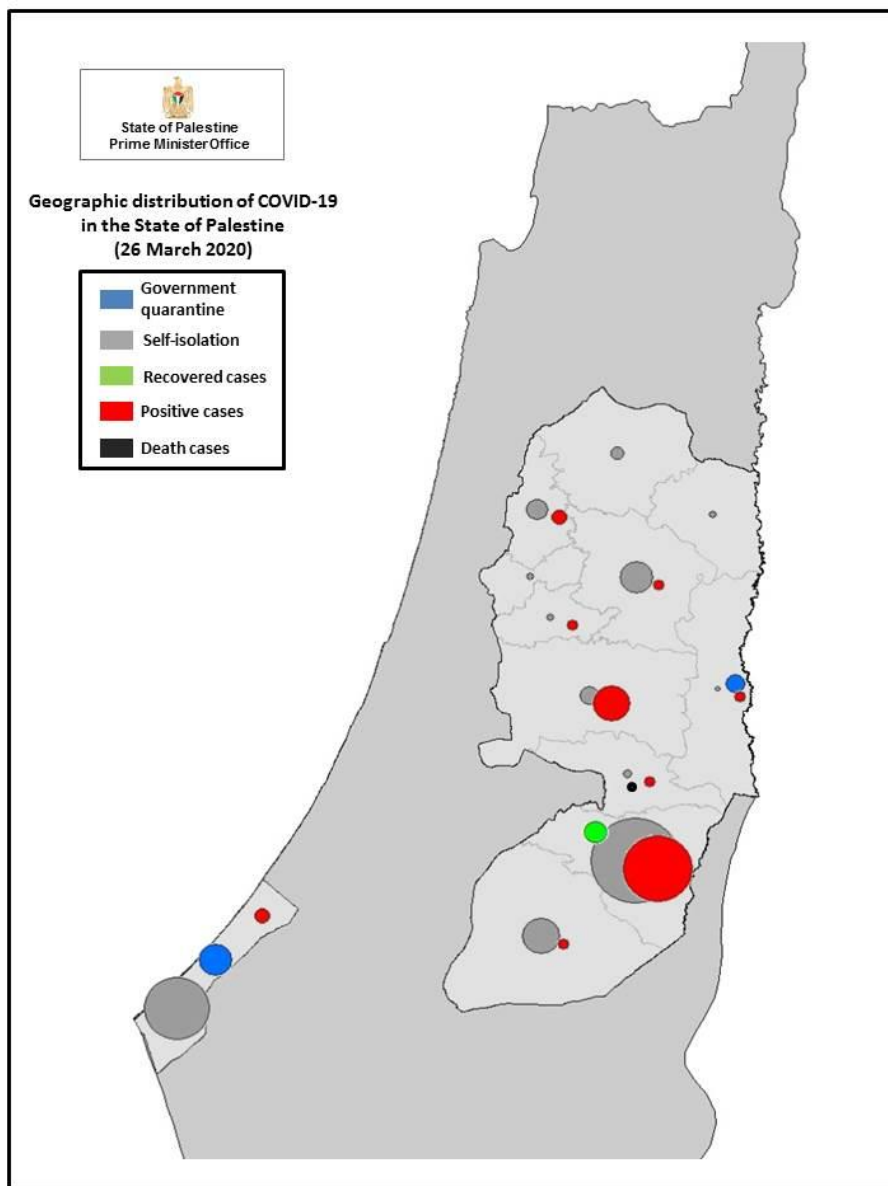State of Palestine
دَوْلَة فِلَسْطِين

State of Emergency

Palestine's COVID-19 Response Plan

Source: State of Palestine COVID-19 Dashboard (www.corona.ps)

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Government of Palestine (GoP) has quickly and effectively responded to the outbreak of COVID-19, using an internationally and nationally coordinated, data-driven approach to contain the spread of the virus within our borders. **The GoP approach is containment and suppression**, which is designed to protect our citizens (particularly the most vulnerable) from infection while also mitigating the stress on our already strained health care system.

The GoP immediately declared a State of Emergency when the first cases in the State of Palestine were diagnosed on 5 March 2020 and launched robust national containment measures, supported by an evidence-based communications campaign to encourage our citizens to protect themselves and follow government guidance.

So far, **the State of Palestine has one of the lowest rates of virus spread and almost no community transmission**, with 84 active cases in the West Bank and the Southern Governorates (Gaza Strip). As the COVID-19 incidence increases around the world, the GoP is continuing efforts to contain the virus to protect our citizens (and those of the larger region) and contribute to the global effort to end the pandemic. **On 22 March, the GoP rolled out stricter suppression measures in the West Bank**, preventing movement between governorates, closing all non-essential facilities, and asking our citizens in the West Bank to stay at home for 14 days.

