

The labor market and East Jerusalem Arabs in the shadow of the Iron Swords War: Current status and policy recommendations

Dr. Amnon Ramon, Dr. Marik Stern

November 2nd, 2023

| Background

Three weeks after the outbreak of the Swords of Iron War, it appears that East Jerusalem is relatively calm compared to the other fronts in the south, the north and the West Bank. This picture, however, conceals serious problems brewing below the surface. On Tuesday, October 31, 2023, the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research in collaboration with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom held a meeting on economic and employment issues in East Jerusalem in these times of war and state of emergency.

Several central problems that considerably affect the rights of East Jerusalem employees arose; these include the security crossings, arrival at work, personal safety and the daily work routine of employees, especially those who work in the western part of the city. These problems harm both the earning ability of many East Jerusalem families in this state of emergency and the ability of workplaces in the western part of the city to function. Furthermore, an ongoing state of unemployment and subemployment in East Jerusalem is anticipated to cause social and political unrest over time, which may be manifested in an outbreak of violence and terror.

| Summary of the main recommendations

1. Security crossings

The issue of security crossings is still far from resolution and makes entry of employees with Israeli residency (blue ID cards) to reach their place of work very difficult. Long lines form each morning at the entrance to the Qalandia crossing, with a wait that could be two to three hours or even longer. Similar problems are found at the Shuafat refugee camp crossing, where only one or sometime two lanes are opened for vehicles. The estimate is that 10,000-15,000 Arab employees living in neighborhoods outside the separation fence have not been going to work or have been arriving late.

We recommend opening additional routes and allocating resources that would allow more expeditious movement, whenever that is possible. Moreover, we recommend considering establishment of a special team with representatives from all security and civil bodies involved in operation of the crossings; the team members would work together to markedly ease the Qalandia and Shuafat refugee camp crossings. It is imperative that closing and opening of the crossings takes place formally, transparently and reliably for East Jerusalem residents by the different authorities, perhaps using a dedicated app.

2. Personal safety

Safeguarding the sense of security of East Jerusalem residents and retaining their ability to arrive at work and return home safely – is a necessary condition for maintaining calm at the security level and economic life in the city. This understanding must guide police activity in this state of emergency as well. Consideration should be given to running a “smart” public campaign addressing this sensitive matter and emphasizing the role of East Jerusalemites in critical areas such as the health system and the hospitals in the western part of the city. We also suggest finding ways to guarantee that workers from East Jerusalem could get to their workplaces in the western part of the city regularly, especially essential workers. Consideration should also be given to possibility of implementing measures similar to those taken at Shaare Zedek hospital (issuing special authorizations, sleeping arrangements for employees, and others).

3. Public transportation

Operation of public transportation in East Jerusalem during the state of emergency period is particularly important as well, to allow access to work and school. Greater involvement is warranted by representatives of the transportation master plan and the Ministry of Transportation in the state of affairs of East Jerusalem public transportation and for their ability to influence bus companies to provide better service. In the longer term, consideration should be given to changing the means of subsidy for some East Jerusalem bus companies and guaranteeing higher frequency of buses, including in the afternoon and evening hours, to assure that employees could return home via public transportation at the end of the work day.

4. Employee rights and utilization of rights

To guarantee the rights of employees, the Israeli Employment Service, the National Insurance Institute and the Population and Immigration Authority must continue to act in East Jerusalem during this state of emergency by providing digital services alongside in-person service. We also recommend operating

a hotline in Arabic to assist employees and to advise them on their rights and benefits. Such initiatives are already being implemented in civilian social organizations; public institutions should learn from their experience.

5. Moderating tensions in the workplace

What also emerged from the meeting was that at the larger places of work, a conscious effort is being made to reduce tensions in different ways, sometimes using methods developed by external establishments such as the Accord Center at the Hebrew University. We suggest that these be adopted in small and midsize organizations as well. We also recommend holding a large meeting on tension management in a mixed workspace for Jerusalem employers. The central message must be emphasis on the centrality of East Jerusalem employees in the labor market and their significant contribution to the overall municipal economy.