

## COVID-19 outbreak in Arab Society in Israel – Preventative Measures

Presented to the Home Front Command, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2020

In light of the spread of the COVID-19 virus in Israel, we examined the unique issues facing Arab society amid this pandemic. This paper presents these unique topics in an effort to galvanize culturally appropriate response to the unfolding situation:

1. **Lifestyle across different sectors of Arab society:** Many of the families in Arab society are large families who live in close physical proximity. The physical proximity of different generations in close quarters, including grandparents, their children and grandchildren, can cause widespread infection in a short timeframe. For example, children playing in the yard with other children may later meet seniors and infect them with the virus.

In addition, the social habit of frequent physical contact, which includes kisses, hugs and handshakes can have a lethal impact on spreading the virus.

**Implications:** Widespread spread of the Corona virus across Arab society, including seniors and at-risk populations.

**Preventive measures:**

A targeted publicity campaign tailored to Arab society, in Arabic, starring professionals including doctors, nurses and social influencers. The campaign should focus on the importance of avoiding touch and physical contact.

2. **Crowded events:** Many Arab citizens are not obeying guidelines by the Ministry of Health that prohibit the gathering of many people and adhering to social distancing regulations.
  - **Weddings:** Traditionally the number of weddings held before the month of Ramadan is high and furthermore due to unpredictable weather, these events are often held in closed halls, with hundreds of guests. This increases the potential of contracting the virus significantly. It is too early to tell how and whether weddings will continue to be held across Arab communities, but as of today, dozens of weddings were held across Arab towns despite clear guidelines to refrain from holding events with 100 people or more. Weddings have been continued to be held due to the potential financial loss of cancelling the events. Economic shortfalls overpower potential health risks.
  - **Mourning and condolence:** Mourning events are collective and en masse in Arab society. These events often include physical touch, including handshakes, hugs and kisses. Despite guidelines by the Ministry of Health, events are still being held and include more than ten individuals (the maximum number of people allowed to attend an event as of today). There have been some changes in mourning practices, as a result of public announcements made by public and religious leaders calling to refrain from physical touch and mass gatherings. Holding such events risks the spread of the virus among mourners.
  - **Prayers in mosques:** Up to several days ago, some Imams continued to call individuals to attend prayers in mosques in Israel. Over last Friday's prayers, several prayer events which included hundreds of worshippers were recorded across Israel.  
Across the Muslim world, sheikhs and imams were asked to call people to pray at home, in the West Bank, imams shortened prayers to ten minutes. These strict guidelines can also

be felt in Israel where sheikhs and imams are adhering to Ministry of Health guidelines. These include only opening mosques for groups of 10-15 worshipers and adhering to social distancing requirements. Children are not allowed on mosque compounds and prayers are shortened.

In some cases, people have chosen to disobey guidelines due to the following reasons:

- Fatalism and thought that "this disease comes from above, and there is nothing we can do about it".
- Conspiracy theories that the Corona virus is not real because no-one has died in Israel to-date coupled with a belief that "this will not happen to me".

**Implications:** Widespread spread of the Corona virus across Arab society, including seniors and at-risk populations.

**Preventive measures:**

- Convene meeting with the forum of Imams in Israel to explain the importance of stopping gatherings for prayers. The meetings should be led by senior clerics who will be able to use religious motifs and explanations.
- Increasing public awareness across Arab society, focusing on these three types of events (weddings, mourning and gatherings for prayers).
- Identifying families in mourning and asking them not to hold mourning events open to the public. This should be led by local authorities.
- Increase enforcement of regulations at event halls alongside meetings with couples and their families to discuss the guidelines and the potential danger these events can have on public health.
- Publish clear and strict guidelines through local government in the Arab communities.

In parallel to these outreach efforts to the general public by doctors and public figures, an outreach effort should target local authorities. Local leaders should lead the effort to inform the public about the importance of staying home and ban crowded events.

- **Businesses:** Many businesses in Arab society are adhering to the new guidelines, however social places, including Hookah bars, cafés and restaurants continue to operate in some towns with little to now law enforcement shutting them down.

As a rule, unlike Jewish local authorities, Arab local authorities have not taken an active part in enforcing the guidelines as of date. This situation can lead to:

1. Neglect of Arab communities as far as enforcement of the guidelines and the wider spread of Coronavirus in these localities compared to Jewish localities.
2. The entry of police and security forces into the Arab communities for enforcement - this step may cause friction between the law enforcement bodies and the Arab citizens.

**Preventive measures:**

- Arab local authorities should take active measures to enforce the guidelines and closing down businesses that continue to operate.
3. **Rumors and hysteria:** The fear of contracting a virus, both in Jewish society and Arab society, causes the spread of rumors and panic across social media. People with flu-like symptoms become "Corona patients" via WhatsApp and individual people who disobey guidelines are mentioned by name.

**Implications:** Hysteria can cause alienation in communities where residents are suspected of having contracted the virus. On the other hand, this social control and “shaming” encourages people to self-quarantine and adhere to guidelines.

**Preventive measures:**

- Inform people of the dangerous consequences of public shaming and spreading unsubstantiated rumors, emphasizing that intentional shaming is a public offence.
4. **Arab citizens among the medical staff:** In light of the fact that many healthcare professionals, including doctors, nurses and pharmacists, are Arab, Arab citizens take on a very important role in caring for Corona patient and in preventing the spread of the virus.

**Implications:** A positive change in the perception of Arab citizens due to the important role they have during this pandemic.

**Required steps:**

Public the fact that a large proportion of Israel’s healthcare workers are Arab and ensure that their voices are heard.

An important issue to keep in mind at this time is that the main figure leading the public outreach to all citizens of the country is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu is perceived by many Arab citizens as a leader who discriminates against them and promotes incitement against Arab society. This perception causes Arab citizens, more than Jewish citizens, to disobey guidelines by the Ministry of Health.

Therefore, an important step to promote the internalization of guidelines among the Arab public must include information by Arab professionals and politicians who are respected in Arab society, such as Arab Knesset members and heads of Arab local authorities.

Sincerely

Ruth Lewin Chen and Ola Najami

Co-Directors, Safe Communities Initiatives

The Abraham Initiatives