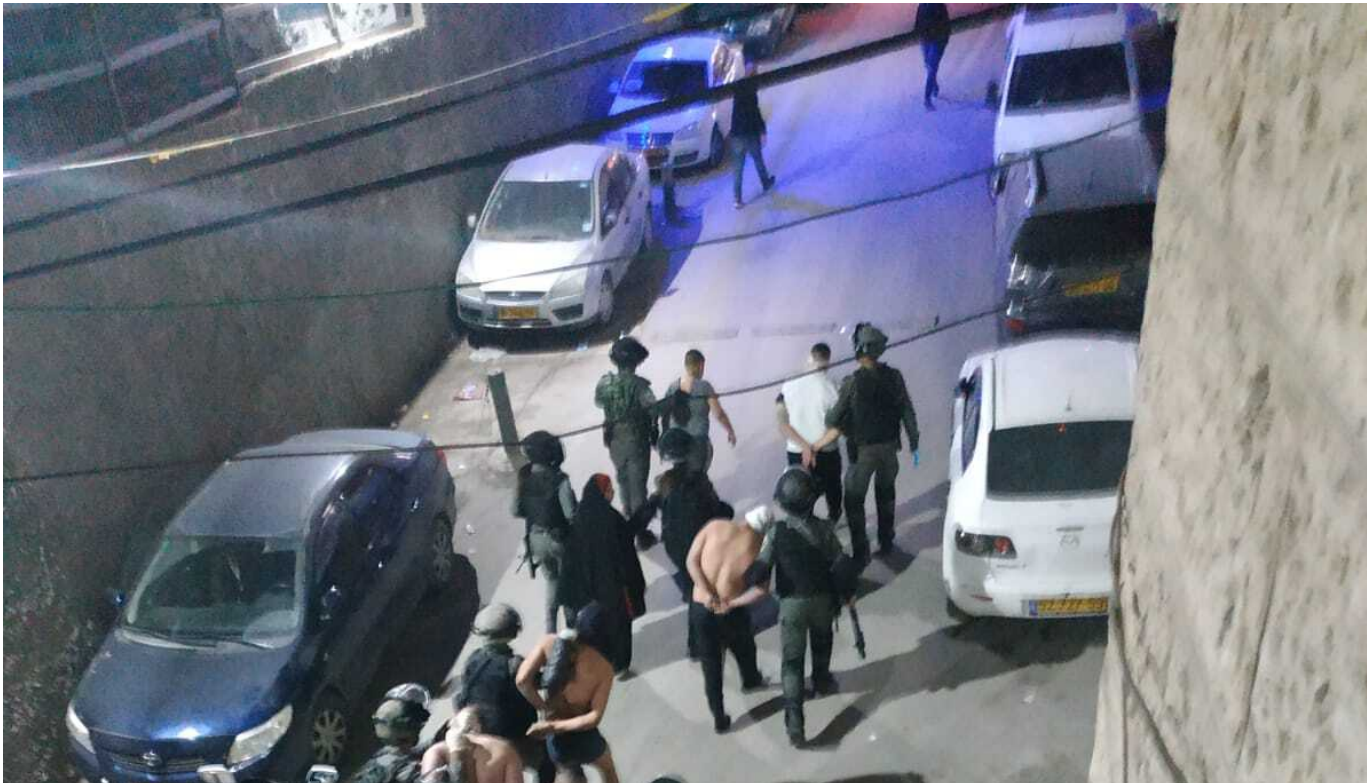
Palestinian merchants in the old city express their desperation as the COVID-19 pandemic cancels the high season of Easter in Jerusalem. Shops are closed, hotels are empty and thus firing staff, and business owners face the unforeseen future of their small businesses.