However, **the State of Palestine faces significant challenges** in this effort, including a severely under-equipped health sector and an existing fiscal crisis caused by the Government of Israel (GoI) withholding of revenue. The COVID-19 and the emergency measures that the GoP is taking is and will continue to have a significantly negative impact on our economy, which will lead to (i) shrinking revenues (by at least 40%) that limit the GoP's ability to maintain existing level of services and (ii) increasing needs for immediate economic support and longer-term economic recovery.

We plan to work jointly with our humanitarian and development partners to respond efficiently and accountably to this crisis. We are further seeking **financial and diplomatic support to ensure an effective and sustainable response to COVID-19**.

The purpose of this plan is to:

- Present the GoP's strategy and actions;
- Propose an aid coordination approach;
- Identify the critical support needs, including for: public health response to COVID-19; budget support to maintain government services; and diplomatic engagement with regional partners; and
- Describe our expectations of the longer-term economic impact of COVID-19 and required economic recovery actions.

2. BACKGROUND ON COVID-19

a. Global Context

The COVID-19 outbreak is of global concern. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and has described it a "defining global health crisis of our time." The virus has spread rapidly across the world, with governments and international agencies working to contain the transmission of the virus between and within countries. The virus is highly contagious and, while most infected people experience little or mild symptoms, can trigger life-threatening reactions in high-risk populations (such as the elderly and those with certain underlying conditions). Therefore, an uncontained outbreak can quickly overwhelm a country's medical system, resulting in a high death toll due to insufficient medical care. The WHO is calling for governments to take immediate and aggressive actions to control the outbreak, including communicate with citizens; contain, treat and trace each case; and mobilize health services, including protecting and training health workers.

b. State of Palestine Context

As of 25 March 2020, there are <u>84</u> known cases in the State of Palestine. One death has occurred. For the first three weeks, community transmission was limited. While the original outbreak of cases (37) was through direct or indirect contact with infected foreign tourists, the newer wave of cases is largely imported, and some community transmission is now occurring.

Table 1: COVID-19 related incidences in State of Palestine (26 March 2020)

Tests	Self-isolation	Government quarantine	Active cases	Deaths	Full recovery
4702	5908	1442	66	1	17

Source: www.corona.ps

Despite the low number of cases, WHO has identified the risk to the State of Palestine as very high, due to insufficient medical resources in the country compared to other countries. The lack of relevant resources (including critical care beds and artificial ventilators) dramatically raises the mortality rate of COVID-19. As shown below, the State of Palestine has 375 adult intensive care unit (ICU) beds (in private and government hospitals) and 295 ventilators, which severely constrains our ability to care for severe cases of COVID-19 (which can require weeks of care) as well as other non-COVID-19 critical care cases.

Table 2: Number of critical care beds and ventilators

Type	West Bank	Southern Governorates	Total
ICU beds	255	120	375
Pediatric ICU beds	16	0	16
Ventilators	175	120	295

3. GOVERNMENT OF PALESTINE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

The GoP is taking an evidence-based, proactive approach of containment and suppression and – so far – successfully limited community transmission. Our actions aim to protect our citizens by preventing the uncontrollable spread of the virus and the resulting health system challenges that have occurred in other countries.

a. Strategic Response

President Mahmoud Abbas declared a state of emergency the same day that the first cases were identified (in Bethlehem) on 5 March 2020.

President Abbas mandated Prime Minister Dr. Mohammed Shtayyeh to take all measures to implement the State of Emergency. With authority from President Abbas, Prime Minister Shtayyeh established an Emergency Command Center in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), supported by inter-ministerial and multilateral emergency committees and regional committees.

The GoP approach of COVID-19 focuses on preparation, containment and communication:

- **Preparation:** The GoP began preparing for a COVID-19 outbreak once the first cases were reported globally. The GoP prepared an emergency response plan in late February and has worked with local and international partners to mobilize health professionals and facilities across the West Bank and equip them with training and the necessary protective gear, medical supplies, and medicine.
- **Containment and suppression:** The GoP is containing the virus outbreak through testing and quarantining and restrictions on citizen movement. The GoP has quarantine facilities in each of the governorates and conducts testing at the Central Health Laboratory. Individuals suspected to have COVID-19 are home quarantined until symptoms develop or they have a positive test: all in-coming travellers are placed in government quarantine for two weeks. Individuals with positive samples or symptoms are cared for in government hospitals. There are contact and trace units in each governorate.
- **Public health outreach:** The GoP immediately launched a national coordinated communications campaign, passing public health and situation updates to citizens via national and local mechanisms on news, Facebook and Twitter. The campaign includes a government COVID-19 tracking dashboard and collaboration with social media pages focused on tackling misinformation.
- **Transparency measures:** The PMO provides twice daily briefings through the national media, including updates on COVID-19 cases and government guidelines for citizens.
- **Regional coordination:** The GoP coordinates its COVID-19 response with Jordan and Israel.

