



ISRAEL'S VIOLATIONS OF PALESTINIAN WORKERS' RIGHTS: COVID-19 AND SYSTEMIC ABUSE

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Since 1967, Israel has been suffocating and subjugating the Palestinian economy. Through military occupation and ongoing annexation, and through restricting the exchange of goods and merchandise between Palestinian cities and villages with a network of settlements and checkpoints, Israel has hindered the Palestinian economy's ability to create job opportunities for over 2.5 million working-age Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

As a result, over 130,000 Palestinians were employed in Israeli territories in 2019, the highest number ever recorded. The [average daily wage](#) in Israeli territories is more than twice that of their counterparts in the West Bank, and more than four times that in Gaza. Although the ability to work in Israeli territories has allowed Palestinian workers to find job opportunities and improve their economic conditions, in reality, they face abysmal working conditions, including inadequate safety measures and insurance, as well as labor violations in relation to wages, working hours, and leave policies.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Israeli violations of Palestinian workers' rights have been exacerbated. On 17 March 2020, former Israeli Security Minister, Naftali Bennett, announced [a series of special provisions](#) requiring that Palestinian workers stay in accommodations arranged by their Israeli employers. Palestinian workers subsequently reported having to sleep in large groups at their workplaces, often without clean bedding and blankets, access to sanitation and hygiene supplies, or even food and drink.

The Israeli regime did little to protect Palestinian workers from COVID-19 infection. Instead, occupation forces expelled or abandoned Palestinian workers suspected of being infected at military checkpoints, or even on the side of the road. As COVID-19 infections and fatality rates in Israel were significantly higher than in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian workers became the main [transmitters of the virus](#) to the West Bank. Indeed, the [first COVID-19 fatality](#) in the West Bank was a woman in the town of Biddu who contracted the disease from her son, a worker in the industrial settlement of Atarot.

Additionally, Palestinian workers were required to download the mobile application, "Al-Munasiq" (The Coordinator), to secure work permits after April 2020. According to the [Palestinian Digital Rights Coalition](#), this [Israeli mobile application](#) — developed by the Israeli Ministry of Defense — collects information and personal data from the cellphones of Palestinian workers, offering Israel the opportunity to further blackmail, exploit, and humiliate them. Moreover, there are reports of Israeli soldiers beating, insulting, and robbing workers at gunpoint near military checkpoints, violating their [right to freely access](#) their workplaces. Soldiers also stalked and chased Palestinians on their way to work, firing [tear gas canisters](#) at workers without permits, eventually murdering two Palestinians in early 2021.

Palestinian workers in Israel contribute nearly \$3.25 billion annually to the Palestinian economy, which amounts to [\\$71 per worker per day](#). In 2020, however, the number of Palestinian workers in Israeli territories decreased by about 34,000. Additionally, Israeli employers refused to compensate Palestinian workers who complied with the PA's stay-at-home orders and [reduced their average daily wage](#) in violation of Israeli laws prohibiting [discrimination based on nationality](#). These developments account for one-third of the [Palestinian economy's losses](#) in 2020 (\$2.5 billion).

Indeed, since the start of the crisis, the [Palestinian economy shrank](#) by 11.5%, government revenue decreased by 20%, the fiscal deficit rose to 9.5% of GDP, and domestic debt reached 15%. Moreover, given the inability of the Palestinian economy to absorb workers affected by the pandemic, the [unemployment rate](#) in the West Bank and Gaza is expected to rise to about 31% by the end of 2021. Accordingly, the Palestinian economy's forced dependence on the Israeli economy is expected to deepen.

In order to protect the rights of Palestinian workers in Israel and its illegal settlements:

- The PA should lobby the international community to intensify efforts to protect Palestinian workers' rights, including at the International Criminal Court.
- The BDS movement should further center the violation of Palestinian workers' rights in its call for boycotts.
- The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions should support the efforts of Palestinian workers in Israeli territories to establish an independent union, and integrate them in the broader liberation struggle by treating workers from the West Bank, Gaza, and Israeli territories on equal footing.
- Palestinian and Arab digital rights organizations should lobby to block the use of the "Al-Munasiq" application.
- Regional and international labor rights organizations should pressure Israeli actors that violate the Palestinian workers' rights to desist from these abuses.