

# **ASPHER Statement**

## **The Right to COVID-19 Vaccination must be extended to Palestinians**

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**Produced on behalf of the ASPHER COVID-19 Task Force\***

\*For a listing of Task Force Members and additional information see: <https://www.aspher.org/covid-19-task-force.html>.

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Israel's COVID-19 vaccination policy is mostly being run in an inspirational manner (1). Particularly notable is the acknowledgement of everyone's right to be vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2 – whether they are house-bound senior citizens, refugees, asylum seekers, or foreign workers.

**However, Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which also include senior citizens and at-risk populations, are not granted the same rights and are excluded from Israel's vaccination program (2).** The dire consequences of this are that there will be higher rates of morbidity and mortality among Palestinian Authority residents. According to World Health Organization (WHO) data, 178,516 verified cases and 2,010 deaths have been recorded in the Occupied Palestinian Territories thus far (as of the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2021) (3).

The Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region (ASPHER), recognises that two of the most fundamental values in public health, are solidarity and equality. These are particularly evident in relation to vaccinations. Healthcare and vaccinations should be a public good provided to all regardless of ethnic origin or location of residence. The Palestinian healthcare system lacks sufficient organizational capacity and is poor in resources. Its functioning depends on international aid and on Israeli humanitarian gestures and foreign donations. It is hard to imagine the distressing images of Palestinians who continue to contract and die from COVID-19 while Israeli citizens benefit from vaccinations at all age groups and even among low-risk populations.

Initiatives like COVAX, which is working for global equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, are too slow to arrive and at best will only serve 20% of the population (4). It is therefore necessary that the State of Israel together with the Palestinian Authority and the WHO work

together to find sustainable solutions to ensure that all Palestinian Authority residents are vaccinated (5). This process should emerge from principles of solidarity and for the benefit of the region. The pledge from Israel on 31 January 2021 to deliver 5000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine for Palestinian health care workers in the next days (6) is a necessary step, but we must continue to hold Israel accountable to the entirety of the Palestinian population.

This is not just a matter of rights and equity. It is important to recognize that Israeli people will not be free of the virus, until everyone is free of the virus. Nobody is safe until all populations in this region are covered. This has become an international call from the Director General of the World Health Organization (4). It applies between countries, it also applies within countries. It applies to all peoples within the borders of Israel. Vaccinating Palestinians is necessary if we are to achieve 'community immunity' (also referred to as 'herd immunity') for all in Israel.

Israeli aid is crucial – on legal and humanitarian grounds and in acknowledgement of the right to vaccination as a basic human right, as well as in the interests of attaining a community immunity which will protect us all.

#### References:

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- 3) World Health Organization. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. Available from: <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/ps>
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- 6) BBC News. Covid: Israel to transfer 5,000 vaccine doses to Palestinians. 31 January 2021. Available from URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55879337>

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