



The remaining facts on the ground

A week before the start, it was not clear that the second *Lancet*-Palestinian Health Alliance Conference at the Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University (close to Ramallah on the West Bank), would actually take place. On Feb 21, 2010, the Israeli Government announced its intention to designate the burial site of Abraham and Sarah as an exclusively Jewish heritage site. The cave of the patriarchs is situated in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron on the West Bank and revered by all three major faiths. Hebronites and their supporters protested, and many civilians were injured in the resulting clashes. On Feb 28, the day that international contributors to the conference were arriving in Ramallah, hundreds of Israeli settlers, escorted by Israeli security forces, stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem. There was tension in the air; the smell of violence everywhere; and denial or restricted access from one part of the West Bank to another and to East Jerusalem. And the country was engulfed with an unusual rain storm, which reduced many streets on the West Bank to muddy streams.

Despite these challenges, most of our international and local guests arrived early on March 1 to attend the 2-day conference. It was a full house, and overflowing; a testimony to Palestinian resilience; to the moral and substantive support and solidarity of international colleagues and friends; and to the resolve of the Palestinian academic and professional community to engage in undertaking, disseminating, and using research to assist in improving population health.

International contributors to the conference came from as far away as Japan, the USA, Sweden, Norway, and the UK, but most papers were presented by Palestinians from the West Bank (Ramallah, Hebron, and Nablus) and East Jerusalem. Three colleagues from the Gaza Strip were denied permits by Israel to travel to the West Bank and present papers at the conference, so their work was presented by others. Two presenters from Lebanon also could not attend because of the continued state of war between Israel and Lebanon. Since 1948, our reality has been that, as Palestinians dispersed all over the world, we have not been able to convene in our homeland and discuss our lives, health, and future. We live, teach, do research, and manage our academic life under Israeli military occupation; and

insecurity and uncertainty mean that we never know if we are able to complete a teaching or research task until it gets done.

In this second international conference on the health of Palestinians under occupation, Palestinian and international academics presented various topics, including the consequences of the Israeli incursion into the Gaza Strip from Dec 27, 2009 to Jan 18, 2010, on: health and human security; disability and mental health; the environmental determinants of health; women's health; child and adolescent nutrition; challenges to the Palestinian health-care system under Israeli military occupation; and success against all odds and the way forward. Presenters came from various academic institutions, sectors, and educational backgrounds, and included students.

The history of Palestinians under Israeli military occupation is marked by alliance building at the local and international levels. As a people who are isolated, fragmented, and violated, alliance building and networking are a necessity for personal and collective survival. As with other Palestinian institutions, we began with collaborative research and intervention work with the Palestinian social action in health movement of the 1980s, and thus gained a good amount of expertise and practice in the field, and learned how to ask the research questions that are relevant and important for the country. We also strengthened our research and

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Palestinian students at the Al-Quds University, Abu Dis, West Bank

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teaching by networking internationally and drawing on international expertise, collaborating on research, and sending candidates abroad to study for Masters and PhD degrees, with the support of various institutions, especially from Norway, the UK, France, and, more recently, the USA and Canada.

However, the *Lancet*-Palestinian Health Alliance placed us, and our local and international partners, firmly into a new and stronger than ever level, the global level. The alliance arose from the work leading to the 2009 *Lancet* Series of reports on health and health services in the occupied Palestinian territory in 2009.¹ The alliance provides an internationally visible expression of a shared determination to do research and to report on the health of Palestinians by framing health in ways that are relevant to Palestinian social and political realities, and not only in medical terms; and by elaborating and validating measures to assess health in situations of chronic warlike conditions.

The alliance conferences will take place every year in early March, and will help to support continued capacity

building for health research. These conferences will help in giving Palestinian researchers the strength and the will to continue believing that they can persist in doing research, despite the many hurdles and the impossibility of the context at times; and that they can influence change, even when the political conditions produce generalised feelings of incapacitation. The conferences will also help to humanise images of Palestinians who are portrayed as either terrorists or hopeless victims. We are real, human beings, a people with agency; we are scientists and scholars who strive to link academic work to societal development; and we are here and, despite everything, we are staying put.

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We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

1 *The Lancet*. Health in the occupied Palestinian territory. March 4, 2009. <http://www.thelancet.com/series/health-in-the-occupied-palestinian-territory> (accessed June 24, 2010).