Introduction

The outbreak of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 has created an additional wave of political instability and insecurity across Palestine, amid the continued aftermath and consequences of the escalation of violence in May 2021. Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem have faced new cases of home demolitions and are at great risk of forced displacement as a result. The Gaza reconstruction process, planned to start by October 2021, did not start due to the delays in disbursements of donations compounded by a complex political situation. Meanwhile clashes between Israeli military forces and Palestinians in the West Bank continued over property seizures and demolitions, including the death of an American Palestinian citizen. With its recent report, Amnesty International joins the Israeli Human Rights Organization B’Tselem and Human Rights Watch accusing Israel of practicing an apartheid regime against Palestinians.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection for the fourth conflict scan report for Palestine was conducted between 4 and 21 October 2021. This report was prepared by an independent consultant and the Search for Common Ground (Search) Jerusalem team, with support from Search’s COVID-19 Response Programming Team and Institutional Learning Team. For more information on the data collection methodology and tools used by Search for Common Ground for this research, click here. This report is part of a series of regular COVID-19 conflict scans aimed at providing quick and actionable answers to a set of specific questions. The previous reports for Palestine can be found here, here & here.

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* This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Search for Common Ground and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

4. Reuters, “Palestinian-American man, 80, found dead after being held in Israeli raid,” January 2021.
Update: COVID-19 Measures and Impact on Conflict

In Palestine, by the end of January 2022, there have been 500,444 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 5,074 deaths. Out of the total population, 47% of Palestinians are fully vaccinated and more than 69% in Israel.7 With more people vaccinated in Palestine, more than 1.2 children have officially returned to schools in August 2021.8 Similarly, university students are back to campus for, at least, the first semester of this academic year.

Although all citizens have been greatly impacted by the spread of COVID-19 over the past year, women in Palestine are disproportionately impacted. Concerning unemployment, women are at a higher rate of unemployment, reaching 47% unemployment rates in the third quarter of 2021 compared to 22% of men. This is especially true in the Gaza Strip, as overall unemployment has reached 50% compared to only 15% in the West Bank.9

COVID-19's Impact on Social Cohesion & Trust

COVID-19 Information in Palestine is deprioritised by Political and Security Concerns

On average, the top trusted sources to get information about COVID-19 among respondents are:

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Compared to the previous report, trust in Facebook has increased again, while trust in TV has decreased further. People are relying less on "other sources", which include official or expert sources of information, including the Ministry of Health website and associated health committees.

Search produced different media formats to disseminate accurate COVID-19 related information and improve social cohesion:10

Radio programmes: Compared to the third round, the percentage of people listening to our media programmes on Nisaa FM has decreased. This overall level is still higher than one year ago. Due to the recent developments in the security situation in Palestine, people pay much more attention to these issues rather than those related to COVID-19.

10. Search produced a radio programme “Community Cohesion in the Time of Corona”, aired October 2020 - May 2021 on Nisaa FM as well as TV spot messages and interviews between April-June 2021 on Ma’an Network.
Out of those who listen to Search’s radio programme, trust rates have increased again. Though the current trust level is almost the same as a year ago, the percentage of mistrust has significantly declined, as people have seen serious concerns among their families, and this also motivated people to get vaccinated.

Trust COVID-19 information shared on our radio programme (Very Much, Mostly)

Though women’s trust levels have been increasing since the beginning of 2021, their trust levels are still lower than in November 2020, and significantly lower than men’s. Women’s trust level is currently almost the same as a year ago, although it has shown some variation over time. Women’s increasing rate of trust in the COVID-19 information on our radio programme could be explained by the increased efforts to address women’s concerns.

TV programme: 20% of respondents watched Search’s programmes on COVID-19 on Maan mix TV.

Trust COVID-19 information shared on our TV programme (Very Much, Mostly)
Overall, (58%) of respondents share information about COVID-19 obtained from trusted media outlets with friends and family, which is slightly less compared to the previous round. Since the launch of our research in the 6 target countries, Palestine always had the lowest rate of information sharing on COVID-19.

Consistent with the previous round, more women share COVID–19 related information than men, albeit slight declining for women. It is noticeable that women share information more during periods when restrictive precautionary measures are in place. This is related directly to information about the online education process.

Vertical cohesion is under extreme pressure in Palestine amid increasing security escalations and a new wave of COVID-19, with trust in authorities and non-governmental actors at an all time low.

Among those who did request for support, requests for food showed a sharp increase (up to 40%), becoming the number one requested type of assistance, indicating a highly precarious situation among certain segments of the population. According to a recent study by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 17% of Palestinians in Gaza and West Bank reported that they are suffering from a critical financial situation and they do not know how to survive. Health related services also increased due to the spread of the new COVID–19 variant. This is also the reason behind the increase in freedom of movement requests, signaling a new round of lockdown and movement restrictions during the reference period.

