Conflict and cooperation in the age of COVID-19: the Israeli–Palestinian case

LIOR LEHRS*

How do disasters influence conflict and diplomacy in conflict areas? The scholarship shows that while they can provide opportunities for cooperation and ‘disaster diplomacy’ between parties to a conflict, they can also intensify tension and hostility.1 The question is applicable in cases of disaster in the form of pandemic disease, such as COVID-19. This article explores the impact of disasters on conflict areas and examines the conditions under which a pandemic might lead to either conflict or cooperation, focusing on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict during the COVID-19 crisis as a case-study. It analyses the influence of the pandemic on relations between the rival parties from the onset of the crisis in March 2020 until September 2020 in three conflict arenas: relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank; relations between Israel and the Palestinian community in East Jerusalem; and relations between Israel and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip.

The article deploys an analytical framework based on two questions. The first asks whether the COVID-19 pandemic had an influence on the conflict, and on relations between the parties, in each of the three conflict arenas, and if so, what kind of influence. It examines whether the pandemic led to COVID-19-related cooperation—and, if it did, whether that cooperation was long-lasting and whether it spilled over into other fields—or resulted in lack of cooperation or indeed growing tension. The second addresses the factors that determine how the pandemic affected the conflict and COVID-19-related diplomacy in each arena, focusing on three main variables: the structure of the conflict arena; domestic politics; and developments in the pandemic.

Scholars in the field of ‘disaster diplomacy’ suggest that pre-disaster conditions have a significant influence on post-disaster conflict outcomes, and on the likelihood of the disaster being used as an opportunity for diplomatic cooperation and

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1 Ilan Kelman, ‘Acting on disaster diplomacy’, Journal of International Affairs 59: 2, 2006, pp. 215–40; Travis Nelson, ‘When disaster strikes: on the relationship between natural disaster and interstate conflict’, Global Change, Peace and Security 22: 2, 2010, pp. 155–74.
conflict resolution, or, conversely, leading to tension and escalation. This study contributes to the literature by identifying how different contexts, relations and actors in each conflict arena have affected the development of patterns of conflict and cooperation with regard to the COVID-19 crisis, and which factors determine the impact of the disaster on the conflict. It enriches the theoretical discussion on the possibilities and limitations of disaster diplomacy and cross-border cooperation in conflict areas, particularly under the unique conditions of a global pandemic. In contrast to disaster events such as earthquakes or floods, a pandemic is a continuing health crisis, and the study uses special tools for analysing developments and changes in the dynamic interaction between a pandemic and disaster diplomacy at various stages. The article also points to the role of local and international actors as disaster mediators that facilitate disaster-related cooperation between the parties.

The study is based on process-tracing analysis, utilizing the analytical framework in order to examine the research questions. It uses the method of structured, focused comparison and within-case analysis, attending to the variations among the three conflict arenas, which differ in terms of factors such as the conflict’s context, structure and actors, and the implications of COVID-19 for each arena. The empirical research is based on ten interviews with Israeli and Palestinian experts, journalists and civil society activists, and on media reports, policy papers, press statements and UN reports.

The article begins by outlining the theoretical background and the analytical framework, moving on to present the historical background of the Israeli–Palestinian case-study. The following sections use this theoretical framework to examine the three conflict arenas in turn, analysing in each case the patterns of conflict and cooperation and the factors that shape and affect them. The article closes with a discussion presenting the theoretical contribution of the research, and conclusions.

**Theoretical background**

Scholars have examined the complex relationship between disasters and conflicts, and found that such events can have contradictory impacts. On the one hand, some studies indicate that disasters and diseases can potentially increase tension, political unrest and violent civil conflict. They may give rise to hostility between social groups, trigger competition over resources, or serve as an instrument in the delegitimization of a certain group. On the other hand, scholars have also found that disasters can promote cooperation and trigger opportunities for conflict resolution efforts. They may demonstrate to rivals that they are facing a common

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2 N. Emel Ganapati, Ilan Kelman and Theodore Koukis, ‘Analysing Greek–Turkish disaster-related cooperation: a disaster diplomacy perspective’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 45: 2, 2010, pp. 162–85.

3 Luis de Sousa, ‘Understanding European cross-border cooperation: a framework for analysis’, *Journal of European Integration* 35: 6, 2013, pp. 669–87.

4 A. Cooper Drury and Richard Stuart Olson, ‘Disasters and political unrest: an empirical investigation’, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 6: 3, 1998, pp. 153–61; Philippe le Billon and Arno Waizenegger, ‘Peace in the wake of disaster? Secessionist conflicts and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 32: 3, 2007, pp. 411–27; Nelson, ‘When disaster strikes’.
enemy and need to join forces to confront it, thereby fostering a sense of empathy and solidarity. Disasters can also serve as ‘focusing events’ that facilitate dramatic political and policy change.

This kind of disaster-related cooperation could spill over into other political fields, serving as a type of confidence-building measure, and even eventually leading to a turning point in the relationship between sides to a conflict. Such situations have given rise to scholarship on ‘disaster diplomacy’, which analyses disaster-related diplomatic activities and cooperation in various conflict areas. Scholars in the field have, for example, examined why the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami triggered conflict resolution efforts in Aceh while exacerbating the conflict in Sri Lanka; and why an earthquake in 1999 improved relations between Greece and Turkey, but an earthquake in 2005 did not improve relations between India and Pakistan.

Disasters can potentially offer unique opportunities to improve diplomatic relations, but whether this actually happens depends on the decisions of the players in each specific situation. The opportunities are not necessarily grasped, in some cases because there is no real interest in doing so, in others because higher priority is given to issues not related to the disaster. Scholars have found that the political contexts and conditions of a conflict before the disaster strikes significantly influence outcomes relating to the conflict after the disaster.

Theoretical framework

The analytical framework used is based on two questions. The first explores whether the disaster—in this case the COVID-19 pandemic—had an influence on the conflict and the diplomatic relations between the parties, and if so, what kind of influence. It distinguishes between patterns of cooperation, including COVID-19-related cooperation and coordination, and spillover to diplomatic cooperation in other fields; and patterns of conflict, including lack of cooperation, tension and escalation to violent confrontation.

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5 Jason S. Enia, ‘Peace in its wake? The 2004 tsunami and internal conflict in Indonesia and Sri Lanka’, *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 19: 1, 2008, pp. 7–27; Selen Akcinaroglu, Jonathan M. DiCicco and Elizabeth Radziszewski, ‘Avalanches and olive branches: a multimethod analysis of disasters and peacemaking in interstate rivalries’, *Political Research Quarterly* 64: 2, 2011, pp. 260–75.

