

## **RC36 Covid-19 Survey: Initial Findings of the Israeli Case Study**

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The survey has been designed by members of RC36 in collaboration with the Institute of Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Science for the purposes of a comparative study between countries. The aim is to investigate how people experience and handle the stress caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent changes to their private and working lives. Our methodology combines an initial quantitative survey with qualitative in-depth interviews that will be conducted in 2021.

About 600,000 Palestinians were left in Israel after the 1948 independence war. The 2 million Arab-Israeli citizens today, who comprise nearly 20% of the total Israeli population of over 9 million people, have also taken part in this survey. We should note that a new Arab-Israeli middle class has emerged in the 72 years of existence of the state of Israel, many of whom are doctors, nurses, and pharmacists serving in the Israeli National Public Health Services, which dates from 1920. Arab-Israeli nurses in fact comprise about 40% of the nurses in Israel, or more than twice their relative population percentage.

The welfare state of Israel deteriorated following the 1967 conquest and occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights into a capitalistic state, and Likud right-wing governments expanded neoliberal nationalistic and political-economy policies after 1977. Following the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by an extreme right student influenced by the Likud severe incitement campaign, Israel became a nationalistic, militaristic, authoritarian, and illiberal democracy.

The Oligarchic Phase of the state's further degeneration after 2009 is embedded in Prime Minister Netanyahu's ideological preference for a brutal neoliberal political-economy. His enthusiastic adoption of Trump's form of illiberal governing led to the construction of alternative facts and fake "reality" that obscured actual reality. David Harvey conceptualized the late phase of neoliberalism as Creative Destruction, but its current Israeli phase could be termed Disastrous Distraction. For example, Israel was not prepared for the pandemic because it had been poorly equipped for decades, with health system infrastructure and medical staffing that accorded with the 2003 population of 6.6 million. The Covid-19 pandemic thus erupted on the 2020 population of over 9 million, but with only a 2003 budget. The Prime Minister promptly took charge of pandemic-control efforts, transforming them into a military-security war. Military secret services operate where public health specialists should be active,

“contact tracing” the movements of Israeli citizens through their mobile phones. Citizens are subject to severe fines by the police and security services if they do not immediately obey the (deliberately) frequent changes of government emergency pandemic rules.

The security services were sent across the globe to purchase respiratory machines and protective clothing for health-care staff, and the population has been managed by committees on the basis of emergency orders embedded in Israeli law that date from the British mandate (1920-1948). Israelis now suffer poverty, unemployment, hunger, and a third-world standard in their state services. There are deliberately repeated political-economy crises and general elections, all the while with no state budget in spite of the pandemic. This state of affairs serves the Prime Minister’s interests, not public health, by obstructing and delaying court proceedings concerning his corruption allegations. Reliable surveys indicate that more than 65% of citizens feel anger, alienation, and mistrust concerning the conduct of the government, not least regarding Covid-19. There are ongoing, very large public demonstrations throughout the country in the face of violent repression by secret anti-terror units and the police as engaged citizens struggle against the deterioration of Israel into an illiberal authoritarian state.

Our initial survey data is currently undergoing further statistical analysis, which will be completed by the Conference dates. Certain preliminary remarks can be made, however.

The 115 Jewish-Israeli respondents (survey still in progress) comprise an elite middle-class group, most of whom are academic staff. There are more women than men, most live in small towns, villages and kibbutzim, and some are retirees (50-85 years of age). The 15 Arab-Israeli respondents (survey still in progress) also comprise an elite middle-class group, all of whom are academic staff. There are more women than men (10/5), most live in small towns and villages, and they are younger than the Jewish Israeli group (30-40 years of age).

It appears that the quantitative survey findings for both the Jewish and Arab Israeli respondents reflect the traits of elite respondents. They are very critical, although optimistic, possess rational and scientific attitudes, are not afraid, are not influenced by myths about the pandemic, and are convinced of the importance of rational behavior based upon scientific knowledge and recommendations.

Typical statements by Jewish-Israeli respondents include:

1) “Clearly atrocious national management and leadership, seriously compounding what would have been in any case a dreadful situation.”

2) “There is a growing problem of public distrust in the leadership on dealing with the pandemic, but also on other political issues. There is a growing sense that they don’t know what they’re doing that makes me feel agitated by the measures and restrictions taken. I feel

that interests other than wellbeing are at play, and am more concerned about the economic and social problems.”

3) “The crisis exposes the deep political-economic divides within the societies of western democracies and authoritarian states in addition to the deep north/south global divides. There is the danger of ongoing deterioration, but also opportunities leading to democratization and greater political, economic, and cultural justice. But since many leaders are not coping well with the crisis, it appears that a better future resides upon the shoulders of citizens everywhere. It is thus both a critical time and an essential time for research.”

Typical statements by Arab-Israeli respondents include:

1. “People around me are not following restrictions.”

2. “Creating hysteria in the public eye does not help in crisis situations. This disease will stay with us for a longer period of time than we expected, and it will obviously keep spreading and affecting people. We should accept this fact, practice social distancing, and prepare our health sector and hospitals accordingly. We will find our new balance once a cure is found, but we should not stop living in the meantime.”

3. “I wouldn’t mind working more from home after the coronavirus threat is over.”