13. In the first report, this question was about sharing COVID-19 related information heard on the partner radio station. The listenership in the territories beyond the green line was almost 0%.
Despite the overall drop in service requests, the Gaza Strip still showed an increase, a clear demonstration of the prevailing complex humanitarian situation there.

During this round, 59% of respondents (or a member of their household) report a full or partial loss of their main source of income during the pandemic, which is higher than previous results.

Loss of income has been highest in East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, with the latter at 50% unemployment rate, while West Bank and beyond the Green Line have seen slight declines.

There is a significant increase in those who are highly satisfied/satisfied with service provision from any service provider, which seems entirely driven by satisfaction with non-governmental providers, but also in those who are not satisfied. The overall satisfaction with governmental services remained the same, but there was a sharp increase in respondents who report not being satisfied. This is accompanied by decreases in those who are somewhat satisfied and those who have never received a response. This might indicate that those who did not receive responses to their service requests in the past, now reported themselves as not satisfied at all, having entirely lost faith in the response system. Thus, an ineffective response mechanism, leaving many requests unanswered, could negatively impact overall satisfaction levels in the future, and should be a warning sign for service providers to improve their response mechanisms.

Satisfaction with the government’s response services is gendered: very clearly, satisfaction levels among men have continued to increase over time (from 12% in Nov ‘20 to 33% in Oct ‘21), while they have continued to drop among women (from 50% in Nov ‘20 to 26% in Oct ‘21). This is a strong indicator that the government’s COVID-19 response efforts have been largely gender-blind, disregarding women’s specific needs in the pandemic response.
Only 4% of respondents requested services from the government in the territories beyond the green line, thus responses from this area are not statistically significant.

Compared to the previous round, the West Bank’s level of satisfaction notably increased, which could indicate increased government’s capacity to provide services. Furthermore, there was a slight decrease in Gaza’s level of satisfaction and a very significant drop in East Jerusalem.

Trust in the government is at an all time low in Palestine since we started our research: respondents’ trust that the government considers the needs of its citizens equally when making decisions relating to COVID–19 has decreased to 40%. This is reflecting a gap in the government’s needs assessment and an inability to align and reflect the needs of everyone in its COVID-19 related service provision. This may be related to the general frustration related to lockdowns and deep economic fractures. Also, the deterioration of the security situation since May 2021 and its consequences on the overall living conditions have a direct influence on trust in the different governments.

For this round, Territories beyond the Green Line and Gaza Strip recorded significant decreases.

Trust in non-governmental responders is also at an all time low: only 44% of respondents agree that non-governmental actors working on COVID–19 have their best interests in mind when doing their work, the lowest level recorded yet. This is accompanied by increasing levels of distrust, with now 28% indicating that they do not trust non-governmental actors.
Horizontal cohesion has also taken a severe hit and is considerably lower than a year ago

During the course of our research across six countries, almost all horizontal cohesion indicators have been lowest in Palestine, recording continuous decreases over the time. In October 2021, only 52% of respondents value collaboration among Palestinians from different areas, down from 69% a year before. A high percentage (28%) say being neutral about this (up from 8% a year before). Prolonged periods of segregation policies and fragmentation led to complete isolation among Palestinianins in different regions and destroyed the Palestinian social cohesion. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic led to further deterioration and restricted the very limited opportunities for Palestinians to collaborate and interact across regions to face this crisis. Political instability and the general insecurity could further hinder collaboration for a prolonged period, especially for people in Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.

Trust levels in non-governmental responders have gone down in all four Palestinian regions and are at lowest levels since we started our measurements. The highest level of trust is noted in Territories beyond the Green Line, whereas the largest drop happened in Gaza, which had previously seen the largest increase. The recent uptick in violence in the Gaza Strip has led many to rely entirely on humanitarian aid, while the significant delays in the reconstruction process associated with extreme deteriorations in living conditions have led to a sharp decrease in trust in non-governmental actors.

Men continue to value collaboration among people from different Palestinian regions more than women, but there has been a downward trend among both sexes. The same can be said for all the age groups: elderly respondents value collaboration most.

The decline in valuing collaboration appeared in all regions, except in the West Bank where it remained stable. Mirroring the previous round’s results, respondents in the Territories beyond the Green Line still value collaboration most, even though this area showed the most significant drop from July 2021.
Only 33% of respondents reported having an interaction\textsuperscript{16} with individuals from other regions in Palestine over the past three months, almost the same as last time, and still lower than a year earlier. Men continue to benefit from more interactions than women, and young people are the age group participating most in such interactions, which can be partially explained by youth’s strong online presence.