6 Thomas A. Birkland, ‘Focusing events, mobilization, and agenda setting’, *Journal of Public Policy* 18: 1, 1998, pp. 53–74.

7 Kelman, ‘Acting on disaster diplomacy’: James Ker-Lindsay, ‘Greek–Turkish rapprochement: the impact of disaster diplomacy?’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 14: 1, 2000, pp. 215–32; Enia, ‘Peace in its wake’; Ganapati et al., ‘Analysing Greek–Turkish disaster-related cooperation’; Akcinaroglu et al., ‘Avalanches and olive branches’.

8 Ker-Lindsay, ‘Greek–Turkish rapprochement’; Ganapati et al., ‘Analysing Greek–Turkish disaster-related cooperation’; Le Billon and Waizenegger, ‘Peace in the wake of disaster?’.

9 A. Cooper Drury, Richard Stuart Olson and Douglas A. van Belle, ‘The politics of humanitarian aid: US foreign disaster assistance, 1964–1995’, *Journal of Politics* 67: 2, 2005, pp. 454–73.

10 Ganapati et al., ‘Analysing Greek–Turkish disaster-related cooperation’.
The second question analyses the variables and factors that shape how the pandemic affects the conflict and can explain the changes and trends in that complex relationship. The study examines three main variables (see figure 1):

1. the structure of the conflict arena, and in particular the relations between the parties;
2. domestic politics—changes and actors in the domestic political sphere on each side;
3. developments in the pandemic—improvement or exacerbation of the health crisis.

In addition, the analysis traces the role of disaster mediators—local or international actors who promote and facilitate disaster-related cooperation between the parties. These may be official actors, such as states or international organizations, or informal actors, such as non-governmental organizations.

**Figure 1: The theoretical framework**

![Theoretical Framework Diagram]

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**Historical background: the Israeli–Palestinian case-study**

In September 1993, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the Oslo I Accord, following mutual recognition by the parties. This was the first step in the Oslo process, which was based on a two-stage plan: a transitional period, in which Palestinian self-government would be established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGS), and a second stage, aimed at achieving a final status agreement. The 1994 Cairo Agreement subsequently led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA). In 1996, under the 1995 Oslo II Accord, the West Bank was divided into three zones: Area A, officially under PA civil and security control (Palestinian cities and surrounding areas—approximately 18 per
Conflict and cooperation in the age of COVID-19

cent of the West Bank); 11 Area B, with Palestinian civil control and joint Israeli–Palestinian security control (22 per cent); and area C, under full Israeli control (60 per cent). Although the parties agreed to reach a final status agreement by May 1999, to date (2021) they have not done so.

In 2005 Israel evacuated its settlements in the Gaza Strip, paving the way for PA control. In January 2006, however, Hamas (the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement) emerged victorious from elections to the Palestinian parliament, and in 2007 violent clashes erupted between Hamas forces and the PLO-controlled PA forces in Gaza, resulting in Hamas taking over the Gaza Strip and the formation of two separate Palestinian governments: the PLO-controlled PA in the West Bank and a Hamas government in Gaza. Israel then imposed a blockade on the Gaza Strip. 12

These developments led to the emergence of three different conflict arenas in the Israeli–Palestinian context, with different actors and interparty relations. The first is the West Bank, where Israel and the PLO-controlled PA are the main actors. Efforts to achieve peace between Israel and the PLO have continued over the years, but they failed to achieve a breakthrough. Since 2014 there have been no peace talks between the parties, nor any direct communication between the two leaders, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (in office from 2009 to June 2021) and PA President Mahmoud Abbas (in office since 2005). Despite the political deadlock and deep mistrust, Israel and the PA continued to maintain civil and security coordination on the ground.

The second arena is East Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a contested, divided city (62 per cent of its residents are Jewish and 38 per cent Palestinian Arab) and, over the years, its status has been a major obstacle to a peace agreement. Under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians in East Jerusalem would not be governed by the PA during the transitional period, and the parties would negotiate the issue during final status negotiations. In contrast to the rest of the WBGS, East Jerusalem had been annexed by Israel in 1967, and it came under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Jerusalem Municipality. Palestinian residents, granted the status of Israeli residents, can vote in municipal council elections but not in elections to the Israeli parliament (under the Oslo Accords they can vote in PA elections). Most of the Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem have boycotted the municipal elections, claiming they legitimize the occupation. Over the years, Israeli authorities have resisted PA involvement in East Jerusalem, shutting down any event or institution with links to the PA. Even though the city has been ‘united’ for five decades, it has remained a divided city, with profound gaps between West and East Jerusalem. 13

The third arena is the Gaza Strip, where Israel and the Hamas government are the main actors. Since 2007, Israel and Hamas have fought four wars (in 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021) and there have been many flare-ups over the Israel–Gaza border.

11 Despite these areas being officially under PA control, the Israeli army frequently enters them for military purposes.
12 Benedetta Berti, ‘Non-state actors as providers of governance: the Hamas government in Gaza between effective sovereignty, centralized authority, and resistance’, Middle East Journal 69: 1, 2015, pp. 9–31.
13 Michael Dumper, Jerusalem unbound (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
Israel and the Hamas government do not recognize each other or maintain official, direct relations, although in recent years they have been engaged in indirect contacts and de-escalation efforts, facilitated mainly by Egypt and the UN.  

The West Bank: Israel and the Palestinian Authority

Cooperation

The first case of COVID-19 in Israel was reported on 27 February 2020. A few days later, on 5 March, the first case was recorded by the PA in the West Bank. Initially, the outbreak led to impressive, even surprising, indications of close Israeli–Palestinian cooperation against the new virus. On 18 March, Israel’s President Reuven Rivlin discussed the pandemic by phone with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. This contact was an unusual event, at a time of political stalemate and lack of communication between the two leaderships. Highlighting the importance of cooperation, Rivlin told Abbas that ‘our ability to work together in times of crisis is also testament to our ability to work together in the future for the good of us all’.  

The two sides established strong strategic cooperation in their COVID-related policy steps and a joint operations room for coordination. Israel delivered testing kits and personal protective equipment to the PA, and Israeli and Palestinian medical personnel participated in joint training sessions. Moreover, the parties reached an agreement regarding Palestinians working in Israel, allowing them to enter Israel and requiring that their employers arrange accommodation for them in Israel. In another unusual step, Israel allowed PA security forces to place checkpoints—aimed at dealing with the virus—in Palestinian villages in Area C, which under the Oslo Accords comes under full Israeli security and civil control.  

