

## Gaza 2015: A few steps forward and several steps back

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### Summary

Following the 2014 military operation, Protective Edge, which caused unprecedented death and destruction in the Gaza Strip, senior Israeli officials changed their rhetoric on Gaza. From the minister of defense to the chief of staff, political leaders and security officials [talked](#) about the importance of reconstruction and the connection between the state of affairs in Gaza, Israel's security and regional stability. In public statements, policy-makers have nimbly questioned whether pressure applied to Gaza over the years was a mistake and some have even supported ostensibly far-reaching measures like allowing a seaport to operate in the Strip.

The change in rhetoric has been accompanied by a handful of measures meant to ease the closure, some of them symbolically significant compared to previous years. Some changes in policy on access for movement of people led to a 128% increase in exit of Palestinians via Erez Crossing compared to 2014, and a 200% increase compared to 2013. Israel's policy on entry and exit of goods also changed. In late 2014, the seven-year blanket ban on the sale of Gaza-produced goods in the West Bank was partially lifted, followed by permission for very limited sales in Israel in early 2015. As a result, the average number of trucks departing Gaza every month rose from 19 in 2014 to 113 in 2015.

In terms of entrance of goods, a change came in Israel's policy with the establishment of the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM) in collaboration with the UN and the Palestinian Authority. As part of the GRM, Israel agreed to allow otherwise blocked, basic construction materials to enter Gaza, in return for strict control over their end-use and tracking of the identity of buyers and distributors inside the Strip. In 2015, about three million tons of basic construction materials (cement, gravel and steel) entered Gaza from Israel, compared to 300,000 tons in 2014 and 800,000 tons in 2013. In fact, more construction materials entered Gaza from Israel in 2015 than in the early months of 2007, before the imposition of the closure.

These changes might seem to have heralded the beginning of a new era in Israel's policy toward the Gaza Strip, a shift many in Israel, Palestine and the international community have long called for. However, the changes have come slowly, painfully and fail to meet Gaza's urgent and extensive needs, not to mention Israel's obligations to residents of the Strip. The military operation in 2014 left Gaza in ruins – more than 17,000 homes<sup>1</sup> were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. Yet, in 2015, most of the construction materials that entered Gaza were designated for repairs to homes that were lightly damaged and for construction projects that began before the operation. Construction of new homes is only just beginning to advance slowly a year and a half later.

The lifting of the blanket ban on sale of goods from Gaza in the West Bank and Israel, which could have made an impact towards restoring and stabilizing Gaza's economy, has remained marred by a slew of restrictions that harm competitive advantage and keep risk high. Changes in policy on movement of people through Erez are also

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<sup>1</sup> According to [recent estimates](#) by the Shelter Cluster, more than 17,000 Gaza housing units were completely destroyed or seriously damaged during Operation Protective Edge. Previously, the estimate was slightly higher at over 19,000.

far from meeting the needs of Gaza's residents, especially given the fact that Rafah Crossing into Egypt remained closed for all but 32 days last year. In the past, some 40,000 entries and exits through Rafah Crossing were recorded **every month**. In 2015, throughout the entire year, **a total of 14,458 exits** were recorded at Rafah, or in other words, less than the monthly average of prior years.

Moreover, more than half of the exits recorded at Erez were those of traders with longer-term permits who exit and enter Gaza several times a month, thus providing the semblance of a significant increase while it remains true that the vast majority of residents of Gaza do not qualify for permits and have no way of traveling.

Despite both urgent needs and a broad consensus on the necessity of easing access restrictions, in some cases, Israel's actions in 2015 made matters worse. In recent months, traders reported increasing difficulties in travel via Erez. Permit holders were called for interrogations and sometimes denied exit and sent back to Gaza. The criteria for exit for medical patients and their companions were also narrowed. In addition, inputs for industry remained blocked. For example, while Israel ostensibly allows Gaza-made furniture to be sold in its territory, the ban on the entrance of wood planks more than one-centimeter-thick and five-centimeters-wide into Gaza has all but wiped out what was left of Gaza's furniture industry.

Figures and statistics alone can't present the full picture and context for the situation on the ground is sorely needed. While Israeli officials tout the increase in the number of exits through Erez, the majority of Gaza residents, whose median age is lower than 18, know they will not be able to travel for academic studies, work, professional training, or reuniting with family. The increase in the number of trucks departing from Gaza is rather dramatic compared to previous years, but is still just a fraction of the potential, compared to past economic activity, and has failed to make a significant dent in alarming unemployment rates – [38.4% in the last quarter of 2015, more than 50% among young people](#). The sense of inertia with regard to access policy, Gaza's floundering economy, and crumbling infrastructure augment a feeling of hopelessness that many cite as indication that the next eruption in violence is only a matter of time.