b. Actions to Date

Over the past few weeks, the GoP requested citizens comply with movement restrictions at the national and regional level, starting with the Bethlehem governorate, which had the first incidence of COVID-19. By 22 March, the following guidelines were in place:

- Closure of all schools, universities and public parks for 30 days (from 5 March - 5 April);
- Closure of all borders (movement of goods is allowed);
- Government quarantine (14 days) and testing for all incoming travellers (from Ben Gurion airport);
- No movement between West Bank governorates;
- Palestinian laborers who travel to Israel for work are asked not to move between State of Palestine and Israel: this means that they should return to their homes (and remain in home quarantine for two weeks) or remain in Israel until the situation changes;
- No movement within all urban areas (except for exceptional circumstances), with all citizens requested to remain with their homes for 14 days (from March 22);
- Closure of all stores, public institutions and government offices, except for essential providers (pharmacies and food) and the Ministries of Health, Finance and Interior (for 14 days from 22 March); and
- All citizens are asked to stay at home, except for essential activities and emergencies (for 14 days from 22 March).

c. Challenges to the GoP Approach

As a nation already suffering from a decades-long military and economic occupation, we recognize that the State of Palestine is already handicapped in our fight to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. We do not have the necessary sovereignty (control over borders, etc) and national resources (medical, financial, etc) to cope with a significant outbreak, particularly when our population has many high-risk characteristics (crowded cities and refugee camps, poverty, food insecurity, non-communicable diseases, etc.).

We have been in a fiscal crisis for over two years, due to Government of Israel (GoI) reductions on the transfer of GoP-owned revenues. The COVID-19 will further decrease GoP revenues. We expect that GoP revenues will drop by (at least) 40% due to COVID-19. (The Ministry of Finance and the PMO are currently conducting the detailed fiscal analysis and expect to have an initial estimate (of the medium-term fiscal framework) shortly). As a result, the GoP budget deficit is expected to increase significantly due to loss in government revenue. Depending on the extent of this loss, the deficit is expected to increase to between $1.8 and 2.4 billion, from the current $0.8 billion. Additionally, we expect that the economic loss from COVID-19 will be at least $2.8 billion. (We are working with the World Bank on a detailed assessment, which should be ready shortly, and we will update these figures.)

An increased budget deficit will restrict our ability to cover operating expenses, pay salaries and pensions, and maintain the social safety network. In the context of COVID-19, this means that we will not be able to cover the full salaries of our health workers in the months leading

to a significant reduction in GoP's ability to manage the pandemic. Additionally, we will also have insufficient funds to cover the scheduled government transfers to the most vulnerable population, with greater numbers of Palestinians expected to need government support due to the economic impact of COVID-19. In the short-term (during the immediate COVID-19 response period), we may need to expand our existing social safety network to enable our citizens to comply with the GoP's containment measures, such as temporary support for workers in Israel, small-medium enterprise owners, and the self-employed.

The Southern Governorates (in the Gaza Strip) are already in humanitarian and economic crisis. Two cases have now been diagnosed there: widespread incidence of the virus will be catastrophic in a population that is overcrowded, undersupplied, and in high poverty and food insecurity. The ongoing closure of the Southern Governorates means that the GoP cannot freely mobilize its national health resources to respond to any outbreak.

4. COORDINATION OF RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN PALESTINE

The National Emergency Committee, headed by the Prime Minister, is leading the GoP response and seeks an active engagement with donor efforts.

We invite our partners to join us in forming a GoP-led coordination mechanism **(PAL-COVID-19 Coordination Platform),** which will enable our international partners to ensure a coordinated response to COVID-19 in Palestine. The PMO will chair the PAL-COVID-19 Coordination Platform as a representative of the GoP, with active participation of the Ministries of Health and Finance and in coordination with key international partners.

The PAL-COVID-19 Coordination Platform will allow the GoP and our partners to quickly share critical needs, coordinate response and funding approaches, provide situation updates, share reports on funding disbursement and jointly track key indicators/delivery targets.

