



**IN FOCUS:**  
THE EFFECTS OF  
ISRAEL'S OFFENSIVE  
AND TIGHTENED  
BLOCKADE ON  
GAZA'S PATIENTS  
AND HEALTHCARE  
SYSTEM

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مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان  
AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



In focus: The effects of Israel's offensive and tightened blockade on Gaza's patients and healthcare system – May 2021

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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## Introduction

May 2021 was one of the grimmest months in recent years for more than two million Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip. Between 10-21 May 2021, Gaza endured Israel's fifth large-scale military operation in the Strip since 2008. Over the 11 days, 261 Palestinians in Gaza were killed (153 men, 41 women and 67 children), of whom at least 176 were civilian, while another 1,981 suffered moderate to serious injuries (939 men, 399 women and 643 children). During and after the offensive, Israel tightened its land, sea and air blockade on Gaza and closed the Israeli-controlled crossings, before imposing additional restrictions on the entry and exit of people and goods (including fuel, food, medicine, and other humanitarian supplies) under its comprehensive closure policy.

The tightening of Israel's unlawful closure—which is a retaliatory policy resulting in 14 years of unlawful collective punishment according to international law—served to further compound the ongoing humanitarian suffering of more than two million people, and in particular impacted the lives of hundreds of Palestinian patients needing medical care outside Gaza. Indeed, the deteriorating conditions of Gaza's healthcare system, perpetually on the brink of collapse due to Israel's closure policies and repeated military attacks, forces cancer and critically-ill patients to leave the Strip for specialized surgeries, diagnostic imaging, and other medical treatments that are unavailable in Gaza.

## Healthcare access for Gaza's patients in May 2021

In May 2021, Israel's military offensive and heightened closure measures, along with its capricious and discriminatory permit regime, severely hindered the access of hundreds of Palestinian patients to necessary healthcare outside the Gaza Strip. This, along with the fact that the supply of essential medicines in Gaza was critically low or out-of-stock, meant that patients were subjected to additional suffering and faced a compounded threat to their lives.



Ritta Hassan Al-Jalees, a 30-year-old woman from Gaza, reported to Al Mezan that time is running out for her two sons, Mohammed, 11, and Fares, 5, who suffer from Cystic Fibrosis. Her eldest son, Abdullah, died at age 12 from the same disease. In early June, Al-Jalees spoke to Al Mezan about the tremendous pressure she and her sons endure while waiting for the Israeli authorities to issue the permits allowing them to leave Gaza to access urgently needed medical care in the West Bank:

After I was able to secure medical referrals for my sons, I applied for exit-permits, but the Israeli Coordination and Liaison Administration to the Gaza Strip informed us that I needed to reschedule the hospital appointments because the timeframe between the permit application and the initial hospital appointment was too short. So, we got another appointment scheduled for 16 May 2021, but we could not leave Gaza because Israel completely closed Erez crossing during its military offensive on the Strip. We got a new appointment for 10 June 2021 at the Hclinic Specialist Hospital in Ramallah. It's 12 June now, and we have yet to receive a response from the Israeli authorities regarding our permit application. We are exhausted and scared, to say the least. I live in constant fear of losing another child. My son Mohammed is developing symptoms, like vomiting blood and rectal bleeding, but the hospital here only puts him on painkillers and antibiotics. My sons need urgent diagnostic tests and surgery to save their lives.

The situation of Al-Jalees and her family is similar to that of hundreds of families throughout the Gaza Strip, where the policies and practices of the Israeli authorities—including the excessive delay in processing applications for exit permits and the shutdown of crossing operations—unnecessarily risks the lives of vulnerable Palestinians.



