

Bias in the World Health Organization

by Michael Curtis



The question of the origin of the coronavirus remains open. It is still an open question whether to believe the natural origin theory that COVID-19 jumped from animals to humans, and spread without involvement of any scientists or laboratories, or whether it resulted from a leak or accident in the Chinese Wuhan Institute of Virology. The WHO, the World Health Organization, the specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for international world health, has been slow to act, and immediately concluded that the lab-leak theory was extremely unlikely. Its primary statement on March 30, 2021 appears to be that it is “likely to very likely that COVID-19 made it to humans through an intermediate host.” In this uncertain situation, the Biden administration on May 26, 2021

was obliged to order an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 after the State Department unit examining the issue had been closed down. Certainly, a full investigation into the origin of the COVID-19 is essential, if only to prevent a further virus.

On its non-decision, as on other matters, the role of the WHO, whose stated objective is the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health, has been challenged especially by the U.S. The WHO has played an important role in public health issues, including the eradication of smallpox, the virtual elimination of polio, the development of an Ebola vaccine, and research on HIV/AIDS. But it has been blamed for inadequate handling of the current pandemic, for not sounding the alarm when the virus appeared or not acting quickly to deal with it, and with being compliant to China, covering up the threat that all agreed had originated in China, thus causing countless loss of life and great economic hardship.

The Trump administration maintained that the WHO had mismanaged its response to the pandemic crisis, and expressed strong concern that the WHO had aided China in covering up the virus, as well as not making necessary reforms. Consequently, Trump in April 2020 announced that the U.S. would stop funding the organization, and in May 2020 declared the U.S. would terminate its relationship with it. In July 2020 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo notified the UN Secretary General of the U.S. decision to withdraw from the organization, an action that would take effect on July 6, 2021.

However, President Joe Biden on January 20, 2021, announced that the U.S. was retracting the declared intention made on July 6, 2020 to withdraw from WHO, and that it would rejoin the WHO, fulfill all financial obligations to it. Later, he stated that Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases would represent the country to it. Biden has, controversially, approved the temporary waiver of U.S. intellectual property protections in order to

fight COVID-19. Biden remarked that the U.S. will continue to be a full participant and a global leader in confronting threat to global health. But it remains to be seen whether Biden will act to try to end the inappropriate politicization of the WHO by Arabs and Palestinians in their conflict with Israel.

Whatever the intentions and motivations of WHO, one might conclude that it misled the world over the outbreak of COVID-19, its severity, and the measures needed to control it. It appeared to accept China's claim at first that the virus was not serious, and was not spreading. Because of the resulting deaths and economic damage because of this non-action, it is possible that the actions or non-actions of WHO can be legally regarded as constituting crimes against humanity.

The U.S. had played an important role in the establishment of the WHO on April 7, 1948, and since then has provided both assessed and voluntary contributions to it, being assessed 22% of the core budget, an estimated \$120 million in 2020, and an average of \$262 million a year in voluntary funding. The U.S. Congress in 1948 had asserted the right of the U.S. to withdraw from the WHO giving one year's notice, but it is legally uncertain whether the president has the authority to withdraw without Congressional approval. Politically, Congress has been divided on the proposals to halt the funding and withdrawal from WHO.

The WHO, composed of representatives from the 194 member states, has a broad mandate including promoting human health, collecting data on global health issues, and providing technical assistance to countries. The WHO is a much needed organization, officially concerned to improve the health of the world. It is shameful that its effectiveness has been undermined and distorted, politicized, by political activists, mainly the Arab Group of States and the Palestinian Authority.

Like some other UN agencies, such as UNHRC, the WHO has been

misused to be continually and particularly critical of the State of Israel. Yet again, this organization illustrates the double standards in UN bodies which single out Israel for condemnation while ignoring or absolving other countries for actions in areas under their control. There are always a considerable number of internal and external questions on the WHO agenda, but condemnation of Israel for alleged ill treatment of Palestinians invariably has priority.

A few of the occasions where the animus against Israel has been exhibited may be mentioned. In May 2016 at the WHO's World Assembly meeting, Israel was selected as the sole abuser of human rights. Unmentioned were significant issues such as the chemical and gas attacks used since 2012 by Syria against its own citizens in Ltamenah, Douma, and the outskirts of Damascus, or the Hamas rocket launchers that killed Palestinian civilians.

In May 2019 the 72nd Assembly of WHO passed a resolution, by vote of 96-11, with 21 abstentions and 56 absent, on the poor health conditions in the "occupied Palestinian territory including East Jerusalem and occupied Syria Golan," accusing Israel of perpetrating the health crisis in Palestinian Arab territories. The resolution co-sponsored by the Arab bloc and the Palestinian delegation, singled out criticism of Israel as the unique violator of health rights in the occupied Palestinian territory and Golan. Only one of the 21 items in the WHO agenda focused on a single country, Israel, though there is a health crisis in many countries. In this there is a double irony: there is ample evidence that Israel hospitals have been caring for Syrians who fled to Israel territory to escape the brutality of the Assad regime ; they have also been caring for Palestinian Arabs including Mahmoud Abbas, head of the Palestinian Authority, and Jibril Rajoub, a major figure in the Fatah party who was treated in a Tel Aviv hospital in May 2019, in spite of his expressed support for terrorist attacks and violence against Jews.

Another vote in WHO on May 26, 2021 adopted a resolution calling for non-discriminatory, affordable and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for Palestinians in the disputed territories and Syrians in the Golan heights. The resolution, obliquely referring to the 11 day war in 2021 started by Hamas, though irrelevant to the virus, also called for analysis of the "psychiatric morbidity and other forms of mental health problems resulting from protracted aerial and other forms of (Israeli) bombing among the population. Though the proponents of the resolution may not have extraterrestrial powers about future Israeli actions, they required WHO to hold the same debate on Israel at next year's assembly.

Those supporting the resolution included not only the usual suspects, Cuba, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, China and Russia, but also France, Spain, Switzerland, Japan, and India, and the three countries, UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco, that recently normalized relations with Israel. Countries opposed included Australia, Czech Republic, Germany, Canada, and Hungary as well as the U.S., the UK and Israel.

The resolution of May 26 passed by vote of 82 to 14, with 40 abstentions and 38 absent. Again, there was no resolution on any other country other than Israel, or on any conflict.

Ironically, though the Palestinians have their own health system, Israel, at last count, has vaccinated more than 100,000 Palestinians, and provided them with thousands of vaccine doses. The draft resolution on May 25, 2021, before the final version, called for the WHO to deal with structural problems emanating from "the prolonged occupation in the protected occupied population in the Palestinian territories in East Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan."

Noticeably, the WHO has three offices for the West Bank and Gaza established in 1994 which support the Palestinian Ministry of Health and partners in improving the health and well being of Palestinians. The enhancement of health services by the WHO is a welcome endeavor to be admired. Yet

reservations remain about it when it states that its role as a leading health agency is in the "context of a chronic occupation and increasingly precarious humanitarian crisis." This does not appear to be helpful in its approach in addressing "social determinants of health", let alone for the tortuous path for peace in the Middle East. The U.S. administration should take note.