

The Abraham Initiatives' Response to COVID-19

March 2020

Background

Arab society in Israel is more vulnerable to the spread of the COVID-19 virus than general public and, without targeted intervention, will be disproportionately impacted by the costs to public health, the economy, education, and beyond. This is due to a number of factors:

Cultural Norms and Traditional Living Arrangements

Arab citizens typically belong to large families living in close proximity to one another, including senior citizens living with children and grandchildren. This community focus includes regular social interactions and large gatherings. As a result, the behavioral change demanded by social distancing will likely be delayed.

Low Level of Emergency Preparedness

Historically, the majority of Israel's national emergencies have been in the context of regional conflict and emergency service providers in Israel have not viewed Arab society as a relevant constituency. The community has largely been excluded from crisis management planning leading to a low level of preparedness to respond to the virus.

Weak Local Governments

Despite recent improvement, many local Arab authorities remain deficient in routine town management. Local politics is often defined by tribal relationships and result in resentment and unequal power sharing. This results in a lack of public trust – a crucial requirement for effective crisis response.

Unstable Employment

Few Arab citizens are employed in the public sector and even less in major companies. Those who are generally hold lower positions and are more vulnerable to layoffs. Eighty percent of Arab workers are employed in manual or service industries. These workers overwhelmingly cannot work from home and due to poverty in Arab society, they are more likely to continue to work, taking the risk of infection in order to provide for their families.

Digital Gap

Arab citizens are less prepared to depend on digital solutions that ease the burdens of social distancing. Limited access to technology and underdeveloped cellular and internet infrastructure, contribute to gaps in distance learning, difficulties working from home, and an increased dependence on shopping in person.

Mistrust in Government

Arab citizens are much less likely to trust the national government in Israel due to unequal service delivery, past imposition of martial law, and recent attempts to limit the Arab citizens' rights. Additionally, the most visible public face of this crisis is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has continued a campaign of incitement against Arab society. This has all combined to engender a deep skepticism public health measures imposed by the national government.

The Abraham Initiatives' Response

The Abraham Initiatives' deep relationships within Arab society and ongoing partnership with the government and NGO sectors uniquely positions us to respond to this crisis:

- On March 17th, we presented our analysis and recommendations to the Home Front Command to better respond to the threat of COVID-19 in the Arab community. Many of our recommendations have been implemented and we remain in ongoing dialogue with the Command and other emergency bodies.

- On March 24th, we presented analysis and recommendations to the Ministry of Education to encourage it to address the serious gaps in technology and digital access that have hampered the implementation of distance learning for Arab students.
- Our six local Safe Communities coordinators, who normally work to combat violence in Arab communities, have transformed into local COVID-19 coordinators beginning to map and address the needs of the communities in which they work. They have proved to be critical liaisons between communities, local authorities, the national government and emergency service providers.

Emergency Actions (contingent on funding)

Local Authorities

The Abraham Initiatives' network of six community coordinators work in eight Arab towns & mixed cities: Jisr A-Zarqa, Acco, Tamra, Majd Al-Krum, Arara Negev, Lod, Ramla, and Jaffa.

In each of these towns our coordinators will:

- Map the needs of the local authority and residents
- Monitor the emergency response
- Observe the level of compliance with Ministry of Health regulations
- Provide the community with assistance in accessing information their rights
- Monitoring, prevention and counseling Domestic Violence (which is expected to rise)

The collected information is being used to advocate for emergency needs, prepare policy recommendations, and share findings with relevant government ministries.

Social Distancing

There is an urgent need to raise awareness in Arab society about the practice of social distancing, its implications, and how to adopt it. Due to the deeply held community norms, economic obstacles, and poor infrastructure, the Arab society needs culturally relevant, specific instructions.

The Abraham Initiatives will run a public awareness campaign, based on animated informational videos, which will be promoted on traditional and social Arabic media.

Bringing Service-Providing NGOs to Arab Society

There are over 30,000 NGOs in Israel's civil society, many providing for key needs of the population at this time. Many have no footprint in Arab society, and Arab citizens are lacking the services they provide. The Abraham Initiatives is acting as a bridge between these NGOs and Arab society at large. Providing consultation on how to tailor services and messaging to Arab society, and connecting the NGOs with local authorities and key players on the ground.

Public Education

The current crisis has generated a more sympathetic social context, especially the visibility of Jewish-Arab relations in hospital staff. This presents an opportunity to use this crisis to build better Jewish-Arab relations, and educate the public about shared society values.

National Campaign

Create a TV advert promoting Social Solidarity using Jewish and Arab presenters, and Hebrew and Arabic, to be screened on radio channels and adverts on most visited news sites.

Lecture series

- Lecture series aimed at teens led by celebrities from Arab society. This will be offered to the students of the 10 high schools we have been working with this year, and also publicized to a wider audience on social media.
- Lecture series for young adults presenting key issues in Arab society and Jewish-Arab relations.