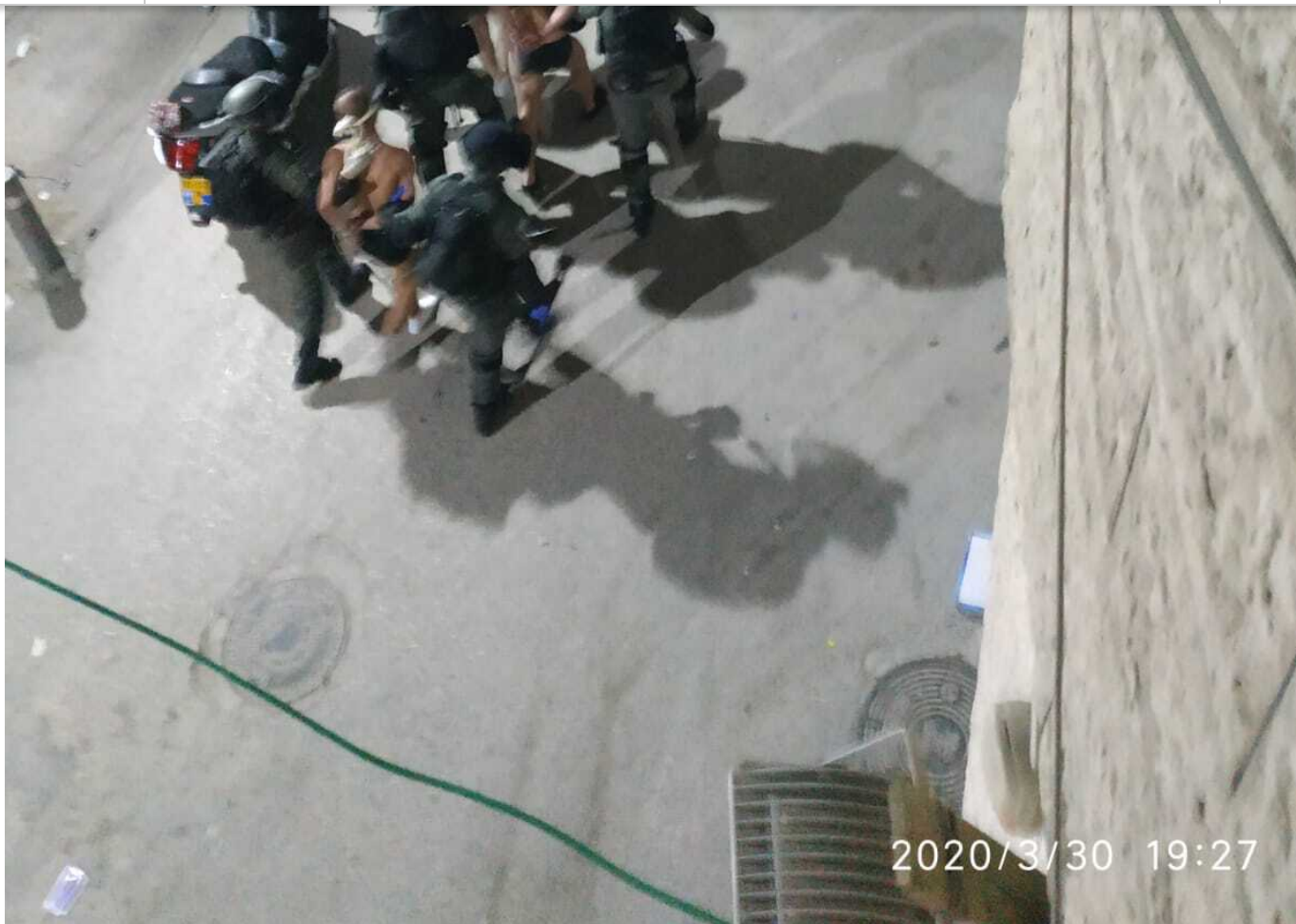


Empty streets in the Old City of Jerusalem, March 2020.

The occupation “business” is continuing as usual even in these times of pandemic. The occupation forces are continuing to raid Palestinian communities, attack residents and make arrests (For example in Al-Issawiyah). In addition, the occupation authorities continue to implement settlement plans (like E1), and other colonial policies that even the pandemic failed to stop. Moreover, the double effect of colonialism and pandemic has created new challenges. For example, the Israeli occupation police lately arrested or detained Palestinian youth because they were sanitizing public spaces in the eastern part of Jerusalem, something that the Israeli authorities are obliged to do themselves.

The Israeli occupation army carries on with raids on Palestinian neighborhoods despite the pandemic. Even in times like these, communities like Al-Issawiyah, Silwan and the Shuafat refugee camp continue to be under attack by the occupation forces: raids, arrests, the excessive use of live ammunition and rubber coated metal bullets, collective punishment, mass arrests, destroying private and public property and other actions that can only be described as terrorism against the residents of these communities.





The occupation forces arrest Palestinians in the Shuafat refugee camp, March 2020.