The GoP invites all humanitarian and development partners that are planning to provide response to COVID-19 in the State of Palestine and/or Palestinian refugees to participate in the PAL-COVID-19 Coordination Platform. We envision that existing coordination mechanisms (such as the Health Cluster - Inter-Agency COVID-19) would join this platform, so that its specialized coordination would be part of this larger coordination effort.

The PAL-COVID-19 Coordination Platform will hold regular meetings (remote).

5. REQUEST FOR DONOR SUPPORT

Working with our partners, we strive to protect our citizens, create a resilient and flexible national response, and rebuild a stronger State of Palestine.

The GoP plans to maintain our "contain and suppress" approach to continue to limit community transmission. While we have taken decisive, critical actions, we recognize that there is and will be significant economic, social and cultural impact on our citizens. We are

working with local and international partners to explain our actions and listen to our citizens, so that our actions remain effective but compassionate and sustainable.

Below we identify key resource and diplomatic engagement needs that will enable us to maintain our effective approach while mitigating the impact on our citizens and economy, including: a) financial support for public health response, budget support, and economic recovery efforts (in the medium and long term), b) support for Palestinian refugees, and c) diplomatic engagement.

We will provide a matrix of COVID-19 response needs that describes GoP actions and identifies gaps for which the GoP needs donor or partner support. This matrix will be kept updated and will be used for partner coordination.

The GoP is asking for:

a. Financial support

Public Health Response – IMMEDIATE NEED
We are asking for $120 million to support our direct public health response to COVID-19 across Palestine (in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Southern Governorates - Gaza Strip). These funds would cover short-term (1-3 months) critical gaps that could undermine our ability to contain and manage COVID-19, including: 1) medical staff, 2) medical supplies and equipment and 3) medicine. (See the table attached).

Budget support – IMMEDIATE NEED
We are asking for support to cover the expected $1.8 billion to $2.4 billion budget deficit, (depending on the extent of government revenue loss). This would enable us to cover operating expenses, pay government salaries and pensions, and maintain the social safety network, with a potential temporary expansion of payments to cover those whose livelihoods are directly impacted by the GoP containment measures.

Please note that the GoP is not able to raise funds through the methods used by other countries due to challenges imposed on us by the occupation: namely, we are not able to borrow money as a state from international mechanisms and we cannot lower interest rates or print additional money, because we do not control our own currency. Therefore, the GoP must seek budget support.

Economic recovery – MEDIUM TO LONG TERM NEED
We are currently working with the World Bank to assess the wider economic impact of COVID-19 in order to prepare our economic recovery plan. We expect to provide an initial estimate by the end of March, with recommendations for economic recovery in the near future.

b. Support for Refugees

Palestinian refugees in the State of Palestine and in diaspora are dependent on development and humanitarian aid. They are also very vulnerable to COVID-19 due to high levels of

unemployment and urban density. We ask that partners prioritize support to Palestinian refugees, including through UNRWA to ensure that its health, psycho-social, and economic support to Palestinian refugees continue and – as needed – expand to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

c. Diplomatic Engagement

The GoP needs diplomatic engagement support with the Government of Israel (GoI) to ensure that the GoI is able to help the GoP respond to this regional challenge, including:

- *Facilitation of access:* Israel controls the borders around the State of Palestine. We will need GoI to facilitate free movement of medical staff, medical supplies and medicine throughout of the State of Palestine, but particularly into the Southern Governorates, which has less than a month's supply of essential medicines.

- *Caring for prisoners and workers:* According to international law, Israel has the responsibility to care for the Palestinian citizens who are in Israel, including Palestinian prisoners and workers.

  - *Prisoners:* COVID-19 presents a serious risk to imprisoned populations, as demonstrated by outbreaks in prisons globally. Therefore, the GoP has asked the GoI to release all Palestinian citizens currently in Israeli prisons, especially women, children and those with underlying medical conditions.

  - *Workers:* The GoP is taking steps to prevent the movement of laborers between Israel and the State of Palestine as a public health measure and has asked that those who are not able to return to home stay in place in Israel, until the situation improves. The GoP has asked that the GoI ensure that Palestinian workers in Israel are treated humanely and in accordance with international law.

- *Providing utilities:* Israel supplies utilities (electricity and water) to many or all areas of the State of Palestine. The GoP and the GoI need to agree how to manage utility provision even if immediate payment by the Palestinian user (company, citizen, municipality, etc) is not possible due to COVID-19 related issues. Utility provision to Palestinian medical facilities must be guaranteed.

The PAL-COVID-19 Platform will ensure that humanitarian and development partners remain updated about these and other key issues that need diplomatic engagement.