



## COVID-19 Infection in the East Jerusalem Neighborhoods: The exceptional case of Kafr 'Aqab

August 3, 2020

### Overview

Kafr 'Aqab is a large neighborhood northeast of Jerusalem **on the Palestinian side of the Israeli security fence**. The neighborhood belongs to the municipal territory of Jerusalem, and most of its inhabitants have the status of permanent residents of the State of Israel. **About 40,000 of its inhabitants work in Israel in the Jerusalem neighborhoods** on the Israeli side west of the security fence. Some work in the PA territories in the Ramallah region. Because of its excessive crowding, poor sanitation conditions, lack of law and order enforcement and lack of a functioning system of governance, Kafr 'Aqab has **the potential for a outbreak of COVID-19 and for the mutual infection between the neighborhood and Jerusalem and the neighborhood and the PA territories**.

► According to data from the Jerusalem municipality, during the second wave of COVID-19 infection the number of active cases in Kafr 'Aqab spiked from 23 on July 9, 2020, to 199 on July 30, 2020 (the number has since slightly begun to decline). However, in all probability, **it can be assumed that the number of active cases is far higher**, because many patients do not report their symptoms and because of the **lack of governance and a functioning system of law and order enforcement**. In the background, **the rate of infection in the other neighborhoods in east Jerusalem is trending upward**, and the rate of infection is **high in the PA villages around Jerusalem**.

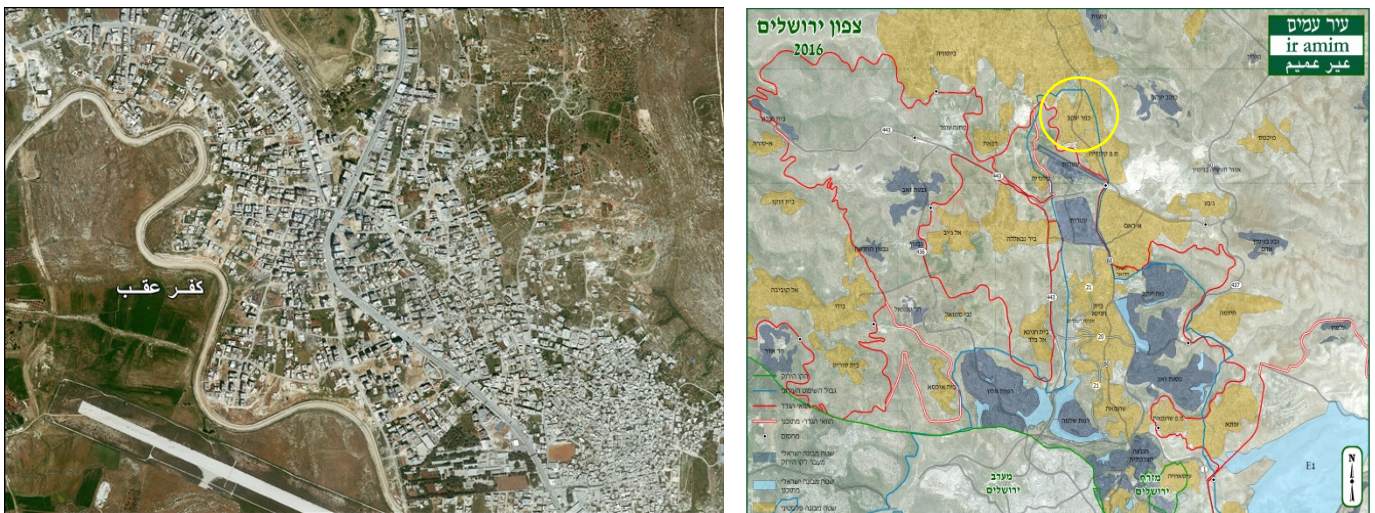
### Background Information about Kafr 'Aqab

► Kafr 'Aqab is a large neighborhood northeast of Jerusalem. It is one of the two large neighborhoods which belong to the Jerusalem municipality but are on the Palestinian side of the security fence.<sup>1</sup> Its population has **permanent resident status**, the same status enjoyed by most east Jerusalem residents [i.e., they carry Israeli ID cards, allowing them unhindered access to Israeli territory and the ability to move freely, work in Israel and vote in Jerusalem municipal elections]. Despite the fact that **the neighborhood is part of the**

<sup>1</sup> The other is Shuafat.