In parallel, Israeli Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon met with his Palestinian counterpart, Shukri Bishara, to discuss the economic aspects of the crisis. As a result of the meeting, Kahlon agreed to transfer 120 million new Israeli shekels (NIS) to the PA as emergency aid. This payment was actually part of the tax

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14 International Crisis Group (ICG), Rebuilding the Gaza ceasefire, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 191 (Brussels, 2018), https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/israel-palestine/191-rebuilding-gaza-ceasefire. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 July 2021.)

15 Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'President Rivlin speaks with the Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas', press release, 18 March 2020, https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2020/Pages/President-Rivlin-speaks-with-the-Palestinian-Authority-Chairman-Mahmoud-Abbas-18-March-2020.aspx.

16 Michael Herzog and Ghaith al-Omari, Coronavirus on the Israeli–Palestinian scene (part 1): the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 April 2020), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/coronavirus-on-the-israeli-palestinian-scene-part-1-the-west-bank-and-east; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), COVID-19 emergency situation report 1 (New York, 24 March 2020), https://www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-1; author phone interview with Majadli Ghada (Physicians for Human Rights, Israel–Palestine), 18 Oct. 2020.

17 Yolande Knell, 'Palestinians working in Israel face coronavirus dilemma', BBC News, 29 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52470718.

18 Author phone interview with Adam Rasgon (journalist, New York Times), 7 Oct. 2020.

19 'In a meeting with Israeli counterpart, finance minister demands Israel frees withheld revenues’, Wafa, 16 March 2020, http://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/10707.
revenues that Israel collects for the PA, but the amount was deducted from the tax revenues themselves because of a separate dispute between the sides. Later, on 12 April, Israel delivered a ‘loan’ of 500 million NIS, and in May Israel and the PA signed an agreement for the transfer of 800 million NIS of tax revenue payments, in four instalments, to cover losses arising from COVID-19.

The UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), Nickolay Mladenov, praised these joint efforts and described Israeli–Palestinian cooperation against COVID-19 as ‘excellent’. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) likewise described it as ‘close, unprecedented cooperation’.

What factors and conditions facilitated cooperation between Israel and the PA in this arena at the onset of the crisis? The first factor is the structural situation in the West Bank, which developed on the basis of the Oslo Accords. Despite the conflict and the political stalemate, Israel and the PA recognize each other and have maintained official relations and coordination at various levels between civil and security authorities. Although Netanyahu and Abbas have had a longstanding rift and have not met for some years, Kahlon and his staff have cultivated constructive relations with the PA that provided a solid foundation for cooperation.

Second, the domestic political conditions in Israel were conducive to cooperation. On 5 March Israel held elections, and during March and April the parties were engaged in negotiations over a new coalition government. This political background facilitated policy-making with minimal interference by domestic politics and political considerations. If the pandemic had begun to spread prior to the election, the degree of cooperation would probably have been lower because of opposing political incentives. A public survey on the Israeli side revealed that the public was divided on the question of helping the PA to fight the virus: 52 per cent of Israelis claimed that Israel should help the PA ‘to a large or quite large extent’, while 41 per cent replied that assistance should be ‘to a small extent or not at all’. The survey found a correlation between the answers to the question and voting patterns: while more than 80 per cent of left-wing parties’ voters supported extensive assistance, only 40 per cent of right-wing parties’ voters supported such assistance. This indicates that the cooperation offered no political benefit for the right-wing prime minister, Netanyahu—and indeed, certain steps sparked criticism from the right.

20 Lahav Harkov, ‘UN praises Israel aid to Palestinians as bereaved families demand block’, Jerusalem Post, 8 May 2020, https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/un-praises-israel-aid-to-palestinians-as-bereaved-families-demand-block-625704. Under the 1994 Paris Protocol, Israel collects value-added tax and import taxes on the PA’s behalf and transfers them in monthly payments. A dispute emerged in February 2019, when Israel announced that it would be offsetting the payments by the amount that the PA sends to Palestinian prisoners detained in Israel and their families.

21 Noa Shusterman, The economic challenge in the Palestinian Authority following COVID-19, INSS Insight no. 1320 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute for National Security Studies, 20 May 2020), https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-pa-economic-situation-after-corona/.

22 OCHA, COVID-19 emergency situation report 1; ‘UN envoy hails strong Israel–Palestine cooperation’, UN News, 28 March 2020, https://shar.es/abLIU.

23 Author phone interview with Jonathan Eshpar (UNSCO staff), 30 Sept. 2020.

24 Tamar Hermann and Or Anabi, ‘Survey: Israel during the Corona’, no. 5 (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 19–20 April 2020), https://www idi.org.il/media/14307/corona-index.pdf.
Some domestic Israeli actors urged cooperation. Kahlon, for example, played an important role as a moderate Israeli political actor who had cultivated contacts with the PA. He was not seeking re-election in the 2020 poll and therefore had greater room for manoeuvre. Similarly, Israel’s security establishment, headed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff, urged cooperation with and assistance to the PA out of concern over the possibility that a crisis could lead to its collapse and to anarchy in the West Bank. Cooperation provided a good public relations opportunity for Israel and was used for public diplomacy by Israel’s foreign affairs ministry and the IDF.

Third, the outbreak of the virus at the first stage came as a real shock to both the Israelis and the Palestinians, neither of whom at this point understood what they were facing. It triggered cooperation at the initial stage, when it was clear that the spread of the virus on one side would affect the other side. As the crisis continued, and the two sides started to get used to the new situation, the interest in joint work, and the sense of emergency, declined.

Conflict

Despite cooperation against the virus, the conflict persisted. Violent incidents and IDF operations continued across the West Bank, and some Palestinian leaders publicly asserted that Israel was taking measures to spread the virus. Thus, even though the cooperation was impressive, it was limited. According to one UNSCO diplomat, ‘it did not spill over to generate greater change in the overall atmosphere surrounding the conflict’.

