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Song Niu & Nianci Li

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ARTICLE



## Israel's Measures and Its Cooperation with Palestine to Fight COVID-19

Song Niu and Nianci Li

Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China

### ABSTRACT

No country can shield itself thoroughly from a global pandemic such as COVID-19, even Israel, which is considered 'the safest country to be during the coronavirus pandemic'. The coronavirus epidemic in Israel began at the end of February. It quickly developed, and eventually more than 16,000 people have been diagnosed with the highly contagious disease. There are many factors to the rapid development of COVID-19 in Israel. For example, religious groups are reluctant to obey government restrictions. Israel has not yet elected a new government after three general elections, while left-wing activists constantly take to the street to protest against Netanyahu staying in power. The Israeli government has also adopted many measures to avoid a serious blow from the coronavirus to national health as well as the economy. However, COVID-19 has not only brought a great challenge to Israel, but also impacted on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the face of this pandemic, there has been a certain degree of cooperation between Palestine and Israel, but little progress has been made regarding their political disputes. For the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the coronavirus plays the role of being both a challenge and an opportunity.

### KEYWORDS

COVID-19; Israel; parliamentary elections; Palestinian-Israeli cooperation

As the coronavirus pandemic intensifies globally, the Middle East, a traditional hot spot in international politics, is receiving worldwide attention due to the critical situations of various nations during the pandemic. Although Israel is a Middle Eastern country geographically, most of the countries engaged in international communication and exchanges with Israel are not its Middle Eastern neighbours, due to its complicated relationship with the Islamic world. The development of the coronavirus epidemic in Israel originated from imported cases of citizens who were infected abroad, mainly from in Italy and Japan. To respond to a possible medical crisis, Israel has taken measures such as requiring social distancing, establishing a voluntary reception centre for confirmed patients, designating a hospital for coronavirus treatment and closing borders. Its anti-epidemic measures have achieved minor success, but there are also negative interferences, which include the resistant attitudes of the ultra-Orthodox

Jewish community to comply with government orders, the absence of a formal government after three elections within a year, and therefore a lack of effective leadership in public health affairs, as well as political ferment and street protests surrounding Prime Minister Netanyahu's corruption cases during the coronavirus. All these combined have increased the difficulty of Israel's fight against the epidemic. Though most of its diplomatic activities are not in the Middle East, and it is less affected by COVID-19 cases than other Middle Eastern countries, because of the existence of the special situation between Palestine and Israel, Israel has been actively cooperating with all parties in Palestine to stop the spread of the coronavirus. With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being the most long-lasting and difficult issue in the Middle East, a complicated Palestine-Israel cooperation is being facilitated by actual pressure of the epidemic. On the one hand, Palestine and Israel have a joint fight against the coronavirus; on the other hand, they tend to overlook the political nature of cooperating and coordinating in the fight against COVID-19. This reflects that they can ignore neither their highly devastated bilateral relations nor their respective domestic political forces and international allies.

## 1. The Development of COVID-19 in Israel and the Israeli Measures

Since its first indigenous case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 27 February 2020, Israel has seen COVID-19 spread extraordinarily fast within its borders. Having peaked at the end of March and early April, the number of daily new cases was once 729. Fortunately, the situation in Israel has stabilised as it entered May. At the moment the number of newly diagnosed people per day is less than 100. As of 14 May 2020, according to data from the Israeli Ministry of Health, the total number of people infected with COVID-19 in Israel is 16,567, with 264 deaths, at a mortality rate of 1.6%. The number of existing cases is 3939.<sup>1</sup>

An outstanding characteristic of the COVID-19 transmission in Israel is that it began late but it was rapid. While China was witnessing an outbreak of pneumonia from the novel coronavirus in January and February, Israel was among the first countries to issue a travel ban on mainland China starting from 30 January 2020. By adopting the means of blocking the entry of viruses from abroad, the Jewish state was able to avoid large-scale outbreaks of infectious diseases in the early days. The first COVID-19 case in Israel was reported on 21 February 2020, when a female Israeli citizen returned from the plagued vessel Diamond Princess Cruise; but this was not the patient zero that led to the local spread of coronavirus in Israel. The source of the local outbreak in Israel at the end of February was actually an Israeli who returned from Italy. Although Israel immediately issued a travel ban on Italy and once again to five Western European states including Spain, Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland in early March, a COVID-19 epidemic has begun in Israel. It took just 21 days for the country to reach 100 cases from the first patient, 11 days to go from 100 to 1,000 cases, and astoundingly only 19 days to go from 1,000 to 10,000. While in the early stage most of the confirmed cases were imported from abroad, community

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<sup>1</sup>For details, refer to the official website of the Israeli Ministry of Health, (accessed 28 July 2020), available at: <https://govextra.gov.il/ministry-of-health/corona/corona-virus/>.

transmission had become a major method of transmission of the coronavirus in Israel from March. However, due to the complicated situation, measures such as maintaining social distance to curb the spread of COVID-19 were not effectively implemented in Israel.