**territory administered by the Jerusalem municipality**, since 2016 it has had a local municipality established by the PA to provide its residents with services and to develop its infrastructure (Ramallah News, September 25, 2016). The head of the local municipality is **Imad Awad**, who has held the office since 2017.

► According to data from the Jerusalem municipality, between **70,000 and 75,000 people live in Kafr 'Aqab** with permanent resident status (as of July 2020). However, **in reality the number is far larger** because Palestinians who are not permanent Israeli residents also live there, and they are not included in the population count. According to Palestinian sources, **an estimated 100,000 to 120,000 people actually live in Kafr 'Aqab.**<sup>2</sup>



**Right: Kafr 'Aqab, northeast of Jerusalem (Map from the Ir Amim website, 2016). Left: Aerial photograph of Kafr 'Aqab (Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem, 2012).**

► Kafr 'Aqab's position on the Palestinian side of the security fence and the lack of control of Israeli enforcement agencies turned it into **a kind of no man's land when it comes to law enforcement**. According to a study by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, the neighborhood is **rife with crime and violence**, and there is a lack of personal safety, given that there is **no police presence**. In addition, the lack of governance has turned it into a no man's land without inspection or organizing of planning and construction laws. It therefore became a center for the construction of cheap housing, with buildings of 10 and 12 floors, whose plans were not authorized and whose construction had no real engineering oversight (buildings often tenanted by people from other east Jerusalem neighborhoods because their prices are low).

<sup>2</sup> Samih Abu Ramila, chairman of the emergency committee to fight COVID-19, said 120,000 people live in Kafr 'Aqab (Facebook page of Radio al-Huriya, April 19, 2020). According to the Palestinian media, 120,000 is the correct population count (al-Quds, November 12, 2019; al-Ayn, April 20, 2020).



**A tall building in Kafr 'Aqab  
(al-Jazeera in English, January 7, 2018)**

► According to data from the Jerusalem municipality, about **40,000 Kafr 'Aqab residents** with Israeli IDs **work in Israel, most of them entering and leaving Israel every day through the Qalandia Crossing.**<sup>3</sup> They work in both east and west Jerusalem, mostly in the service industry (as drivers, store clerks, hotel workers, cleaners, etc.). **Some of them work in the Palestinian job market, mostly in the Ramallah area.**