The picture was transformed from one of cooperation to one of conflict in May 2020, as a result of a new crisis between the parties and changes in the conflict’s structure, in the Israeli political sphere and in the infection rate of the virus. In May 2020 a new coalition government was established in Israel, and the idea of Israeli annexation of areas of the West Bank became the main topic in Israel’s political discourse during May and June. Annexation was a major element of Netanyahu’s election campaign and he promised to implement it. The platform of the new coalition declared 1 July as the starting date for annexation plans. At that point it seemed that the path to implementation was being paved, with a green light from the US administration, leading to growing concerns among the Palestinians. In addition, the first wave of COVID-19 had been managed effectively,
Conflict and cooperation in the age of COVID-19

creating the impression in Israel that the virus was defeated. As a result, the subject was sidelined, allowing the media to focus on the annexation.

These changes quickly and dramatically affected relations between Israel and the PA, including their ability to cooperate against the virus, and tensions increased. On 19 May Abbas declared that because of Israel's intention to annex parts of the West Bank, the PA was no longer bound by 'all the agreements and understandings' with Israel and the United States, and would cease security and civil coordination with Israel.30 There were also economic repercussions. The PA declared that it would no longer accept the tax revenue transfers from Israel, thereby exacerbating the economic crisis in the PA and undermining its capacity to pay employees' salaries. The economic channel between Kahlon and Bishara no longer existed, as Kahlon had left political life. The cessation of cooperation also damaged the PA's ability to enforce COVID-19-related restrictions, especially in areas B and C, and to test and monitor the Palestinian workers moving between Israel and the West Bank.31

These developments put an end to cooperation against the pandemic and had a direct impact on the health and humanitarian situation. They disrupted the import of essential supplies from international organizations. It should be noted that at the time of the PA's decision to end cooperation, it had seemed that the virus was under control; however, by late June a second wave, far more severe than the first, was under way—this time without coordination. UN envoy Mladenov expressed concern: 'We are far below the level of coordination that existed in the beginning of the year, when the first wave of the virus hit. This situation could have serious repercussions on the ability to control its spread and its impact on people's lives.'32

The second wave in Israel and in the PA, beginning in late June, had significant political implications. It removed annexation from the national agenda as public opinion called for a focus on the health and economic crises. Israel's alternate prime minister and defence minister, Benny Gantz, declared that 'anything that is not related to the coronavirus will wait'.33 This ties into the theoretical discussion on 'focusing events' and the way they change the issue that dominates the agenda.

The turning point in this sub-case illustrates the limitations of disaster diplomacy. The positive impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the conflict was short-lived. Developments in the conflict and in domestic politics resulted in a dramatic change of attitude and put an end to cooperation, including the united effort against the pandemic. The vacuum that had formed demanded attention from the

30 'President Abbas declares end to agreements with Israel, US; turns over responsibility on occupied lands to Israel', Wafa, 19 May 2020, http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=3QEYPa11715434202933QEYP.
31 OCHA, End of Palestinian Authority coordination with Israel in response to annexation threat: decision already impacting medical referrals (New York, 20 July 2020), https://www.ochaopt.org/content/end-palestinian-authority-coordination-israel-response-annexation-threat-decision-already.
32 Michael Gabriel Hernandez, 'UN: Israel–Palestine breakdown hurting COVID efforts', Anadolu Agency, 22 July 2020, http://v.aa.com.tr/1918084.
33 Noa Landau, 'Hinting at annexation date, Gantz says "Anything not related to Coronavirus will wait"', Haaretz, 29 June 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-gantz-tell-trump-s-envoys-july-1st-not-a-sacred-date-for-annexation-1.8953161.
UN, which sought to fill it by assisting mediation efforts aimed at humanitarian coordination.  

This sub-case indicates how pandemics can influence conflicts by shifting the focus of policy-making and public discourse. During the first wave of infection, the outbreak of the virus focused the parties’ attention and fostered cooperation; in May, however, when the situation improved, focus shifted to the issue of annexation, bringing cooperation to an end. The second wave, in July, assisted in removing the question of annexation from the agenda and bringing the focus back to the virus; but while the first wave compelled the parties to cooperate, the second wave failed to do so. This indicates that the crisis concerning the annexation plan between the parties, as well as the rift that emerged between them, was stronger than the impact of the health crisis. Even after it was announced in August 2020, as part of the agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, that the annexation plan was suspended, the second wave did not lead to renewed coordination between the sides. Another factor was the ongoing nature of the crisis and the diminishing impact of the virus over time, which meant that the second wave did not spark the same sense of shock as the first did at the initial onset of the crisis.

East Jerusalem: the municipality and the Palestinian community

Conflict

The first case of COVID-19 in East Jerusalem was reported in early March. As the virus spread, Palestinian residents felt they were being neglected. Israel was providing care on the Israeli side, the PA was taking care of the Palestinians in the West Bank, and the residents of East Jerusalem were being ignored. The first cases in East Jerusalem were initially excluded from Israel’s Ministry of Health COVID-19 online map; there were no epidemiological investigations of the first Palestinian patients in East Jerusalem and almost no tests, and the authorities made no effort to provide information or instructions.

These developments, alongside the structural conditions in this arena, generated tension between Israel and the PA in East Jerusalem, especially in neighbourhoods beyond the separation barrier. The barrier, that began to be built amid the violence of the second intifada (starting in 2002), left a few East Jerusalem neighbourhoods (with about 100,000 residents) outside the barrier. As a result, these areas became a no-man’s-land: Israeli authorities do not enter to provide services, even though the neighbourhoods lie within the municipal boundaries of the city. The COVID-19 crisis brought this complex and explosive situation to the surface, sparking tension between the parties. In late March 2020 armed PA forces began operating in some of these areas, such as Kafr ‘Aqab, assisting in enforcing

34 Author interview with Eshpar; Hernandez, ‘UN’.
35 Suha Aref, ‘Did the Ministry of Health decide not to check Arabs?’, Siha Mekomit, 10 March 2020, https://www.mekomit.co.il/ps/59864; Amnon Ramon and Yohanan Tzoref, Coping with the coronavirus in East Jerusalem (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Tel Aviv University Institute for National Security Studies and Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research), 14 May 2020, https://jerusaleminstitute.org.il/content/east-jerusalem-corona-status-may-2020/.
COVID-19-related restrictions and subduing internal clashes. Moreover, in some Palestinian East Jerusalem neighbourhoods, the PA provided COVID-19-related assistance, including policing, testing and disinfection. PA leaders also attacked Israel publicly for its lack of response in East Jerusalem and for not providing the necessary health services to residents.