In the face of the COVID-19 epidemic, the Israeli anti-epidemic measures are clearly characterised by external strictness and internal looseness. When COVID-19 started to spread rampantly overseas but had not yet arrived in Israel, the Israeli government adopted extremely strict travel bans on states with a serious epidemic, in an attempt to keep the virus out of the country. On 30 January, Israel was one of the first countries to impose a travel ban on China. Any non-Israeli citizens and permanent resident who had visited mainland China within the previous 14 days were prohibited from entering Israel. As a result, direct flights between Israel and mainland China were cancelled. Subsequently, Israel imposed travel bans on some Asian countries and regions where the coronavirus spread, including the prohibition in early February of non-citizens who in the past 14 days had visited Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Thailand, a popular travel destination for Israelis. When COVID-19 spread to East Asia, especially after an outbreak on the cruise ship *Diamond Princess* docked in Yokohama, Japan, the travel ban also included Japan. On 23 February 2020, after confirming seven members of a South Korean tour group that had stayed in Israel for eight days were diagnosed with COVID-19 after they returned home, Israel immediately put South Korea on the list of no-entry. Other South Korean tour groups that remained in the country were gathered and isolated by Israel and later sent back to South Korea by charter flights. However, the Israeli way of handling a possible COVID-19 spread caused some diplomatic discontent. Since Israel was too tough at expelling South Korean tourists, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed strong protests against the Israeli government and its embassy in South Korea.<sup>2</sup> In the beginning of March, there was a new outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe. Israel gradually issued travel bans to a number of European countries, trying to prevent the coronavirus from entering Israel from another direction, but it failed. On 9 March, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu officially announced closure of the state, and stipulated that foreigners who have entered the country are subject to mandatory quarantine. Israelis and permanent residents returning from overseas had also to implement home isolation. At the time, Israel had just 39 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

When preparing for a possible outbreak of COVID-19 in Israel, the government focussed its efforts on testing, health publicity and epidemiological tracking. Its measures included calling on the public to avoid shaking hands and paying attention to personal hygiene, conducting massive virus detection tests, and sending patients with flu-like symptoms to the hospital in a timely manner. Sheba Medical Centre, Israel's most advanced medical facility, was set up as a COVID-19 treatment hospital. It also launched remote treatment projects for the coronavirus. In early times, the Israeli Ministry of Health released the movements of each confirmed patient, to remind people who might be in the same location to self-quarantine. However, when the number of confirmed cases was still small, Israel did not take strict measures to restrict

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<sup>2</sup>W. Wang, 'Israel introduced 'super severe' measures to prevent and control the COVID-19 epidemic, Japan and South Korea are dissatisfied', *Global Times*, (25 February 2020).

personal movements. Economic activities as well as social life remained normal. When cases exceeded 100, Israel announced the closing of primary and secondary schools and universities, but kindergartens, special education schools and boarding schools remained open.<sup>3</sup> From 11 March, Israel began implementing the regulation of social distancing, prohibiting gatherings of more than 100 people. With the rapid growth in the number of COVID-19 patients, four days later, the Israeli government again issued new regulations prohibiting gatherings of more than 10 people and closing some businesses including restaurants. It also recommended that people should maintain a social distance of at least two metres. However, the spread of the epidemic did not slow down. On 19 March 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declared a state of emergency and a mandatory seven-day lockdown, those who violated the lockdown restrictions would be fined. On 25 March 2020, the government tightened COVID-19 regulations again. Citizens were not allowed to go out unless it was extremely necessary, and they had to wear protective masks outdoors. Yet according to the 25th March version, people were still allowed to leave their residences under multiple circumstances. By that time, Israel had not adopted strict anti-epidemic measures. Further tightened-up government orders were not in place until the number of COVID-19 cases in Bnei Brak, a small town on the northeast of Tel Aviv, soared sharply to more than 1,000. Bnei Brak, with a population of about 200,000 and a religious majority, had the second biggest number of patients due to the outbreak among religious Jewish communities. Under this critical situation, the Israeli cabinet voted to seal off Bnei Brak for a week on 3rd April. In addition, during the Jewish holiday Passover, in order to reduce the spread of the coronavirus caused by citizens travelling and visiting relatives and friends, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that from 4 pm on 7 April to 7 am on 10 April, the entire country would be under lockdown. Inter-city travel would be prohibited. On the eve of Passover from 6 pm on 8 April to 7am on 9 April, a curfew was imposed across the country and everyone was required to stay home. What proved controversial was that in order to ensure mild and unconfirmed patients were quarantined at home for 14 days as requested, Israel even applied anti-terrorism technology from the intelligence department to track and locate them, and required neighbours to supervise and report on those people, triggering public objections.