Between 1-10 May 2021, Israel granted permission to leave Gaza to 22 patients in need of life-saving treatment (transported via ambulances) and another 252 patients for treatment in hospital. When Israel launched its offensive against Gaza on the evening of 10 May, its authorities suspended all crossing operations at Erez and Kerem Shalom. Accordingly, between 11-23 May 2021, in parallel with the ongoing offensive, Israeli authorities completely closed Erez, thus blocking the passage of Palestinian patients, including injured people, preventing them from accessing urgently needed medical care. Between 24-31 May 2021, due to the continued tightening of closure measures, the Israeli authorities continued to deny all but 20 patients (of whom 19 needed life-saving treatment) entry to hospitals in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Israel.

Al Mezan's documentation shows that in May 2021, four Palestinian patients, including two children, died after Israeli authorities obstructed their access to health care outside Gaza:

Israeli authorities refused to grant 15-year-old Amr Fakher Al-Kurd an exit-permit to travel through Erez Crossing to Al-Ahli Specialized Hospital in Hebron. Al-Kurd suffered from a brain disease that needed to be diagnosed and treated outside Gaza, but his permit application was consistently rejected. Deprived of urgent medical treatment, Al-Kurd's health deteriorated and he passed away on 19 May 2021.

In a similar case, Hasan Ahmed Al-Kharti, 62, died on 30 May 2021, following a missed appointment at Al-Makassed Hospital, Jerusalem, upon the rejection of his permit application. Al-Kharti suffered from tumors of the tongue and jaw.

On 13 May 2021, Aisha Hasan Abu Jazar, a one-year-old infant, passed away after being unable to attend her appointment for follow-up treatment at Wolfson



Medical Center in Holon, Israel, where she had undergone surgery six months earlier.

As reported above, the passage of Palestinian patients through Erez crossing remained largely blocked even after Israel's military offensive ceased. Among the patients who were not allowed to leave Gaza was Mohammed Abdelrauf Al-Mabhohuh. After missing an appointment at Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem on 25 May 2021, he traveled to Egypt on 30 May 2021 to seek medical treatment unavailable in Gaza. The doctors who handled Al-Mabhohuh's case said that his condition had already deteriorated drastically and led to his death on 11 June 2021 at the age of 64.

For many Palestinians patients who are stranded in the blockaded Gaza Strip, feelings of uncertainty and helplessness are a constant reality, that are now worsening with the current, widespread shortages of critical chemotherapy drugs. Thaher Shehada Al-Abwini, a 58-year-old former nurse at an UNRWA clinic, spoke to Al Mezan about his unsuccessful attempts to receive medical treatment at Al-Rahma Hospital, Nablus, since being diagnosed with cancer four months ago:

My first permit application to the Israeli Coordination and Liaison Administration to the Gaza Strip was rejected, so I reapplied four times, but to no avail. Every time I applied, I had to secure a hospital appointment. Part of my treatment regimen involves taking one dose of medication two weeks before my hospital appointment. I have done this four times. Each time I really hoped I would be able to leave Gaza... During the Israeli offensive, I felt extremely distressed because I was informed of a severe shortage of cancer treatment drugs. Meanwhile, my health steadily worsens. I take Carbamazepine along with three other drugs. When the hospital ran out of it, as my doctor said, I had to buy it at my own expense. It cost me 270 ILS (ca. 83 USD). My medical referral to the



hospital expired while I was waiting, so now I have to apply for another one along with a request for financial coverage. I do not understand why Israel insists on punishing cancer patients this way. What have we done to deserve this? I desperately need to go to Al-Rahma Hospital for the diagnostic tests that will detect cancerous cells in my body. Due to Israel's repeated rejection of my permit application, I had to seek help from Al Mezan's legal unit. It was then that the Israeli Coordination and Liaison Administration to the Gaza Strip informed me that I needed to go through a security interview as a precondition for leaving Gaza through Erez.