The PA activity sparked an Israeli response in opposition to the former’s involvement in the city. In Silwan, for example, Israeli police closed a COVID-19 testing clinic and arrested its organizers, arguing that it was linked to the PA. In response to the PA’s involvement in Kafr ‘Aqab (located beyond the barrier), Israel sent large numbers of IDF and police personnel to the area to enforce COVID-19 instructions and demonstrate Israeli control. The Israeli security forces removed a sign that PA forces had placed in the neighbourhood. Right-wing Israeli actors in the municipal political sphere lobbied for this expression of sovereignty. Israel also arrested the PA’s minister of Jerusalem affairs and the PA’s governor of Jerusalem in retaliation for the ‘illegal’ PA activity in Jerusalem.

These developments illustrate how differences in structural conditions between different conflict arenas influence the ways in which the virus affects the conflict. While the onset of the crisis led to cooperation between Israel and the PA in the West Bank, it sparked conflict between them in East Jerusalem. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is an asymmetrical conflict, not a conflict between independent states. However, while the West Bank has an official (albeit limited) Palestinian government, as well as institutions and armed security forces, in East Jerusalem the relations are between Israeli state and municipal authorities, on the one hand, and residents—who lack official institutions or elected representatives—on the other. In addition, the Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, particularly in areas beyond the barrier, are an arena for Israeli–Palestinian competition and struggles for control and presence. This structural situation can easily lead to tension in the event of a disaster such as a pandemic.

Cooperation

The picture began to change in April 2020. First, Palestinian civil society organizations and local activists in East Jerusalem, sensing that they were on their own,
took control in an effort to fill the vacuum. Local committees were established to assist in enforcing restrictions, providing humanitarian assistance and information, and providing care for COVID-19 patients. Eventually, 82 Palestinian organizations and committees established a joint body: the Jerusalem Assembly to Battle the Coronavirus. They opened the first quarantine hotel in East Jerusalem and established a hotline in Arabic offering information and assistance. They distanced themselves from politics, forming no ties with the PA but also opposing any direct cooperation with the Israeli authorities. Palestinian organizations that cooperate with the authorities risk being labelled in public opinion as ‘traitors’ who ‘normalize the occupation’.

In parallel, Israel’s authorities recognized their blind spot, acknowledging the epidemiological proximity between the city’s communities, and began to operate in East Jerusalem. Israel opened a few testing stations, including in the area beyond the barrier, appointed an officer from the IDF’s Home Front Command to oversee efforts in East Jerusalem, and established a special situation room. In the days leading up to the month of Ramadan (late April), the municipality decided to assist by providing shopping vouchers and food rations to the needy in East Jerusalem. At that point, despite the political divide and lack of mutual recognition between, on the one hand, the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem (called ‘the occupation municipality’ by the Palestinian residents) and other Israeli authorities, and, on the other hand, Palestinian civil society networks, some form of indirect and informal coordination and cooperation nevertheless emerged. This cooperation included, for example, informal recognition by the Israeli authorities of the quarantine hotel that the Palestinian Jerusalem Assembly had opened independently; coordination by the Jerusalem Assembly with Israeli authorities, including the police, before its volunteers undertook activities such as distributing food baskets (to make sure they would not be arrested and accused of ties with the PA); and coordinating the presence of a Palestinian emergency medical services organization at funerals to ensure adherence to COVID-19-related rules. These forms of coordination took place without official recognition or direct cooperation. In some cases, they were facilitated by Israeli civil society activists in Jerusalem-based NGOs.

Other channels of cooperation also emerged during the crisis. The Israeli situation room on East Jerusalem worked primarily with community councils in East

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41 See https://www.facebook.com/Jerusalemghathering/.
42 Juman Abu Arafa, ‘In light of the deliberate neglect of the occupation … Corona unites the efforts of Jerusalemites’, Al Jazeera, 3 April 2020, https://aja.me/b295f; author phone interview with Amnon Ramon (researcher, Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research), 29 Sept. 2020; Nir Hasson, ‘Dawn of a new era? Jerusalem and its Palestinian residents joining forces to battle coronavirus’, Haaretz, 4 May 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium.MAGAZINE-jerusalem-and-its-palestinian-residents-joining-forces-to-battle-coronavirus-1.8816808; author interview with Agmon-Snir.
43 Author interview with Agmon-Snir; author phone interview with Ahmad Asmar (East Jerusalem researcher and activist), 6 Oct. 2020.
44 Ramon and Tzoref, Coping with the coronavirus; Nir Hasson, ‘COVID-19 brings East Jerusalem Palestinians and Israeli authorities closer. Will it last?’, Haaretz, 25 Oct. 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-covid-19-brings-east-jerusalem-palestinians-and-israel-closer-will-it-last-1.9260954.
45 Author interview with Agmon-Snir; author phone interview with Nir Hasson (journalist, Haaretz), 19 Oct. 2020.
Jerusalem (established over the years by the municipality). It also communicated at a less official level with other local Palestinian activists. The crisis provided more legitimacy for coordination, and the fact that the meetings took place online made it easier for Palestinian activists to participate without being accused of ‘normalization’. Moreover, Jerusalem’s mayor, Moshe Leon, initiated contact with the directors of East Jerusalem hospitals and met them regularly. Leon also participated in some activities involving the distribution of food and toys in Palestinian neighbourhoods, and the municipality suspended house demolitions in East Jerusalem during the first wave of the virus. Despite the tremendous suspicion of Palestinian residents towards the municipality, Leon received some credit for his actions during the crisis. Leon was a new mayor (having taken office in December 2018), and signs of his different attitude, compared to his predecessor, had been evident before the pandemic, when he visited a Palestinian boy who lost an eye after being hit by an Israeli policeman’s sponge-tipped bullet.

The unique type of coordination in East Jerusalem derives from the structure of the conflict arena. While this structure, as well as the current diplomatic and legal context, leaves almost no room for Israel–PA cooperation in East Jerusalem, the municipal context provides certain opportunities for cooperation based on some pre-disaster infrastructure. Despite the complex relations between the municipality and the Palestinians, a few platforms and channels for coordination have developed over the years. Given the context in this arena, the actors who served as disaster mediators were local actors, mainly civil society activists, community centres, and personnel from hospitals and health centres in East Jerusalem (whose cooperation with the authorities is granted legitimacy because of their profession). The crisis allowed the parties to be more flexible about their official policy, given the unique circumstances. Domestic political actors, notably the new mayor, also played a role in this process.

However, the coordination was mostly informal and limited. It did not spill over to real change in the core issues of East Jerusalem. The freezing of house demolitions was the only example of spillover to other fields, as the issue was connected to the crisis. The demolitions were renewed in May, but suspended again during the second wave. Such positive developments as did occur did not dispel the deep sense of neglect, especially in areas beyond the barrier. Moreover, the Israeli police hardly enforced the COVID-19-related rules in the Palestinian areas in East Jerusalem.