Though restrictions of the Israeli government on gatherings were not effectively implemented, Israel did manage to prevent its medical system from becoming overloaded, so that it could efficiently handle the increasing influx of COVID-19 patients. For example, Israel's Magen David Adom National Emergency Centre made changes to its call centre. Dealing with a surge in emergency calls, MDA diverted patients who did not necessarily need to go to the hospital to online consultation or home medical services, reducing the need for people to go out or be admitted to the hospital where the risk of infection was high, and consequently decreased the workload of medical staff.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the MDA emergency centre deployed ambulances and first-aid

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<sup>3</sup>'Israel closes schools, universities as Netanyahu issues dire coronavirus warning', The Times of Israel, (12 March 2020).

<sup>4</sup>'MDA: we'll reduce ER traffic by a third so hospitals can cope with coronavirus', The Times of Israel, (12 March 2020).

personnel nationwide based on the status of existing patients and their locations. Designating the Sheba Medical Centre to admit COVID-19 patients also helped to efficiently allocate medical resources, and cut off ways for unconfirmed patients to spread the virus.

## **2. Negative Factors in the Anti-Epidemic Efforts in Israel**

In Israel, COVID-19 broke out against a backdrop of stagnation in politics. Behind it were issues of the political participation and national identity of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in a secular nation-state, as well as the impact of Orthodox Jewish-related affairs on the formation of government after the three elections in Israel. In addition to many variables resulting from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's corruption cases, Israel's anti-epidemic efforts have been greatly challenged.

### ***2.1. The Non-Cooperative Attitudes of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Groups***

Although the total number of COVID-19 cases in Israel is still growing, with no more than 100 new cases per day, the rate of increase has dropped significantly since the beginning of May. Having passed the peak of the curve, the COVID-19 epidemic is stabilising in Israel as one can see a steadily decreasing number of existing patients, and the cumulative total of more than 16,000 diagnosed. Among these 16,000 people, religious Jews have been hit disproportionately hard, especially ultra-Orthodox Jews. Israeli cities and towns with a majority religious population are also those most seriously affected. This phenomenon is also reflected by the results of epidemiological tracking. According to epidemiological data released by the Israeli Ministry of Health on 22 March, reported by the media, synagogues as religious sites are places where most people contracted the coronavirus.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the infection rate of religious groups in Israel is not only significantly higher than that of other groups, but the behavioural patterns of religious groups during the epidemic are also one of the determining factors in the rapid spread of COVID-19 in March and April. There are two reasons why religious Jews, especially ultra-Orthodox Jews, have accelerated the development of COVID-19 in Israel. First, religious families tend to have many children and that makes it difficult for them to maintain social distance. Religious Jews are also generally not willing to abide by government decisions, be they anti-epidemic measures or other regulations. As a result, the spread of COVID-19 in Israel was not effectively suppressed in the early stages. Second and more importantly, the Israeli Ministry of Health, led by religious leaders, not only fails to play its due role in addressing epidemic issues in a scientific way, but it has also become an obstacle for professionals to organise anti-epidemic work orderly and timely.

First of all, for religious Jews there is nothing more important than studying the Bible and praying to God. Chaim Kanievsky, a top rabbi in Israel said that not studying

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<sup>5</sup>N. Hasson, 'Synagogues, Yeshivas and hospitals: most coronavirus prone locations in Israel', Haaretz, (24 March 2020).

the Torah is more dangerous than the coronavirus.<sup>6</sup> Jews should only obey God's commands and leadership. Human affairs cannot hinder the communication between Jews and God. However, the secular government's suspension of social activities and maintaining social distance issued for the purpose of curbing the spread of an epidemic was deemed as interfering with the activities of religious Jews. Therefore, in cities and areas where religious Jews are predominant, government orders to restrict public gathering were to a large extent overlooked, and all activities remained unperturbed. Religious schools, Yeshiva, opened as usual. In addition to study the Torah collectively, religious Jews often participated in other large-scale gatherings in early March, such as praying in synagogues, attending wedding and funeral ceremonies, etc. Despite disregarding restrictions on gatherings, religious Jews were very disgusted by any secular attempts to intervene in their life. At a religious rally in Bet Shemesh, a city in central Israel, some children from religious families shouted "Nazis" at police that were assigned to maintain order there, and coughed wildly at them. Religious Jews in Jerusalem even threw stones at medical staff who were supposed to collect samples for virus screening to drive them out. Resisting quarantine, insisting on gatherings and refusing to take virus tests, the religious community seriously accelerated mutual infection within their neighbourhoods, finally resulting in an outbreak of COVID-19.

