



IN FOCUS: THE EFFECTS OF ISRAEL'S TIGHTENED BLOCKADE ON THE ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS IN THE GAZA STRIP

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AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



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Al Mezan Center for Human Rights is an independent, non-partisan and non-governmental human rights organization established in 1999. Al Mezan is dedicated to protecting and advancing the respect of human rights, with a focus on economic, social, and cultural rights, supporting victims of violations of international law through legal initiatives, and enhancing democracy, community and citizen participation, and respect for the rule of law in Gaza as part of occupied Palestine.

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Background

Prior to the start of the 11-day escalation in hostilities in May 2021, over 2 million Palestinians in Gaza were already under the Israeli government's land, sea, and air blockade—a comprehensive closure amounting to a 14-year unlawful collective punishment under international law. The closure, rooted in severe restrictions on the freedom of movement of both people and goods, undermines all aspects of life in Gaza and results in a protracted humanitarian catastrophe. Through the policy, residents of Gaza are denied the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms and forced into profound levels of poverty, aid dependency, food insecurity, and unemployment. The construction, industrial and agricultural sectors are dramatically undermined and essential services, including education, health, WASH, environmental and electricity services, are collapsing. The energy sector has been the most affected as a result of Israel's systematic targeting of electricity networks and the protracted and repeated ban on the entry of fuel, with devastating effects on the implementation of all related services and activities in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli authorities have full control over all crossings between Gaza and Israel and restrict access of Gaza residents to the rest of the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), including East Jerusalem. The Israeli-controlled commercial crossing is Kerem Shalom, which is used for the entry of goods necessary for the well-being and survival of Gaza's population—including food, medicine and fuel—as well as basic materials needed for industrial businesses and factories, agriculture and fishing, and infrastructure and construction projects. However, as Israel maintains full control and discretion over all goods and people coming into Gaza, many materials—even essential ones—cannot enter the Strip because of Israel's claim that they have dual civilian-military usage. The commercial crossing is also used for Gaza's exports, especially of agricultural products, which are also highly restricted.



During the 11-day bombardment, the Israeli authorities completely closed the Kerem Shalom crossing, thus preventing the entry and exit of goods to the Strip until a ceasefire agreement came into effect on 21 May 2021, when the crossing was partially reopened. These measures seriously hampered the work of the industrial facilities in the Gaza Strip, left thousands of workers unemployed, and led to a substantial rise in the price of raw materials. These actions, as well as the other measures and policies that make up the Israeli closure regime, constitute an unlawful collective punishment of the protected Palestinian population that cannot be justified under any circumstances and amount to the crimes against humanity of persecution and other inhumane acts.

At the same time, the occupying power's military attacks concentrated on civilians and civilian properties. Not just homes and persons, but also factories, industries, businesses, shops and farmlands, which, being civilian objects, are afforded protection against direct attack and excessive collateral damage under international humanitarian law, with violation of this principle rendering the attacks war crimes and likely crimes against humanity. In particular, according to Al Mezan's documentation and field research, Israeli attacks during the 11-day offensive damaged more than 200 industrial and commercial facilities in Gaza. In addition to the regular shortages in materials and goods that residents of Gaza face, the vast destruction from those 11 days brought new shortages and needs for the population.

Both during and following the bombardment, the Israeli government increased restrictions and bans on necessary products, goods and materials and on exports. The everyday challenges that all members of the population face are therefore vast and increasing. This short briefing is intended only to give a snapshot of the impact of the current and recent escalation in closure restrictions.



Imports

The statistics on imports through the Kerem Shalom crossing prior to the 11-day aggression show that more than 650 trucks entered the Strip every day, whereas since the end of the aggression to date, the number has not exceeded 130 trucks per day. The permitted imports are only those containing food, medicines, and fuel for UNRWA and the private sector. Israel still prohibits the entry of fuel otherwise, construction materials, furniture, textiles and raw materials. Before the implementation of these tightened closure measures, 45% of Kerem Shalom's imports were construction materials, 7% raw materials, 27% food, medicine, feed and fruits, whereas the remaining percentage included furniture, textile and agricultural chemical materials.¹ As for machinery and equipment, their import already required a prior permit that could take several months to be approved by Israeli authorities.

Due to the closure of crossings and the ban on the entry of construction materials, thousands of families who lost their homes to Israeli bombardment are now housed in temporary rental housing or with their relatives.² Similarly, the lack of raw materials has also had negative effects on factory owners in the Gaza Strip. The following is a testimony from the owner of a sponge factory:

The ban on the entry of raw materials to the Gaza Strip has resulted in heavy losses and has delayed delivery dates to customers. We had to temporarily close the factory until the entry of materials, laying off 35 employees. Our suffering is not only limited to the crossing closure, but also to the congestion of goods in Israeli ports, on which the Israeli authorities impose fees, causing us considerable losses. We could completely lose our business if goods do not enter.

¹ Mohammed Khalil Siksik, Director of the Palestinian Trade Center (PalTrade) in Gaza, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher on 13 June 2021.