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46 See Nufar Avni, Noam Brenner, Dan Miodownik and Gillad Rosen, ‘Limited urban citizenship: the case of community councils in East Jerusalem’, *Urban Geography*, publ. online 1 Feb. 2021, pp. 1–21, doi: 10.1080/02723638.2021.1878430.

47 Author interview with Agmon-Snir; Hasson, ‘COVID-19 brings East Jerusalem Palestinians and Israeli authorities closer’.

48 Author interview with Hasson.

49 House demolitions are one of the most sensitive issues in East Jerusalem. The buildings affected are houses that, according to Israeli authorities, were built without permits, whereas Palestinians reject the Israeli housing policy in East Jerusalem as unreasonable and discriminatory.

50 ‘The coronavirus crisis is Jerusalem mayor’s finest hour, but his real test lies ahead’, editorial, *Haaretz*, 5 May 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/jerusalem-mayor-s-finest-hour-1.8820346; author interview with Agmon-Snir; Hasson, ‘Dawn of a new era’.

51 Author interviews with Hasson and Agmon-Snir.
While intensive interference could have led to violent clashes, the absence of any intervention created a vacuum that no other force filled.

In addition, the civil society framework, which was very effective and active at the beginning of the crisis, became weaker, eroding and dissolving over time.\(^52\) The second wave in East Jerusalem was more severe than the first and was met with a weaker civil society response and less public willingness to cooperate. At this point, the more institutionalized coordination—based on community centres and hospitals—was more sustainable.

An illustration of the different approaches taken by the parties in the two waves, and the eroding impact of the crisis, is evident with respect to the holy sites in Jerusalem. The most sensitive of these is the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, and while during the first wave both sides—Israel and the Waqf (the Muslim organization that administers the site)—agreed to close the site to all visitors, during the second wave the Waqf wanted to close the site but the Israeli authorities insisted on leaving it open for Jewish visitors, leading the Waqf to change its stance and refuse to close the site only to Muslims.\(^53\)

**Gaza: Israel and Hamas**

**Cooperation**

As the virus began to spread in Israel and the PA, the Gaza Strip became a matter of paramount concern, given its extreme vulnerability and poor living conditions. This small area is densely populated, with many of its residents in refugee camps, high rates of poverty and unemployment, limited access to water and electricity, and a very poor health-care system.\(^54\)

Given the structure of the conflict arena in Gaza, the parties were unable to establish direct cooperation, but in the light of strong concerns about the pandemic, Israel permitted the delivery of medical equipment from international organizations (mainly the World Health Organization, WHO) and states (such as Qatar) to the Gaza Strip. The PA and international organizations played a role in the coordination between Israel and Hamas.\(^55\)

The crisis resulted in a unique effort, whereby medical personnel from Gaza entered Israel for training in dealing with COVID-19. This was an extremely unusual move, which in other contexts would be considered a ‘normalization step’.\(^56\) The pandemic also provided an opportunity for economic cooperation, as

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52 Author interview with Agmon-Snir; author email interview with Moien Odeh (East Jerusalem lawyer and activist), 7 Oct. 2020.
53 Author interviews with Ramon and Hasson.
54 Zaha Hassan and Aaron David Miller, *Israel–Palestine and coronavirus* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 April 2020), https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/14/israel-palestine-and-coronavirus-pub-81528.
55 Author phone interview with Ghada; author phone interview with civil society activist in Gaza, 15 Oct. 2020.
56 Michael Herzog and Ghaith al-Omari, *Coronavirus on the Israeli–Palestinian scene (part 2): the Gaza Strip* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 May 2020), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/coronavirus-on-the-israeli-palestinian-scene-part-2-the-gaza-strip; Entsar Abu Jahal, ‘Hamas quietly allows Gaza doctors to get COVID-19 training in Israel’, *Al-Monitor*, 26 April 2020, http://almon.co/3ck2.
textile factories in Gaza converted their production lines to COVID-19-related equipment such as masks and protective suits, approximately 90 per cent of which were sold to Israeli companies.\(^{57}\)

The pandemic also served as a framework for a growing discourse on both sides regarding the possibility of a 'humanitarian deal' between the parties, including some indirect contacts on the subject. Hamas linked the idea of a prisoner swap with the new virus and suggested that Israel release elderly and ill prisoners who were more vulnerable to the pandemic, and allow increased delivery of necessary medical equipment as part of such a deal.\(^{58}\) These ideas and suggestions did not mature into an agreement.

The structure of this conflict arena can explain why the outbreak of the virus did not lead to close formal cooperation as it had between Israel and the PA. But the strong concerns about Gaza prompted coordination to assist the Hamas government in fighting the virus, using existing channels including, particularly, the PA. Moreover, in contrast to the situation in East Jerusalem, there is an undisputed border between Israel and Gaza and clear division of control between Israel and Hamas. Also, in this sub-case the political circumstances in Israel at that point (after the election) were conducive to disaster diplomacy, as domestic political incentives were not a major source of interference.

**Conflict**

Despite the humanitarian coordination efforts that characterized the onset of the crisis, the virus quickly became another tool in the conflict between Israel and Hamas, feeding into their aggressive rhetoric. At an early stage of the crisis, Hamas threatened to escalate the conflict unless Israel provided ventilators for COVID-19 patients in Gaza. Yahya Sinwar, head of Hamas in Gaza, warned Israel that ‘if ventilators are not brought into [Gaza], we’ll take them by force from Israel and stop the breathing of 6 million Israelis’.\(^{59}\) Meanwhile, the Israeli defence minister, Naftali Bennett, implied that Israel would link the provision of COVID-19-related medical aid to Gaza with the release of the bodies of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas.\(^{60}\)

The end of coordination between Israel and the PA in May 2020 affected Gaza and made it more difficult to transfer patients from Gaza to health centres in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel. As a result, human rights organizations and the WHO stepped in to create a new mechanism, in coordination with Palestinian

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57 'Textile factories in Gaza turn to manufacture masks and protective gear', Gisha, 27 April 2020, https://gisha.org/updates/11577.

58 Adnan Abu Amer, 'Humanitarian concerns could swing it for a prisoner exchange deal between Hamas and Israel', *Middle East Monitor*, 14 April 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200414-humanitarian-concerns-could-swing-it-for-a-prisoner-exchange-deal-between-hamas-and-israel/; author phone interview with Rasgon.