On the other hand, as the ministerial frontline in Israel's fight against the coronavirus, the Israeli Ministry of Health is led by religious leaders, as typically "laymen leading experts". Israel's Minister of Health Yaakov Litzman is an ultra-Orthodox Jew. When a wave of pneumonia caused by a novel coronavirus first broke out in China and caused public panic, Litzman showed that he had little knowledge and barely any attention to this new virus, and even told citizens to pray to God to avoid infection. Litzman had reservations about the government's anti-epidemic measures, and advocated postponing restrictions over gatherings. Just as historically interpreting various natural or man-made disasters, religious Jews believe that the coronavirus is God's punishment to humanity. It indicates the Last Judgement, and the Messiah is the ultimate medicine for the virus. People should obey and accept the arrangement of God, pray day and night, and welcome Messiah with both arms so that they can survive the disaster. This view was recognised by the Minister of Health himself. Litzman publicly stated that the Messiah was the cure for COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> The lack of correct understanding and attention to the severity of COVID-19 by the Israeli Ministry of Health is an important reason that Israel missed great opportunities in the early days to establish an epidemic response mechanism. Moreover, under the leadership of an ultra-orthodox Health Minister who strictly abides by Jewish law, the Israeli Ministry of Health is inefficient and made many mistakes. First, the Ministry of Health did not allow laboratories to conduct virus testing on the Sabbath, which led to a significant delay in testing progress. Second, even if testing was completed, the Health Ministry constantly made errors, such as publishing an incorrect number of confirmed case and mislabelling positive samples as negative. Due to the low efficiency of testing, test

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<sup>6</sup>A. Pfeffer, 'Israel's leading Rabbi thinks not studying Torah is more dangerous than coronavirus', Haaretz, (15 March 2020).

<sup>7</sup>N. Ahituv, 'Israeli health minister's cure for COVID-19? the Messiah', Haaretz, (26 March 2020).

results were not quickly released. Consequently, infected patients did not receive proper isolation, and thus became walking sources of the virus. On 2 April, Israeli Health Minister Yaakov Litzman and his wife were diagnosed with COVID-19, because they violated their own regulations and went to the synagogue to pray with others. His contracting of the coronavirus led to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the head of Mossad, who had had contact with him, entering self-isolation.

## ***2.2. The Government was not in Place and there was a Lack of Effective Leadership in Israeli Public Health Affairs***

Since the first general election on 9 April 2019, Israel has been unable to form a new coalition government within the past year, in the presence of disputes between the left and right wings. The two sides are neither capable of defeating the other, nor willing to make compromises to one another. Each time both sides failed to form a coalition government of their own, and therefore Israel held three elections in less than a year so that the fighting parties could avoid make concessions, yet the country is trapped in a deadlock. After experiencing two failures in April and November last year, Israel held its third general election on 2 March 2020, against a background of the raging epidemic, when many countries decided to cancel public events and gatherings. The Israeli Health Minister, who belongs to a religious party, even urged people to go out to vote, without worrying about the spread of the coronavirus. According to Israeli media, the turnout rate in the third general election was higher than the previous two, reflecting the aversion of the public to the long-lasting political stalemate, and their eagerness to have a government that can lead, especially during a devastating epidemic. A formal and fully functional government will be more effective to respond to this far-reaching global health emergency.<sup>8</sup> However, this wish of the people was not fulfilled. Benny Gantz, the leader of the Blue and White Party who won the third general election, was authorised by President Rivlin on 16 March to form a cabinet, yet he failed to do so before the deadline. After that, Benny Gantz was invited by his rival, the incumbent Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to form an “emergency” coalition government solely for addressing crises caused by the coronavirus. On 20 April, the two formally signed an agreement to share power—Netanyahu would continue to serve as Prime Minister for the next 18 months, during which Gantz would serve as Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister and take over as prime minister in 18 months. Within the first six months, the government would exist in the form of an emergency coalition government, which only deals with legislative matters related to the fight against COVID-19.

After three fruitless elections, a fully functional government with proper personnel is what was absent in Israel over the past 17 months. Though a new government was not in place, the incumbent government was still exercising some of the administrative power and dealing with some of the daily state affairs. Frequent campaigns and elections have rendered government leaders ineffective and inefficient in handling all of the government tasks, legislative affairs, judicial procedures, and social and

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<sup>8</sup>G. Hoffman, ‘Elections 2020: 65.5% of Israelis vote, highest since 1999’, The Jerusalem Post, (2 March 2020).



economic issues. While the costs of election campaigns have multiplied, social resources have been wasted, election activities have also intensified personal movements and expanded the spread of COVID-19. The resentment of the Israeli people towards the government is constantly on the rise. So is their weariness of politicians' denial of wrongdoings and their name-calling. The government's prestige and credibility have been greatly affected, and therefore people feel more reluctant to follow government regulations regarding the coronavirus. This has created a negative impact on Israel's efforts to curb the development of the epidemic.

