

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 15, 2021

The Honorable Anthony Blinken
Secretary of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to request that the State Department take additional action to ensure that the Israeli government provide COVID-19 vaccines and facilitate vaccination programs for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

The recent announcement that Israel will vaccinate Palestinians with Israeli work permits is a step in the right direction. However, until Israel takes action to provide a comprehensive vaccination program for Palestinians, continued pressure is needed to ensure Israeli action to meet its obligation as an occupying entity. Even senior Israeli health officials have urged the government to vaccinate the entire Palestinian population.¹

Over the last months COVID-19 rates in the West Bank and Gaza have risen significantly. According to the World Health Organization 200,000 Palestinians have already contracted COVID-19 and over 2,000 Palestinians have died. The humanitarian situation facing Palestinians in Gaza was already dire prior to the global coronavirus pandemic, where 90 percent of the population does not have regular access to clean water and more than 50 percent of the population lives in poverty.^{2,3} On February 28th, the schools in the West Bank were shut down due to a sharp rise in COVID-19 variant infections and intensive care units there reached 95% occupancy.⁴ In the absence of a vaccination program in the West Bank and Gaza these numbers will continue to rise.

The Israeli government has implemented one of the most successful vaccination campaigns in the world. It has now vaccinated nearly 50% of its population and hopes to move towards a quick reopening as vaccination rates continue to increase. At the same time, Israel has not provided vaccines for Palestinians living under its control in the occupied Palestinian territories and in some instances has blocked the transfer of vaccines to Palestinian recipients. Even if Israel

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/01/972573521/israeli-health-officials-to-government-vaccinate-all-palestinians>

² <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/gaza-strip>

³ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/53-cent-palestinians-gaza-live-poverty-despite-humanitarian-assistance>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-israel-palestinian-idUSKCN2AS0HJ>

vaccinates the majority of its population, continued spread of COVID-19 in the West Bank and Gaza increases the risk of viral mutations and other challenges that may not remain limited to Palestinian areas.

As the occupying power, Israel has a legal responsibility under the Geneva Conventions to ensure that the occupied Palestinian population is provided with adequate medical care including “adoption and application of the prophylactic and preventative measures necessary to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics” to “the fullest extent of the means available to it.” Even though, under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority maintains responsibility for the management of health care for Palestinian’s living in the occupied territory, this does not negate Israeli obligations under international law, nor does it lessen Israel’s control over Palestinian movement, access to medical imports, and other factors which directly impact vaccination efforts.

Outside of the legal and moral obligations it should be clear that it is in Israel’s self-interest that Palestinians receive vaccines.

As of March 1, Israel has committed to providing 5,000 vaccines, but up to this point only provided 2,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority has worked to secure vaccines from the World Health Organization’s COVAX initiative and other entities, however, they have so far secured less than 50,000 vaccine doses total for the millions of people living in the West Bank and Gaza.⁵ This amount provides protection for less than one percent of the total Palestinian population. Additionally, Prime Minister Netanyahu had pledged at least twice as many doses to Honduras, Guatemala, Czech Republic and Syria than it has to the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.⁶ If Israel continues to lead the world with its inoculation plan, it must send a moral message by assisting a population that has been deprived of the means to assist itself.

We understand that you have asked Israel to facilitate the transfer of vaccines to the West Bank and Gaza and we welcome and appreciate your intervention. We believe you must continue to push the Israeli government to take action until there is a comprehensive vaccination program in place for Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

Sincerely,



Mark Pocan
Members of Congress



André Carson
Member of Congress

⁵<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-israel-palestinian-idUSKCN2AS0HJ>

⁶<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/israels-allies-road-vaccines-runs-jerusalem-76105003>

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