59 'Hamas chief threatens Israel over ventilators for coronavirus patients', *Times of Israel*, 2 April 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-chief-threatens-israel-over-ventilators-for-coronavirus-patients/.

60 'Israel hints that Gaza coronavirus aid hinges on release of soldiers’ bodies’, *Haaretz*, 1 April 2020, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-hints-that-gaza-coronavirus-aid-hinges-on-release-of-soldiers-bodies-1.8731697.
and Israeli authorities, to address the problem. Despite the challenges, the virus remained under control in Gaza until late August: its isolation from the world, in combination with the COVID-19-related measures of the Hamas government, kept case numbers very low. Up to late August, only one death was recorded and all the positive cases were confined to quarantine facilities for residents returning from abroad.

The situation between Israel and Gaza began to shift during August. After six months of a tense lull in hostilities, matters started to escalate in early August. A rocket was launched from Gaza into Israel on 2 August and another on 16 August, and hundreds of incendiary kites and flammable balloons were launched from Gaza towards Israel on a daily basis. As part of this escalation, the Israeli army struck Hamas targets in Gaza and gradually increased its responses. Israel also suspended fuel imports to Gaza and closed the offshore fishing zone. The escalation is attributable to the deteriorating humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza resulting from COVID-19-related circumstances. These conditions drove Hamas to take action in the hopes of bringing the political focus back to the situation in Gaza.

These manifestations of conflict and escalation may be explained using the three factors identified in the theoretical framework. First, the structural condition of Gaza comprises a tense, ongoing conflict with recurring cycles of clashes and ceasefires between parties that do not officially recognize each other, and without any stable long-term agreements. While the shock and concern at the onset of the crisis allowed them both to focus on the pandemic, as time went by this effect dissipated, and the virus became another element of the conflict. Over time the economic implications of the crisis intensified, sparking more tension and escalating the situation.

Domestic politics also played a role: on the Israeli side flexibility became more elusive after May, with the establishment of a new coalition government; and in Gaza an internal struggle surrounding the upcoming elections for the Hamas leadership had an impact, driving Hamas leaders in Gaza, such as Sinwar, to apply more pressure on Israel in the hope of achieving results that would bolster their position in the elections.

This sub-case also illustrates the impact of the pandemic itself. The onset of the crisis had led to COVID-19-related coordination, but as the crisis continued, and was effectively contained in Gaza, attention reverted to the conflict, which began

61 OCHA, COVID-19 emergency situation report 14, 15–28 July 2020 (New York, 28 July 2020), https://www.ochaopt.org/content/covid-19-emergency-situation-report-14; author interview with Ghada.
62 'Gaza in lockdown after first COVID-19 community transmission', Al Jazeera, 25 Aug. 2020, https://aje.io/rvbxn.
63 Mohammad Habosh, 'Gaza’s balloon bombs spark new cycle of violence', Al-Monitor, 14 Aug. 2020, http://almon.co/3dwn; Rina Bassist, 'Israel cuts off fuel to Gaza as balloon attacks continue', Al-Monitor, 13 Aug. 2020, http://almon.co/3dwq; 'Israel shuts Gaza fishing zone after overnight cross-border fighting', Al-Arabiya, 16 Aug. 2020, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/08/17/Israel-shuts-Gaza-fishing-zone-after-overnight-cross-border-fighting.
64 Author interview with Rasan; author phone interview with Celine Touboul (expert, The Economic Cooperation Foundation), 22 Oct. 2020; ICG, Gaza’s new coronavirus fears, Middle East and North Africa Briefing no. 78 (Brussels, 9 Sept. 2020), p. 4, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/israel-palestine/b78-gazas-new-coronavirus-fears.
65 Author interview with Rasan; author interview with civil society activist in Gaza.
to escalate. But the strongest evidence of the impact of rising COVID-19 cases on the conflict could be seen in late August, in the midst of the escalating violence.

On 24 August, four cases were detected within one family in Gaza, the first cases outside the quarantined facilities for returnees from abroad. In response, the Hamas government declared a lockdown. Transmission in the community surged as the number of cases increased very rapidly thereafter: in two weeks Gaza recorded 1,054 cases.\textsuperscript{66} The dramatic outbreak prompted intensive mediation efforts by Egypt, UNSCO and Qatar. On 25 August Qatar’s envoy visited Gaza and declared that Qatar was willing to increase its monthly payments to Gaza, with part of the additional funds earmarked for the local COVID-19 response. On 27 August, thanks to the mediation efforts, Israel agreed to allow delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza and on 31 August the parties reached a ceasefire agreement. Hamas suspended its attacks, and Israel permitted the resumption of fuel shipments to Gaza as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid needed to address the COVID-19 outbreak. A senior Hamas official told the International Crisis Group that it ‘was not the right time to escalate, despite their [Hamas leaders’] readiness to do so, given the pandemic’.\textsuperscript{67}

This sequence of events indicates that the rapid spread of the virus prompted de-escalation and impelled Hamas towards a ceasefire agreement.\textsuperscript{68} In this sub-case, the disaster mediators played an important role: the WHO helped coordinate the health aspects of the response, and UNSCO, Egypt and Qatar assisted in the economic and political aspects, and in facilitating a ceasefire.

\textbf{Discussion}

This section presents a comparative discussion on the three conflict arenas, offering theoretical conclusions about the factors that affect the development of patterns of conflict or cooperation in the context of a disaster such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion is organized according to the three variables of the research framework: structural factors, domestic factors and pandemic progression.

\textbf{Structural factors}

One influential factor in the context of the conflict arena’s structure is the existence of official relations between the parties to the conflict before the disaster, and coordination between the respective authorities. Where established relations already exist, the likelihood of disaster-related cooperation is higher. This point can account for the difference between close Israel–PA cooperation in the West Bank at the onset of the pandemic and lack of direct Israel–Hamas cooperation

\textsuperscript{66} ICG, Gaza’s new coronavirus fears, p. 3; OCHA, COVID-19 emergency situation report 14.
\textsuperscript{67} ICG, Gaza’s new coronavirus fears, p. 6; David Halbfinger and Adam Rasgon, ‘Israel and Hamas agree to cool hostilities, for now’, New York Times, 1 Sept. 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/world/middleeast/hamas-gaza-israel-coronavirus.html?smid=tw-share.
\textsuperscript{68} Author interview with Touboul.
in Gaza. Another factor is the division of control and authority in the conflict arena. The research shows that when the dividing lines are contested and unclear, especially in areas where there is a vacuum in effective governmental control, there is greater likelihood that a pandemic will generate conflict and competition. This was illustrated by the Israel–PA competition in East Jerusalem, especially in areas beyond the barrier, at the beginning of the pandemic.