The three failed elections and numerous attempts to form a cabinet reflect the uncompromising nature of Israeli party politics. One of the reasons that it is always difficult for Israel to form a coalition government is that there are too many political parties, but each of them does not necessarily agree with another one. Even the party with the most parliamentary seats cannot form a cabinet on its own. Instead, it needs to win over small parties to form an alliance through exchange of interests. Religious parties are often the target of the current Prime Minister Netanyahu to make a coalition. The ultra-orthodox Health Minister who was the first minister diagnosed with COVID-19 also entered the cabinet along this path. However, religious parties are too powerful to touch and too outstanding to ignore when it comes to forming a cabinet. They have contributed so much to Netanyahu's rise to power to the point that even the government cannot enforce mandatory quarantine measures against religious communities, which have the highest infection rates.

### ***2.3. The Netanyahu Corruption Cases put Israel in a Constitutional Crisis***

Initially, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu announced the dissolution of the Knesset last year and brought forward the general election, in the hope that he could form a cabinet that could make it easier for him to use executive power to intervene in the judiciary to avoid being prosecuted for allegations of corruption. Now, because fewer and fewer people are willing to be stuck with a prime minister suspected of corruption, the Israeli right wing tried desperately to maintain their majority by holding three elections in a year. On the other hand, the outraged left wing vehemently wants Netanyahu to step down and go through legal judgement, so the furious public took to the streets to express their indignation through demonstrations. Protests of left-wing people against Netanyahu staying in power broke out in many places across Israel before COVID-19 arrived. After the coronavirus started spreading in Israel, left-wing people still protested as usual, but it was worrying that when there was an increasing number of COVID-19 cases in Israel, most of the people participating in the demonstrations did not wear masks or maintain a social distance of one metre or more. Moreover, protests against Netanyahu usually involve a large number of people, gathering in densely populated areas such as city centres or outside important government facilities, creating favourable conditions for the coronavirus to spread.

At a time when the number of COVID-19 patients in Israel was rising sharply, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu announced on 14 March that it was forbidden to participate in assemblies with more than 10 people, and then the cabinet announced that the

court system was temporarily closed and the Knesset adjourned.<sup>9</sup> However, the date of his announcing restrictions on aggregation, and later the decision to close the court system, was just three days before the Ministry of Justice originally scheduled to hold a trial on Netanyahu's corruption, fraud and breach of trust case on 17th March. The trial was postponed to 24th May due to restrictions on gatherings. The left-wing activists who have been protesting against Netanyahu tend to think this is too much of a coincidence. They suspected that he used the coronavirus to escape a trial. On 18 March, people from around the country put on demonstrations (which are allowed in anti-epidemic restrictions), but they were dispersed by police because the number of gathered people exceeded the required figure. On 24 March again, disregarding the regulations restricting gatherings and with almost no one wearing a mask, hundreds of people demonstrated in front of the Israeli parliament to protest against Netanyahu's use of the epidemic to consolidate his power and undermine Israeli democracy. The police at the scene did not wear masks either. Until the COVID-19 epidemic reached a critical point in April, some of the Israeli protesters who continued to participate in demonstrations finally put on masks.

As COVID-19 in Israel gradually reached its peak in April, the Israeli government banned all people from going out and imposed curfews during Passover. But even on lockdown, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was deeply involved in corruption allegations but refused to step down, was still the target of left-wing protesters who have been fighting to protect democracy in Israel. After the Passover curfew orders were over, protesters continued to go out to participate in anti-Netanyahu demonstrations, especially after Netanyahu invited his opponent, Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz, to form an emergency coalition government. The left-wing people are concerned that the power-sharing agreement negotiated by the two would allow Netanyahu to continue ruling even when on trial. Hence, on 19 April, when Israel still did not restore normal economic activities and social life, more than 2,000 protesters gathered at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, wearing masks, waving black flags, while keeping a social distance of two metres between each other, to keep protesting against Netanyahu and the emergency coalition government agreement. This was the most powerful anti-Netanyahu protest held during the Israeli epidemic. The protest has been held for three consecutive weekends so far. Although they were in an orderly manner and the epidemic situation is overall improving, crowded protest gathering of this kind will still bring a certain risk to Israel's anti-epidemic efforts.

### **3. Palestine-Israel Cooperation in Fighting COVID-19 and its Impact on the Bilateral Relations**

In response to the continued spread of the COVID-19 epidemic in Palestine and Israel, and the rising number of confirmed cases in both countries, in addition to the strict measures taken by each, Palestine and Israel have to temporarily put aside disputes, cease complaints and conduct cooperation to fight against the COVID-19 epidemic.