### **Extent of the COVID-19 infection**

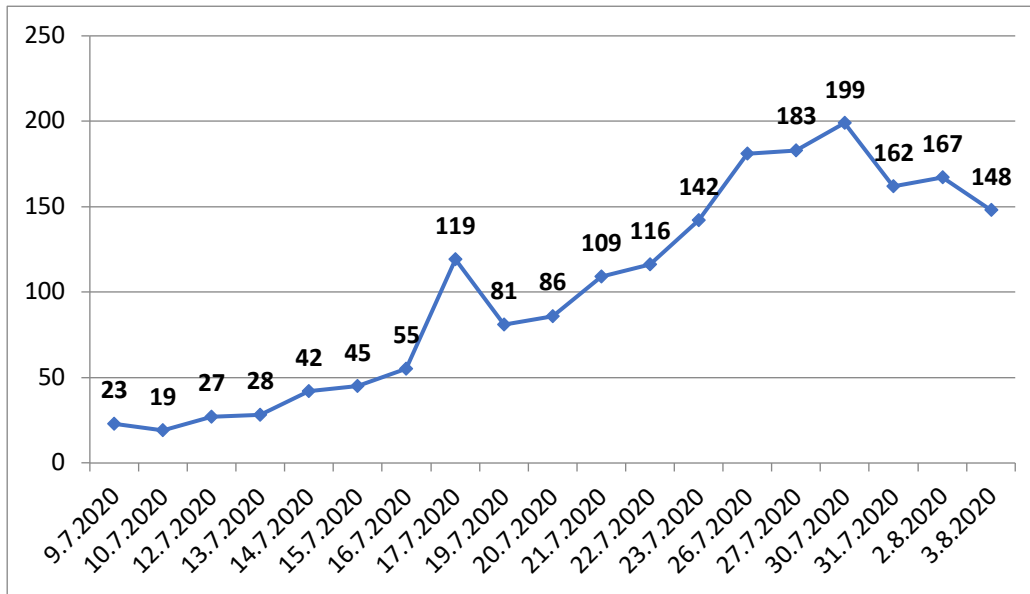
► During the second wave of COVID-19 infection in Israel and the PA, the number of active cases in Kafr 'Aqab spiked. **On July 9, 2020, the number of active cases stood at 23, and by July 30, 2020, it had risen to 199.** According to data from the Jerusalem municipality, at the beginning of August the number of active cases began to decline slightly (See the graph below). It is currently unclear if the decline indicates a trend or is temporary. Given the lack of an orderly, systematic testing and reporting system, **in all probability the real number of active cases is far higher than what has been reported by either the Jerusalem municipality or the Palestinian ministry of health.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to the study by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, about half of Kafr 'Aqab's residents are employed in the Israeli job market.

<sup>4</sup> For example, according to data from the Jerusalem municipality, on July 21, 2020, there were 109 active COVID-19 cases in Kafr 'Aqab. According to the Kafr 'Aqab municipality, on the same date there were 223 active cases (Kafr 'Aqab municipality Facebook page, July 21, 2020). Nir Hasson, Israeli newspaper Haaretz correspondent, spoke with Samih Abu Ramila, chairman of the emergency committee to fight COVID-19. Abu Ramila said he knew of at least 400 COVID-19 patients in Kafr 'Aqab, while the official number was 109 (Haaretz, July 22, 2020). On July 21, 2020, according to the Kafr 'Aqab municipality, the only source for the number of COVID-19 patients was the PA ministry of health (Kafr 'Aqab municipality Facebook page, July 21, 2020).

## Rise in the number of active COVID-19 cases in Kafr 'Aqab since July 9, 2020 (According to data from the Jerusalem municipality)



► The high rate of infection in Kafr 'Aqab **is part of the broader trend of a rise in the number of COVID-19 patients in the east Jerusalem neighborhoods** paralleling the spike in infection in the PA territories and in Israel during the second wave of the pandemic. According to reports from the PA the number of active cases in east Jerusalem **stands at 2,212**, and the **numbers continue trending upward**, as of August 2, 2020.<sup>5</sup> However, the data for Kafr 'Aqab are exceptional, and distinguish its potential for infection from the other east Jerusalem neighborhoods, as noted above.

### Local activity to combat the virus

**The Kafr 'Aqab local municipality** (which has close ties to the PA) is participating in the fight against COVID-19, as is the emergency committee to fight COVID-19, headed by Samih Abu Ramila. They are being given support by the **Fatah branch in Kafr 'Aqab** and members of **the Shuala al-Quds [the "Jerusalem flame"] scouts**. **Their activities are ineffective because of crowding, poor sanitation, lack of cooperation from the residents and the lack of means to enforce preventive measures** (See below)

<sup>5</sup> For further information, see the August 3, 2020 bulletin, "The Spread of COVID-19 in Judea, Samaria, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip."