In addition, when the border zone is characterized by continuous tension and recurring military clashes, there is greater likelihood that over time, a pandemic, and its humanitarian and economic consequences, will lead to escalation of the conflict, as illustrated by events in Gaza in August 2020. Moreover, when the conflict arena is a city, as in the case of Jerusalem, the urban and municipal context can generate opportunities and channels that would not occur in other contexts. The variations in the level of cooperation, and in Israeli pandemic-related aid and efforts, across the three arenas were also influenced by the varying degrees of Palestinian contact with Israel and Israelis during a crisis of contagious pandemic.

**Domestic factors**

The variable of domestic politics is significant, and in cases of asymmetrical conflicts in which the weaker side depends on the stronger side, the domestic factors on the stronger side are particularly influential. One important domestic factor is the political timing and context, especially the extent of the current political leadership’s room for manoeuvre. Pandemic-related cooperation and aid can be controversial and not politically rewarding, and the more political leeway the leadership has, the better the chances for cooperation. This explains the pattern of Israel–PA cooperation after Israel’s 2020 elections, during the coalition-building process, followed by diminished cooperation after the formation of a new government, which promoted the annexation plan. In this case conflict-related and political considerations simply outweighed pandemic-related considerations, as also illustrated by Israel’s closure of a Palestinian COVID-19 testing clinic in Silwan. It should be noted that the Israeli public views East Jerusalem as part of Israel, and therefore regarded aid to its Palestinian residents as a domestic matter rather than a conflict-related issue.

Another influential factor is the presence of moderate, pro-cooperation actors in important decision-making positions, which is likely to improve the chances of disaster-related cooperation. This was illustrated by the role of Minister Kahlon with regard to the West Bank and Mayor Leon in East Jerusalem.

**Pandemic progression**

Developments relating to the pandemic itself are a crucial variable, and two points should be made in this regard. First, because the early stage of a pandemic generates genuine shock and raises acute concerns, the chances for cooperation are much greater at this stage. This was illustrated, for example, by variations in
Conflict and cooperation in the age of COVID-19

Israel–PA cooperation in the West Bank during the pandemic and in Israel–Waqf cooperation surrounding holy sites in Jerusalem. Second, when the virus surges significantly, there is a high likelihood of its becoming a ‘focusing event’ that shifts public discourse and replaces conflict-related issues. This was evident when the second wave of COVID-19 removed the annexation plan from the agenda, and when a COVID-19 outbreak in Gaza in late August led to de-escalation and prevented a potential military clash.

Conclusions

The scholarship on disaster diplomacy reveals a complex set of relations between disasters, conflict and diplomacy. This study uses the Israeli–Palestinian conflict during the COVID-19 crisis as a large empirical field in which to analyse the influence of disasters, and specifically pandemics, on relations between the rival parties, and to explore variables and conditions that affect whether the outcomes tend towards cooperation or conflict. It traces the impact of the pandemic through the progression of the crisis, from March to September 2020, in three different arenas of the conflict.

The study uses a theoretical framework for its comparative analysis of the three conflict arenas, identifying three types of influential factors that affect the development of patterns of conflict and cooperation. The first type comprises the pre-disaster structural factors of each conflict arena: here the research demonstrates that factors such as pre-existing official relations and coordination mechanisms between the parties, and a clear division of control, improve the chances of cooperation. The second type comprises domestic factors, such as political timing, the amount of leeway enjoyed by the current political leadership, and the existence of pro-cooperation actors in senior decision-making positions. The third type comprises pandemic-related factors: here the analysis indicates that the effect of the virus on the conflict in the initial stage differed from its impact in later stages, and that a surge in the pandemic can transform the political discourse and remove conflict-related issues from the agenda. The research also points to the role of disaster mediators in promoting coordination or in filling a vacuum in the absence of formal cooperation. These could be local actors (such as civil society activists or health-care facility personnel) or international actors (international organizations or states).

A final remark about vaccines is in order. Israel had a very successful vaccination campaign, which began at an early stage (December 2020) and proceeded very quickly. The world saw Israel as a model, but at the same time human rights organizations criticized it for not vaccinating the Palestinians in the WBGS, arguing that, as the occupying power, Israel has moral obligations to these populations. Israel for its part argued that the Oslo Accords delegate the responsibility for public health to the PA. In this respect too, the picture differed across the three conflict arenas. In East Jerusalem, the Palestinians received full access to vaccines, as they have Israeli residency status and health insurance; in the West Bank, Israel vaccinated Palestin-
ian workers with Israeli work permits (around 100,000); also, Israel permitted the
delivery of vaccines donated by international actors to the WBGS.69

The vaccination process highlights the asymmetrical relationship between the
parties to the conflict. The variations across the three arenas can be explained by
the different legal status of Jerusalem residents and Palestinian workers in Israel,
and by the degree of contact with Israel (structural factors). The vaccinations took
place against the background of another election campaign in Israel (March 2021),
with no political incentive for Netanyahu to operate vaccine diplomacy with the
PA. At the same time, Israel’s ministry of health served as a pro-cooperation actor
that advocated providing vaccines for Palestinians (domestic factors).

At the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, some voiced hopes that it would serve
as an opportunity for change in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and encourage the
parties to reach a diplomatic breakthrough.70 These hopes were not fulfilled. The
pandemic did not lead to a new peacemaking process or to a dramatic improve-
ment in relations between the parties. The pre-disaster conditions necessary to
foster such an outcome did not exist. But for all three conflict arenas, we can
identify signs of COVID-19-related cooperation or coordination. The most signif-
icant process took place between Israel and the PA at the start of the crisis. In all
three arenas, however, cooperation was limited in scope and in time, and even the
Israel–PA cooperation did not last long. Ultimately, conflict-related and political
factors were usually more powerful than pandemic-related factors. Although the
crisis might have provided an opportunity, the main players did not opt to seize it.

69 ‘UN envoy calls for more support to aid Palestinian COVID-19 response’, UN News, 25 March 2021, https://
news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088262.

70 Mohammed S. Dajani, Forgiving a path to peace in the time of coronavirus (Washington DC: Fikra Forum, 24 April 2020),
https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Peace-Coronavirus-Israel-Palestinians-COVID-19.