### **The impact of Israel's military offensive on Gaza's healthcare system**

Israel's latest military offensive inflicted serious damage on Gaza's healthcare system. According to information collected by Al Mezan, Israeli aerial attacks—both direct and indirect—led to the partial destruction of 84 healthcare and medical facilities, including hospitals, medical centers, pharmacies, testing laboratories, and private clinics.<sup>1</sup> Many of the affected facilities were government institutions (including, among others, five hospitals and six medical centers), while other facilities included the Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Rehabilitation and Prosthetics Hospital, Palestine Red Crescent Society, Kuwait Obstetrical and Pediatric Hospital, Haidar Abdel-Shafi Medical Center, and Patient's Friends Society. For instance, an Israeli airstrike partially destroyed Al-Rimal clinic—Gaza's only laboratory for processing COVID-19 tests—and the administrative building of the Ministry of Health in Gaza. The attack inflicted injuries on medical personnel and rendered the lab inoperable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ashraf al-Qedra, Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza, interviewed by Al Mezan on 9 June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, 'Under Heavy Attacks and Tightened Blockade, Gaza Health Services at Risk of Collapse', 19 May 2021, available at: <http://mezan.org/en/post/23989>



Further, the deliberate destruction of vital paved roads—a recurrent practice by the Israeli military throughout its offensives—placed substantial barriers on the movement of ambulances in the affected areas and seriously imperiled the lives of both paramedics and injured persons. Some health facilities, such as Hala AlShawa Medical, which provides obstetric care and chronic disease treatment, completely shut down during the offensive.<sup>3</sup>

In May 2021, according to the General Directorate of Pharmacy of Ministry of Health in Gaza, 40% of essential drugs (206 items) were at 'zero stock', meaning with less than one month's supply available. The shortages were particularly acute in the following medical services: emergency and intensive care, primary healthcare, cancer treatment, mental and neurological care, epidemiology and infection control, and hereditary disease treatment. Similarly, 33% of medical disposables (278 items) were out of stock in emergency and operation services, including cardiac catheterization and open-heart surgeries, orthopedics, hemodialysis, and ophthalmology.

Additionally, 34 drugs used in the treatment of cancer and blood disorder were at zero stock, while the supply of another 12 drugs was running low, with an estimated supply sufficient to last one to three months. This means that the overall shortage of oncology drug stood at 72 percent. This is directly affecting the regimens needed to treat hundreds of cancer patients in Gaza, especially as the Israeli authorities continue to obstruct their access to hospitals and treatment facilities in Israel and the West Bank.

The Israeli authorities heightened closure measures, in particular the ban on the entry of essential medical supplies, medical equipment and fuel, took a heavy toll on Gaza's healthcare system, that was already perpetually on the brink of collapse

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<sup>3</sup> Palestinian Ministry of Health, press release on the effects of Israel's military offensive on medical facilities in Gaza, 23 May 2021, available at: <https://cutt.us/jCvn1> (Arabic only)





due to Israel's comprehensive closure and repeated military attacks over the span of more than a decade.

For example, the Ministry of Health in Gaza has been unable to repair 350 medical devices due to the tightened Israeli closure measures restricting the import of spare parts into the Gaza Strip. Due to the ban on fuel, Gaza's perpetual electricity crisis worsened in May, endangering patients' lives as hospitals and healthcare facilities struggled to keep equipment and devices needed to provide medical services running.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusions

Al Mezan reiterates its condemnation of the unnecessary, inhumane and discriminatory permit regime established by Israel, the occupying power, which imposes unlawful preconditions on urgent and lifesaving treatment for Palestinian patients residing in Gaza and violates the rights to freedom of movement, health, to live free from torture and ill-treatment, and in the most serious cases, the right to life. Israel's tightened closure measures are punitive, retaliatory and target Gaza's patients, one of the most vulnerable populations in Gaza. The measures also exacerbate Gaza's chronic humanitarian crisis.

Al Mezan calls for international intervention to fully and immediately end Israel's unlawful closure and blockade as a matter of priority. These punitive and unlawful policies must not be tolerated either in part or in full any longer; it is critical that the international community exert pressure on Israel to comply with its legal obligations as an occupying power vis-à-vis the occupied Palestinian people, notably pertaining to access to adequate and prompt healthcare and supplies.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ashraf al-Qedra, Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza, interviewed by Al Mezan on 8 June 2021.