**Samih Abu Ramila, chairman of the emergency committee to fight COVID-19 (Right: Raya FM Facebook page, May 24, 2020; Left: YouTube, April 15, 2020).**

### Instructions for the public and difficulties in enforcement

- ▶ During July 2020, at the height of the second wave of COVID-19, the Kafr 'Aqab municipality called on residents who had contracted the virus to fully and immediately self-isolate. They were also asked to tell the emergency committee about people with whom they had come in contact so they could also self-isolate and contain the spread of the disease. The municipality called on stores and businesses not to allow people to enter without masks and without having their temperature taken (Facebook page of the Kafr 'Aqab municipality, July 21, 2020).
- ▶ During the first wave of infection, **Nasser al-Shehab, secretary of the Fatah branch in Kafr 'Aqab**, reported that an emergency committee had been appointed by the municipality. The committee sent dozens of volunteers to limit movement, close stores and businesses and carry out disinfections. Steps were also taken to limit movement between Kafr 'Aqab and Jerusalem by setting up roadblocks manned by Fatah youth movement volunteers. During the current, second wave of infection the Fatah branch was again activated but it seems to be keeping a lower profile and to focus mainly on public service messages.
- ▶ The Fatah branch's main public messages were the following:
  - ◆ **On July 9, 2020** the Fatah branch called on owners of reception venues to close them **in accordance with the PA government decision**. It was noted that the Palestinian police had distributed announcements **ordering them to follow the government's orders** (Facebook page of the Fatah branch in Kafr 'Aqab, July 9, 2020).
  - ◆ **On July 18, 2020** the branch appealed to residents, **warning them not to ignore the orders**, and calling on them to observe social distancing and avoid gatherings, wear gloves and masks, to wash their hands frequently and be tested for COVID-19 if they detected symptoms. Owners of stores and businesses were asked to maintain the

social distancing between customers, ensure that customers and employees wear masks and gloves, and keep their places business clean and disinfected (Facebook page of the Fatah branch in Kafr 'Aqab and Samiramis, July 18, 2020).

► However, **in reality, local residents did not pay follow the instructions of the municipality, the emergency committee or the Fatah branch**, whether because of lack of awareness or lack of means of enforcement. The difficulties facing local actors in their fight against COVID-19 **were made evident** on the Facebook pages of the Kafr 'Aqab municipality and of Samih Abu Ramila (Facebook page of the Kafr 'Aqab municipality, July 21, 2020; Watan TV, June 25, 2020), who said the following:

- ◆ **The main reason for the spread of COVID-19 in Kafr 'Aqab is the residents' disregard for public health guidelines and the lack of enforcement mechanisms.** Residents do not practice social distancing, and they hold weddings and parties, and erect mourning tents.
- ◆ **As Eid al-Adha approached, owners of stores and businesses disregarded security orders.** Some of the people who were infected and were supposed to self-isolate at home were walking around the streets and going shopping for food in local grocery stores.
- ◆ **Weddings, social events and large gatherings in general continue routinely.** Samih Abu Ramila himself **saw a COVID-19 patient at a local wedding.**
- ◆ **There is no quarantine center in Kafr 'Aqab for people who have been infected, not on the Israeli side and not on the Palestinian side.** The Israeli ministry of health tells people to self-isolate at home, but **since there is no rule of law in Kafr 'Aqab**, people infected with COVID-19 do not treat the order seriously.



**Members of the local scouts disinfect the Kafr 'Aqab municipality  
(Facebook page of the local scouts, July 20, 2020)**

► **There is concern in the PA that the residents of Kafr 'Aqab who work or visit in the PA territories will import COVID-19 from Israel.** During the first wave of the disease the PA blocked the roads leading from Kafr 'Aqab to the PA territories because of the fear of the infection.<sup>6</sup> However, apparently because of the cessation of security cooperation with Israel, the PA's preventive measures in the second wave of COVID-19 are less effective, **while the level of infection in the villages around Jerusalem is high.**<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the article by Nadav Shragai, "Even in the days of COVID-19, the Arab neighborhoods on the other side of the fence in Jerusalem remain a no man's land," (Hebrew), March 26, 2020, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

<sup>7</sup> For further information, see the July 27 and August 3, 2020 bulletins regarding the spread of COVID-19 in the PA territories.