Palestinian Prisoners Face Coronavirus

As governments around the world are releasing prisoners as a protective measure from COVID-19, the Israeli occupation authorities continue to arrest and imprison Palestinians instead. We see almost-daily reports about Palestinians arrested by the Israeli occupation, also Jerusalemite youth who were arrested for sanitizing public areas to prevent the spreading of the virus in their communities.

prisoners have been living under inhumane conditions regardless of the current pandemic, amidst the usual absence of international human rights organizations, which has not changed also during these times.

A few days ago, a prisoner released from the Ofer military detention center near Jerusalem was found positive with COVID-19. The occupation authorities did not conduct any tests to check whether other prisoners who have been held together with him have also caught the virus, not even taking their temperature. This reflects a systematic medical negligence of Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails.

Israeli interrogators and jailers are the source of the virus's transmission to prisoners, and with the steady increase of infections among Israelis, a decision was issued by the military ruler in the West Bank to extend the period detention for prisoners and postpone interrogations, for fear that the virus would spread from the prisoners to the interrogators, and thus the period of detention of some would increase or double to an unseen extent.

For their part, the Palestinian prisoners started escalating steps to protest these practices. Some of them started returning their meals, and some announced a hunger strike, calling on the occupation authorities to take the necessary measures to limit the spreading of the virus in prisons. At the same time, Palestinians have launched virtual campaigns to back and support our prisoners in their struggle that has new aspects under current circumstances.

Despite the Occupation: Hope is Not Lost

Jerusalem's complex reality has always birthed youth initiatives serving their communities that are intentionally neglected by the occupation authorities. It is also safe to say that the (relative) absence of the Palestinian Authority from Jerusalem, and thus its inability to control or hijack these initiatives, is one of the main reasons behind the success of these initiatives.

In light of the difficult circumstances created by the Coronavirus pandemic, it was not surprising that voluntary youth campaigns were launched in Jerusalem seeking to relieve their communities and provide their needs. "It took only a short video that was posted on our pages on social media (Facebook and Instagram), for the generous contributions and donations to be made by Jerusalemites to begin, which enabled us to raise the

The campaign managed to recruit dozens of young men and women from Jerusalem. A few days after its launch, it provided 130 food parcels to families in need, according to Al-Abbasi. As for the selection of these families, he said trustworthy community members suggested which families to aid. The initiative coordinators do not count on lists of the Israeli welfare services (under the Israeli Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services). Thus, aid reaches those families that were not included in the lists of the social services, which are influenced by political considerations in many cases.



The initiative volunteers at the beginning of the campaign, March 2020.

The campaign did not stop at the colonial borders dividing Jerusalem, and families on both sides of the Wall, and on both sides of the Israeli dictated Jerusalem municipal boundaries were supported: Shuafat and the Shuafat refugee camp, Beit Hanina, Sur Baher, Al-Tur, Anata and Al-Thori. It also included some of the villages of Bethlehem, such as Al-Ubeidiyah, to the south of Jerusalem.

who put their own agendas before Jerusalem. These initiatives are part of a wide grassroots community which alone is able to carry this collective responsibility, or as Al-Abbasi put it": "Our city matters to us as does our community, and we will continue our campaign during the month of Ramadan, when the need of some families is expected to increase, especially in light of the ongoing pandemic and its economic consequences for Jerusalem and its people." To contact the initiative, you can visit Ramzi's page on [this link](#).

Grassroots Al-Quds These Days

Grassroots Al-Quds' team is Staying Home!

In the beginning of March, we joined the general effort of slowing down the spreading of the Coronavirus. Fortunately, we are able to do a lot of our work from home. Among the exciting projects we are currently working on are the development of the mobile phone application of [Wujood](#) and the research for updating our [website](#).

At the same time, our community engagement and field work have stopped entirely. Our research team is trying to make up for community visits and interviews with phone calls when possible, but our [tourism project](#) is currently on hold. Naturally, all of our tours stopped as well since the beginning of March.

We will continue to be in touch with our community members, friends and followers through our social media channels. On our [facebook](#) and [twitter](#) pages, you will find updates from Jerusalem, information about the city and recommended readings. We will enhance our virtual presence during the current situation and offer webinars and lectures about the city for those who are also staying home and wish to continue learning and engaging with Jerusalem.

We invite you to follow us on social media, and contact us at info@grassrootsalquds.org if you are interested in organizing webinars or other activities and would like input from Jerusalem!

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