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<sup>9</sup>D. Scheindlin, 'Israel suspends two branches of government, in a battle over democracy with a long history', (20 March 2020), (accessed 28 July 2020), available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/israel-suspends-two-branches-government-battle-over-democracy-long-history>.

On 17 March 2020, Israeli President Rivlin and Palestinian President Abbas launched a 'telephone diplomacy'. Rivlin and Abbas conducted in-depth exchanges on the development of COVID-19 and its impact on the world and the Middle East region. Rivlin pointed out, 'Our cooperation between us is vital to ensure the health of both Israelis and Palestinians.'<sup>10</sup> Abbas welcomed Rivlin's call for a joint fight against the COVID-19 epidemic. Thanks to the consensus reached by both heads of state on anti-epidemic cooperation, Israel had stepped up its anti-epidemic assistance to the Palestinian side. Israel delivered the most needed virus test kits and other key medical protection materials to Palestine in batches and sent experts to conduct training for more than 100 Palestinian medical personnel four times. Elhanan Bar-On, the Director of the Israeli Centre for Disaster Medicine and Humanitarian Response, which is responsible for training Palestinian medical personnel, expressed his pleasure in sharing anti-epidemic experience and information with the Palestinian side. He believed that only unity and joint efforts could be effective in containing and defeating the epidemic, 'no one has time to deal with ancillary topics – politics or anything else,' 'everyone understands we are in the same boat and we have to work together to stay safe.'<sup>11</sup> On 19 March, the Israeli Ministry of Finance signed a decree allowing the \$33 million tax payment of Palestinian taxpayers to be transferred to the Palestinian government for the maintenance of the operation of its medical system.<sup>12</sup> On 31 March, Israel even launched COVID-19 fighting cooperation with Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, and a large number of medical supplies donated by the WHO were transported into Gaza under Israeli coordination.<sup>13</sup> Whether it was the Israeli President's initiative to extend an 'olive branch' to the Palestinian President and get a positive response, or the excitement of the Israeli virus expert from the successful sharing of medical skills, or the rare quick transfer of Palestinian taxes from Israel, all are based on an inescapable fact that the Palestinian-Israeli economy is highly integrated and results in intensive personnel movement.

After the "Oslo Process" that promoted peace between Palestine and Israel was launched in the 1990s, an asymmetric bilateral relationship was established between Palestine and Israel. As 'land for peace' continues to advance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), this asymmetric relationship is a 'double-edged sword' for Palestine. On the one hand, Palestine is economically constrained by Israel, on the other hand, it also objectively shares the dividends of Israeli economic development to a certain extent. Furthermore, on the one hand, Israel is on alert with regards to Palestine, but on the other hand there is a huge demand for cheap Palestinian labour. It is for this reason that Israel is well aware of the principle of shared destiny in fighting COVID-19. Because of the special relationship between Palestine and Israel, for Israel, Palestine is not only a 'barricade' that cannot be avoided on its way to become a completely normal country, but also a unique 'natural barrier' in its battle against the COVID-19 epidemic. Rather than saying that

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<sup>10</sup>J. Greenblatt and B. Bahbah, 'Israeli and Palestinians work together against coronavirus', Jerusalem Post, (24 April 2020).

<sup>11</sup>M. Jaffe-Hoffman, 'Sheba doctor teaches Palestinians to treat coronavirus', Jerusalem Post, (29 March 2020).

<sup>12</sup>M. Jaffe-Hoffman, 'Why Israel should lead efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19 in Gaza', Jerusalem Post, (26 March 2020).

<sup>13</sup>T. Lazaroff, 'Coronavirus: Israel must help Hamas without creating a security threat', Jerusalem Post, (2 April 2020).

Israel is helping Palestine fight the epidemic, it is more accurate that Israel is pushing its own front line against COVID-19 into the Palestinian territory. The excessive disparity in economic strength between Palestine and Israel is also reflected on the medical treatment level. Palestinian medical and healthcare level has long been under the high concern of the World Health Organisation. As the COVID-19 epidemic intensified, both Palestine and Israel took urgent proactive 'closing door' measures. The isolation of each other made the Separation Barrier built by Israel unexpectedly became a physical virus-intercepting line. The purpose of Israel's exportation of medical skills and equipment into the Palestinian territory and the transfer of taxes was to enhance the Palestinians' ability to internally cope with the threat to the health and safety of their nationals. The increased strength of Palestine in the fighting of COVID-19 will not only help alleviate the pressure of Israel, but also create a healthy environment for the continued economic cooperation between the two sides in the future. Although there are still sporadic conflicts between Palestine and Israel, the basic cooperation between the two countries will be the norm state until the global and Palestine-Israel health situation have improved.

