



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

## **COVID-19 in Israel's Arab Communities: Health Risks and Economic Concerns**

March 23, 2020

Israel has enacted [stringent measures](#) to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus, placing strict [limits on public and private sectors](#), shutting [down schools and universities](#), and urging a transition to remote working and learning. On top of nationwide economic impact and challenges to emergency and welfare services, there are concerns that Arab communities and organizations are significantly less prepared for this transition and may be at risk for rapid spread of the virus and hit harder by socio-economic consequences as the crisis unfolds. In addition, [inadequate](#) information in Arabic and misinformation within Arab society ([Hebrew](#)) has generated some confusion and delays in implementing guidelines.

This post summarizes some of the major health and economic concerns including how civil society organizations are coping with the crisis, recent actions taken to mitigate the risks, and further recommendations issued. A separate post will follow covering impact and issues related to shared society and Jewish-Arab relations.

See [National Council of Arab Mayors' recommendations to the Ministry of Health, here](#).

### **HEALTH RISKS**

The health risks for Arab society derive from (1) higher population density in most Arab towns and more people living under the same roof ([young and elderly in particular](#)); (2) inadequate official information in Arabic contributing to [delays and/or reluctance](#) to adopt government guidelines; (3) weak and under-resourced local authorities limited in their capacities to centralize local information and resources or implement emergency response; (4) less access to health care and emergency services; and (5) a high ratio of blue-collar workers unable to work remotely.

- **Access to Trusted and Accurate Information:** Until March 15, the Ministry of Health published little information in Arabic. Following [appeals](#) from Arab MKs and civil society organizations a week earlier, the Ministry was quick to respond, but with [questionable accuracy](#) since the translations were initially from Hebrew and of questionable quality. The Ministry is now working with [volunteers and Arab medical professionals](#) to [publish guidelines](#) and promote [instructional materials](#) in Arabic more regularly.

- Non-Compliance with Guidelines / Religious and Social Gatherings:** With both mistrust of government sources and a high cultural value on social gatherings and close contact with elders, there are reports of [weddings, mourning periods, and gatherings for prayer](#) taking place, as well as [additional non-compliance \(Hebrew\)](#) in [Arab communities and schools \(Hebrew\)](#), and by social businesses like restaurants and Hookah bars. These have raised concerns and a call for better public awareness campaigns and engagement of local authorities, medical professionals and religious leadership in messaging and enforcement. This past week, the Islamic Movement in various towns [cancelled prayers \(Arabic\)](#) and urged residents to [#stayhome via an online campaign \(Arabic\)](#).
- Weakness of Arab local authorities:** Municipal bodies in Israel serve as a bridge between the central government and citizens serving as a source of information, local instructions, and emergency resources in times of crisis. Most departments in Arab local authorities are not currently functioning due to the crisis while those that are (i.e Welfare, Sanitation and Mayor's offices) lack resources and capacities. Overall, Arab local authorities are not prepared to fulfill their role in crisis situations. Few local authorities have emergency plans, information hotlines or volunteer networks; most are understaffed and lack financial resources; and many lack basic digital capacities allowing them to access online materials or participate in online forums.
- Civil Society Organizations:** Currently many emergency services in Arab society are being handled by non-profit organizations. Throughout Israel, [many organizations \(Hebrew\)](#) supporting the most vulnerable populations report working on a [skeleton crew or have shut down essential services, \(Hebrew\)](#), having sent many employees on unpaid leave (meaning they are eligible for government unemployment benefits) due to budget restrictions. The economic slowdown threatens NGOs [corporate and private donations \(Hebrew\)](#), while government funding for civil sector activities has [faced delays \(Hebrew\)](#) due to serial elections and the absence of a sitting government. On March 18, [Manhigut Ezrahit](#) (Civil Leadership), an umbrella organization for the civil sector, [issued a letter](#) to Government ministers with recommendations for immediate action. On March 23, the [Ministry of Finance announced the following supports \(Hebrew\)](#) through the State Guarantee Loan Fund:

**State Guarantee Loan Fund supports for civil society organizations announced on 3/23:**

- State guarantees of up to 85% for lenders to offer credit on favorable terms to non-profit organizations and a special lending track to deal with the impact of Coronavirus
- A special lending track for social NGO's providing governmental services in the health, education and welfare fields, under preferred conditions, without the provision of a personal guarantee or a third-party guarantee, for a term of up to 60 months with the option of a grace period on repayment.