Palestine consistently recorded among the lowest rates in actual interaction across divides among our 6 target countries (e.g. other countries recorded 74% on average during the last round of data collection). In Palestine, interactions between Palestinians living in different regions under different governmental bodies is driven mainly by economic opportunities and trade activities between the different regions. That was impacted directly by the COVID-19 movement restriction measures and resulted in lower levels of interaction and led to a further breakdown in horizontal cohesion. In Gaza, the situation is much worse; only 20% report interacting with other regions, compared to 48% in Eastern Jerusalem, and the sharpest drop from a year before (69% in November 2021). There are very limited opportunities to interact,\textsuperscript{17} and people from Gaza can meet others only via online platforms.

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\textbf{Territories beyond the Green Line} & Oct 21 & Jan 21 & Nov 20 \\
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East Jerusalem & 48% & 46% & 35% \\
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West Bank & 31% & 46% & 66% \\
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Gaza & 20% & 21% & 69% \\
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\caption{Actual Interaction}
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Overall, 51% of respondents agree or strongly agree that they feel safe interacting with people from other regions, with women and elderly reporting the lowest feelings of safety, and more people are now reporting neutral reactions. Search tracks this indicator to characterize the nature of interaction during a pandemic across divides. Given the complexity of the political and security situation in Palestine and the existing barriers between the regions, this decrease in safety feelings compared to last time is understandable. This could also be explained in part by the fears arising from the digital sphere during the recent escalations, which may have security repercussions and put people at increased risk.

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\textbf{Territories beyond the Green Line} & Oct 21 & Nov 20 \\
\hline
East Jerusalem & 48% & 35% \\
\hline
West Bank & 46% & 66% \\
\hline
Gaza & 21% & 38% \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Feeling of safety}
\end{table}
The result of this latest round indicates the lowest percentages so far of respondents who generally feel safe interacting with someone from the other sex inside their household or private sphere, with 20% now reporting not feeling safe. For obvious reasons, women feel least safe. The recent escalations in May 2021 contributed to the increase of domestic and GBV reports, particularly in Gaza. GBV survivors in Gaza have no access to safe shelters during military operations, as these shelters have to close for security reasons. Many families were displaced to homes of their relatives to escape the areas where the fighting is raging (53.9% percent of Gazans and 6.4% percent of the West Bank residents report having been temporarily displaced), and this is contributing to the deterioration of living conditions, as the density increases within the housing units, while at the same time domestic violence services had to be suspended.

Feel safe when interacting with individuals from opposite sex inside the household or private sphere (strongly agree or agree)

- Territories beyond the Green Line: 56%, 68%, 81%
- East Jerusalem: 60%, 74%, 72%
- West Bank: 57%, 63%, 61%
- Gaza: 60%, 83%, 75%

Next Steps For COVID-19 Response Efforts

Response providers should integrate a multi-pronged communication strategy to ensure COVID-19 related information reaches all citizens via outlets they trust most, i.e. social media

- Our data shows that most respondents in Palestine still rely on Facebook and TV as the top trusted sources of information to find information about COVID-19. Those working on COVID-19 information dissemination should ensure they are tapping into these channels. Furthermore, participants’ reliance on family and friends as a source of information has increased, creating a need to ensure correct and up-to-date information is disseminated across these informal channels. Lastly, reliance on official sources has decreased, usually reported under “other sources”. Official entities could improve their social media presence, especially on Facebook, to ensure the distribution of credible information to a wider audience.

- Radio outlets still remain an importance and trusted source for many citizens, particularly for women. This could also be an important source for those who lack access to online platforms and TV. However, latest results show a decrease in the listenership rate to our radio programme, radio outlets could also strengthen their social media presence in low-cost ways, by establishing a Facebook presence to generate more awareness about existing radio programming and create new entry points for engagement with listeners.

Urgent and sustained interventions are needed to address the deteriorating social (vertical and horizontal) cohesion situation in Palestine

- Compared to the other target countries under our research, and looking at how the data evolved over the past year, it stands out starkly that Palestine is at the bottom of our social (vertical and horizontal) cohesion indicators and that most of our indicators have sharply declined over the past year. The results are indicative of a deteriorating social cohesion and fragmentation, which demand immediate attention from governmental and non-governmental actors, and the international community. Response providers should be alarmed by this deterioration, and adopt response strategies that promote social cohesion and partnerships.
• In particular, our data shows a dramatic decline in the percentage of people (especially women) who feel safe when interacting with someone from the other sex inside their households or private sphere, the lowest rate since the beginning of 2021. The compounded effects of COVID-19 restrictions and the recent escalations in violence are hitting women and girls hardest, especially in Gaza. With the suspension of domestic violence services during the recent military operations in Gaza, governmental and non-governmental stakeholders should pay urgent attention to this. For instance, media outlets can provide space for women from different areas to voice their needs, and identify areas for needed support in similar situations to prepare a GBV emergency response plan.