Although the willingness and execution of fighting COVID-19 cooperation between Israel and Palestine is notable in the face of the turbulent situation, this has not been the normal state of Palestinian-Israeli relations in recent years. The spirit of cooperation highlighted in this temporary arrangement is precisely the core element most needed in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Palestinian-Israeli relations towards the 'post-COVID-19' period will continue to face internal, regional and international influences. All in all, the COVID-19 epidemic has pressed the 'pause button' for the large-scale conflict between Palestine and Israel. However, under the combined force of various internal and external factors, the relationship between Palestine and Israel will continue to show a complex state of conflict and compromise.

First, the internal variables both in Palestine and Israel. Although the new government's dystopia caused by Israel's three elections within one year came to an end, even after the formation of the new government, it is still uncertain whether Gantz can take over as prime minister on schedule. In fact, in the three parliamentary elections, Likud led by Netanyahu and the 'Blue and White' led by Gantz have been in a state of stalemate in which they are well-matched in strength and unwillingness to compromise. This is the root cause of the failure of both sides to form a new government twice, and the 'vital few' in Israeli party politics has given fatal blows to Netanyahu and Gantz in each round of parliamentary elections. On 2nd March 2020, under the threat of the COVID-19 epidemic, Israel held the 23rd parliamentary election. Earlier on 21st February, the Israeli Ministry of Health officially confirmed that there was the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in its territory. The confirmed patient was an Israeli citizen, who was an imported case of infection on the "Diamond Princess" cruise ship. The result of this parliamentary election is not fundamentally different from the previous two rounds. For Netanyahu, though, it could be regarded as worrying. Israeli President Rivlin granted Gantz the priority to form a cabinet. Gantz was planning for the establishment of the forthcoming government within 6 weeks. It however made people suspect that Gantz was elected as speaker of the new Israeli parliament on 26 March. On that day, Israel's Haaretz revealed the idea that

Netanyahu and Ganz are expected to form a coalition government and take turns in power.<sup>14</sup> The continued deepening of the COVID-19 epidemic made the approach to Israel's cabinet formation even more variable, after the Jerusalem District Court announced on 15 March that the juridical days for the alleged corruption case of Netanyahu on 17 March were delayed due to the epidemic until 24 May. The meeting between Netanyahu and Ganz, originally scheduled for 29 March, was also cancelled on the same day when Netanyahu's assistant Palucci confirmed infection of COVID-19. One day later, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office said that Netanyahu had accepted the nucleic acid testing (NAT) and quarantined himself.<sup>15</sup>

As far as the Palestinian side is concerned, internal disintegration is becoming more and more solid, which the centrifugal force against the Palestinian government stemming from the Gaza Strip, where the power of Hamas is increasingly obvious. Due to geographical isolation, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are indeed two independent anti-epidemic entities.<sup>16</sup> It was only on 22nd March that the Gaza Strip confirmed infected cases of two Gaza residents for the first time, both of whom were imported cases from Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Considered beyond the reach of the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the Gaza Strip's direct cooperation with Israel has become a priority. It turns out that the Palestinian-Israeli cooperation in the fight against epidemic disease includes the Israel-West Bank of Jordan River cooperation and the Israel-Gaza cooperation. After the epidemic, the internal variables of Palestine and Israel will inevitably have a direct impact on bilateral relations.

Secondly, the tendency of the anti-Iran alliance and re-shuffling among Middle Eastern countries in the face of the 'Iranian threat' is becoming increasingly more obvious. Some Arabian major powers still show pragmatism to Palestine as to "sacrifice one's pawn to save the queen". As the outbreak of Covid-19 in Qom, a Shiite holy city in Iran, spread throughout Iran and surrounding countries, it further intensified the old conflict and confrontation in the gulf region. Saudi Arabia blamed Iran's inaction on the newly confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia's territory, that is, Shiite Muslims of Saudi Arabia travelling to and from Iran via a third country without Iranian stamps on their passports. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being responsible for the spread of the outbreak in Saudi Arabia and condemned Iran's move as a serious threat to international public health.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the Saudi Shias' decision to bypass the third country to travel to Iran and concealing their itinerary was precisely a chain reaction caused by the consequences of the break-off of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the ongoing Qatar crisis. This also demonstrates that in the face of the epidemic, the geopolitical conflict in the Gulf, the sectarian strife, and the

<sup>14</sup>J. Lis, 'Gantz voted in as Knesset speaker, paving way for 'emergency' unity government with Netanyahu', Haaretz, (26 March 2020).

<sup>15</sup>'Netanyahu under quarantine as aide tests positive for COVID-19', Al Jazeera, (30 March 2020).