- **Local Access to Health Care:** Despite the large number of Arab doctors and health care professionals in Israel, Arab localities have less medical infrastructure (clinics, local medical staff and local emergency services) and less access to online medical services, meaning more Arab citizens go straight to hospital emergency rooms where there is significantly greater risk of exposure to the virus ([Hebrew](#)). Moreover, hospitals in the periphery—where 70% of Arab citizens live—have fewer doctors, nurses and equipment, meaning that primary care for Arab citizens poses a potential additional risk of over-burdening the system.



**Joint List MKs visiting testing centers on March 22:** Dr. Ahmad Tibi, Walid Taha, Yousef Jabareen and Sami Abu Shahade visited Coronavirus testing centers in Tel Aviv and demanded standing and mobile testing centers also in Arab population centers, citing a shortage of testing centers accessible to Arab citizens. The MKs also called on Arab citizens to go to existing centers to get tested if they display symptoms.

- **Domestic Violence:** With families spending significant time in close quarters there are concerns about increased domestic violence in parallel with reduced access to social services.
- **Negev Bedouin:** Bedouin communities in the unrecognized villages in the Negev are at high risk [due to lack of basic infrastructures](#) such as clean water, electricity, sewage treatment system, and more, making individual hygiene more challenging. Additionally, lack of access to medical services and equipment leaves these communities highly vulnerable to spread of infection. Lower levels of digital and Hebrew literacy make effective communication of guidelines an even bigger challenge. A [New Dawn in the Negev](#) has launched a Coronavirus hotline for the region. [AJEEC-NISPED](#) been working with its volunteers and Religious Leaders Forum as well as via a social media campaign to get information about Coronavirus to the Bedouin community and are preparing their emergency teams to respond to challenges in the unrecognized villages.

### Civil Society Recommendations and Actions

Organizations like the [National Council for Arab Mayors](#) and [The Abraham Initiatives](#) and others have presented to government ministries, issued recommendations, and appealed to officials to close information and resource gaps and to support local authorities. These recommendations include:

- (i) A national hotline and national crisis center for Arab local authorities
- (ii) Public awareness campaigns promoting health guidelines and social distancing
- (iii) Real-time translations and publication of government information
- (iv) Budgets for local authorities to implement emergency measures
- (v) Support for local authorities to communicate and enforce guidelines
- (vi) Increase of welfare services (i.e. food stamps) for vulnerable populations; including social and psychological services

- (vii) Increase equipment and staff in medical clinics in Arab localities and identify locations that can serve as temporary hospitals
- (viii) Add drive-through Coronavirus test stations in Arab communities.

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT**

The transition to remote working and learning during this crisis is testing the effectiveness and capacities of digital and technological solutions in every sphere and is only available to parts of the population. Low-income communities, who have a high ratio of blue-collar workers and fewer digital capacities, are at higher risk of exposure to the virus if they continue to work, of economic hardship from lost jobs and wages, and of lagging behind where online resources and options are not accessible. This has become more complex with the recent [cancellation of almost 270 bus lines](#) across the country, significantly limiting the mobility of Arab citizens who mostly live in the periphery but work in the Center.

National unemployment rates climbed to [511,109 or 16.5%, as reported on March 22](#), compared to 3.4% before the crisis and marking the highest since the establishment of the state (Hebrew). This number does not include the informal labor force such as day laborers who are among the country's most vulnerable.

The high ratio of Arab families that are dependent on income from low-wage, physical labor jobs are generally less informed about government supports and employee rights. With Arab local authorities mostly shut down and lacking infrastructure such as call centers and online resources, and civil society organizations struggling to provide emergency services, there are concerns that low-income families will be hit especially hard.

#### **Digital Gaps:**

For low-income families, schools and municipalities digital gaps such as fewer computers and poor internet connections are a significant barrier. For students, these barriers are compounded by fewer online resources available in Arabic, and fewer staff with digital and online familiarity. While the Ministry of Education has introduced a remote learning system, [not all the contents were translated to Arabic](#). Additionally, the contents are not mobile-friendly which is a challenge in Arab society where there are many smartphones but far fewer computers.

#### **Civil Society Recommendations**

- (i) Enhance Arab education system to enable distance learning
- (ii) Enhance telecom infrastructure in Arab localities
- (iii) Support Arab employees in accessing rights regarding loss of working days, including a public awareness campaign and assistance by Riyan Centers
- (iv) Ease government lending for Arab businesses and support accessing rights to recoup losses
- (v) Advance welfare payments and postponement of bill collection ahead of holidays - Easter, Ramadan, Eid El Fitr