² According to the OCHA, around 8,500 people were forcibly displaced during the last Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip: www.ochaopt.org/response-escalation-opt-situation-report-no-3-4-10-june-2021



At the same time, the cost of most commodities has risen significantly due to the tightened closure, with the prices of clothes, furniture, wood and construction, cleaning and agricultural materials rising. Even life's simple joys around marriage and family are impacted—happiness that is often overlooked for a population under immense physical insecurity and conflict, but which is no-less important for residents of Gaza. The following is a testimony from a groom who delayed his wedding until home furnishings become affordable:

Following the recent Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip, I went to furniture stores to buy bedroom furnishings as my wedding was scheduled for mid-June; however, the insanely high price of furniture, reaching \$1,000, pushed me to delay my wedding until the entry of materials.

Israel's increased restrictions extend to postal services and the education sector, with the entry of books, stationery and other related materials also banned, at the same time that high school students are gearing up to take their final exams on 24 June 2021.³ The postal service has been halted due to the closure of Erez, the mostly pedestrian crossing, which impacts in particular patients whose passports are in Ramallah and who are therefore unable to go abroad for medical treatments unavailable in Gaza, while at the same time being denied access to hospitals in Israel and the West Bank. Not only has the disruption of postal services undermined patients' right to health, but also people's right to work and education, as many Gazans studying or working outside the Gaza Strip have been affected by the delay of their documents and passports, which are issued by the Ministry of Interior in Ramallah or embassies in Jerusalem. The director of the Palestinian Society of Tourism and Travel

³ Dr. Samir Abu Mudalla, Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Administrative Science in al-Azhar University.



Agents in Gaza noted that more than 6,000 passports are stuck because of the closure of Erez crossing.⁴

As for the energy sector, the shortage of fuel supplies has affected all aspects of life in Gaza and hindered the supply of power to the population, forcing the Strip's sole power plant to provide only six hours of electricity at a time, followed by 12 hours of power outage. The energy deficit has hampered the work of hospitals and medical centers, the supply of municipal water and the ability to treat wastewater. In addition, the energy crisis undermines the economic sector and has led to a greater stagnation in trade movements and a deterioration in the work of the economic facilities.

The agricultural sector has also suffered the negative effects of the crisis. Palestinian farmers in the Gaza Strip have endured considerable losses since most of their work depends on the supply of energy that is used to run water wells, sanitize plants and animal farms, and keep products refrigerated.

Exports

Despite partially re-opening the Kerem Shalom crossing almost a month ago, the Israeli authorities continue to ban exports from the Strip, impacting in particular Palestinian traders that sell to markets outside Gaza. Ninety percent of Gaza's exports are agricultural products, while the remaining 10% are furniture and clothes. Approximately 70% of all exports are destined for markets in the West Bank, while the rest are exported to countries in the Middle East and Europe. The value of exports from the Gaza Strip to external markets is estimated at between two to five million dollars per month.⁵

⁴ Statement published in Palsawa news agency: <https://palsawa.com/post/306888> (in Arabic).

⁵ Mohammed Khalil Siksik, Director of the Palestinian Trade Center (PalTrade) in Gaza, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher on 13 June 2021.



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The ban on exports means that agricultural products must be sold in the Gaza Strip instead, at lower prices as products flood the market. This testimony from Farhan Mohammed Bashir, 54, a Palestinian working in the export of agricultural products, reflects the impact that Israel's tightened closure measures are having on his work:

I work with my sons in the field of agriculture and the export of vegetables and fruits to the West Bank. In recent years, with the severe restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip since 2007, we faced difficulties in the export of our products to the West Bank and Israel, and the situation became worse after the recent Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip. Since Israel is still closing its commercial crossings, I cannot export any of my products outside the Gaza Strip. I've lost around \$200,000 and I laid off my employees. I cannot fulfill my financial obligations to traders and landowners from whom I buy crops. I had to sell the products in the local markets, which led to a significant increase in the supply and a significant decrease in product prices, causing me to incur substantial losses.

During its latest offensive on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military also targeted Palestinian farmlands and agricultural facilities, inducing heavy losses to Palestinian farmers, including of livestock and fish. Farmers and breeders could not reach their farms during the entire duration of the aggression, leading to the deterioration of a significant amount of crops and the death of animals.

According to information obtained by Al Mezan from the Palestinian Ministry of Agriculture, some 36,000 donums of agricultural land and greenhouses were damaged during the aggression. Meanwhile, dozens of poultry, animal and fish farms were impacted. The Ministry estimates the value of direct and indirect losses in the agricultural sector to be more than \$200 million.



Conclusion

The scenario described above shows how the economic and humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip continue to deteriorate due to the severe and systematic violation of Palestinians' rights through the occupying power's tightened closure measures. According to official statistics, the unemployment rate among the labor force has reached 48% and the poverty rate has reached 53%. Meanwhile, the rate of food insecurity has reached 68.2%, while the rate of households receiving aid is 70% of the total households in the Gaza Strip.

These are appalling statistics that are derived from humanmade, orchestrated policies and conditions meant to cause harm to Gaza's population. The humanitarian repercussions of Israel's ongoing closure, tightened restrictions and disruption of postal services are severe and inhumane. It is important to note that these conditions could reignite the conflict should they not be rapidly improved, fundamentally by immediately and unconditionally lifting the unlawful closure. Accordingly, Al Mezan calls on the international community to promptly intervene to stop the occupying power's escalation of these measures and take the appropriate steps to ensure Israel lifts the closure and ends its collective punishment of more than two million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.