<sup>16</sup>See H. Bao, 'The one-state solution: an alternative approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?' *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 12(3), (2018), pp. 328–341.

<sup>17</sup>F. Najjar and M. Humaid, 'Fear, anxiety as besieged Gaza confirms first 2 coronavirus cases', Al Jazeera, (22 March 2020).

<sup>18</sup>'Saudi Arabia says Iran's actions have helped spread the coronavirus around the world', Arab News, (5 March 2020).

fight among different Middle East alliances<sup>19</sup> have not been alleviated, and the epidemic has become a new tool for struggle. Under this inertial operation, the marginalisation of the Palestine issue will hardly show signs of easing.

Finally, the American election campaign is now reaching fever pitch. Trump is making full preparations for the presidential election in November this year by deeply participating in touting the “Deal of the Century” and spreading the “political virus” through hyping the epidemic issue. Skewing heavily towards Israel is a consistent policy of Trump’s administration, specifically expressed by Trump’s support of Israel’s current Prime Minister Netanyahu. When Netanyahu faced election pressure or the accusations of corruption, Trump did not hesitate to send a series of “gift packages” to rescue him, e.g., recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, moving the embassy to Jerusalem, recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and no longer considering Israeli settlements in the West Bank to be inconsistent with international law. Until 28th January 2020, the ‘Deal of the Century’ was officially made, among which there is still the ‘endorsement’ for Netanyahu’s preparations for the March parliamentary election. After the outbreak of COVID-19 in Iran, the United States attributed the reason to the Iranian regime itself because of political prejudice. After the COVID-19 epidemic spread to the United States, Trump intensified the containment policy for relevant countries and turned a blind eye to Iran’s call for the United States to lift unilateral sanctions to better deal with the epidemic. Some American polls have shown that Trump’s approval rating has increased rather than decreased under the epidemic, which is not good news for Palestine. The political trend of Palestine and Israel is still closely intertwined with Trump’s re-election.

#### 4. Conclusion

On the whole, Israel’s fighting measures against the COVID-19 have achieved phased results, and the Israeli-Palestinian limited cooperation on the epidemic has also eased the bilateral tension. However, what cannot be ignored is that the COVID-19 is still spreading all over the world, the epidemic situation in the United States, Europe and the Middle East is still severe, and there is a rebound in Israeli epidemic situation. On 6 July 2020, in face of a new round of increases in the confirmed cases, Israel implemented the ban policy and closed bars, gymnasiums and stadiums. Moreover, Health Minister Yuli Edelstein said, ‘Israel is just getting started in the battle against the virus in this second wave, and there is still more that must be done to get the pandemic under control.’ ‘The virus is changing its behaviour and we must adjust ours accordingly.’ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pushed a bill in the Knesset for the fine on not wearing a face mask outside the home, then the fine would be raised to NIS 500 from NIS 200.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Palestine and Israel cooperation in fighting COVID-19 has been greatly impacted by the ‘Deal of Century’. In particular, Israel’s attempt to annexe Jordan Valley and other places in West Bank has greatly shaken the foundation of bilateral cooperation. However, the cooperation in fighting COVID-19 between

<sup>19</sup>See J. Han and H. Hakimian, ‘The regional security complex in the Persian Gulf: the contours of Iran’s GCC policy,’ *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13(4), (2019).

<sup>20</sup>H. Julian, ‘Edelstein: ‘still more to be done’ in fighting COVID-19’, *Jewish Press*, (6 July 2020).

Palestine and the international community, especially with China, has also eased the epidemic pressure of Israel to a certain extent. The prevention and control of the COVID-19 in Israel is not only intertwined with the religious community, party politics, alleged corruption cases of state leader and the evolution of Israeli-Palestinian relations, but also closely related to the impact of the COVID-19 on current international relations. The United States' series of manipulation of politicisation on the COVID-19 and stigmatisation on some countries, as well as the suppression on and withdrawal from the World Health Organisation, have greatly damaged the global health cooperation in fighting COVID-19. Israeli scholar Alexander Pevzner pointed out that, "The COVID-19 epidemic has been still spreading all over the world now. There are more than 1,000 newly-confirmed cases in Israel, and the epidemic situations in the United States, Europe and Latin America all are very serious. The world is in the critical stage of fighting against the epidemic, and the United States declared its withdrawal from the WHO at this time, which is very irresponsible."<sup>21</sup> As a close ally of the United States, Israel is hard to be alone, and its position in the World Health Organisation will be more complex.

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<sup>21</sup>L. Sun, 'Israeli scholar believe that US withdrawal from WHO is not beneficial to the global fighting against epidemic and is irresponsible', (accessed 10 July 2020), available at: <http://news.cri.cn/toutiaopic/b91df6ef-101e-b101-b346-6ecaa872569c.html>.