## Travel of people

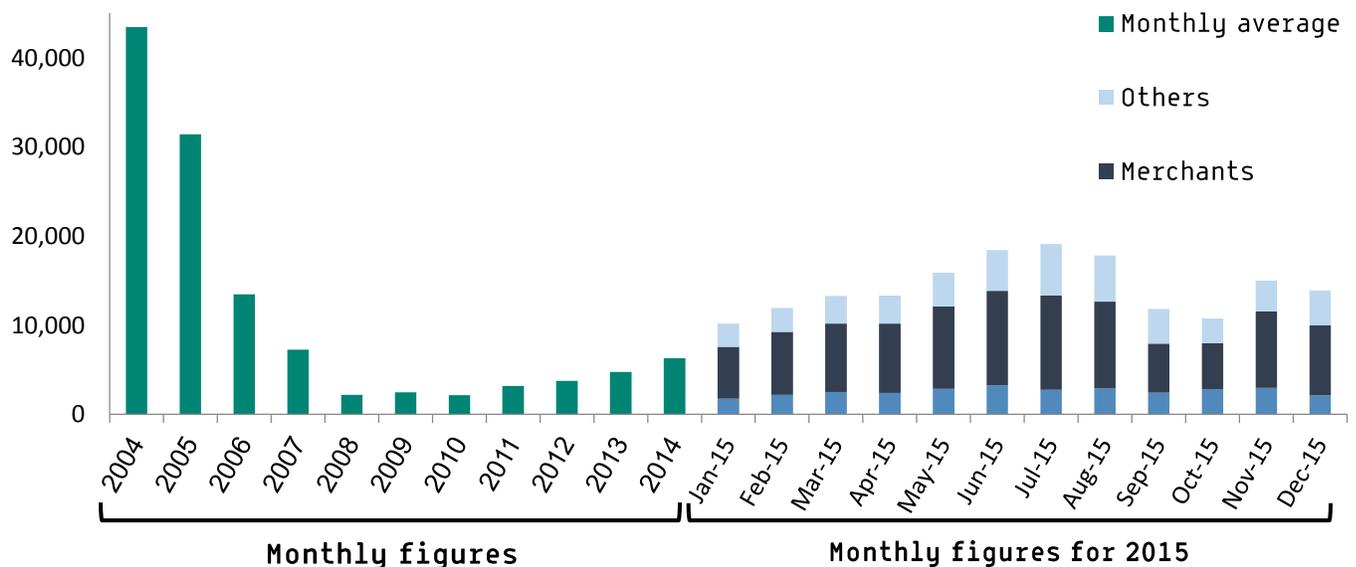
The increase in the number of exits through Erez Crossing, which is controlled by Israel, falls far short of compensating for the closure of Rafah Crossing, controlled by Egypt, and remains a miniscule fraction of past activity at the crossing. The criteria for travel through Erez have scarcely changed, and in some cases, were restricted further

Over the course of 2015, a monthly average of 14,276 exits by Palestinians via Erez Crossing was recorded, representing a 128% increase compared to the monthly average in 2014 (6,270 exits) and almost 200% compared to 2013 (4,766 exits).

At the same time, the average number of exits via Erez remains extremely low; the increase observed over the course of 2015 can be attributed to a low base for comparison through the years of closure. A better comparison might be to 2000, before the Second Intifada broke out, when about 26,000 laborers alone crossed via Erez **daily**. This amounts to more than 500,000 exits per month, 35 times the monthly average in 2015.

The increase in travel via Erez fails to compensate for the ongoing closure of Rafah Crossing, which, in the past, was Gaza's main gateway abroad. Until mid-2013, about 20,000 exits were recorded at the crossing every month. In 2015, however, the average number of exits per month was only 1,205, and the crossing was operational for only 32 days (of those days, only on 25 was exit from Gaza possible). As a result, many Palestinians living in Gaza could not travel abroad for conferences, professional training, academic studies or reuniting with family. Those abroad were also prevented from returning home. At the same time, the average number of exits through Erez Crossing to Allenby Bridge (and from there to other countries via Jordan) stood at only 121 per month.

**Erez Crossing: Monthly exits by individuals 2004-2015**



In 2015, the average monthly number of exits via Erez Crossing was 14,276. However, 56% of the exits were by merchants, and the quota for merchant permits stands at 5,000 only. (Figures for 2004-2009 kindly provided by UNOCHA)

## Exit categories

### Traders

The main reason for the increase in the number of exits of Palestinians via Erez is the increase in travel of traders. In 2014, the monthly average number of exits by traders at the crossing was only 2,606, compared to 7,963 in 2015, making for a 205% increase. Since trader permits are subject to a 5,000 person quota, we can say that 56% of the total number of exits via Erez were made by no more than 5,000 Palestinian residents, who entered and exited the Strip several times each month.

### Medical patients and their companions

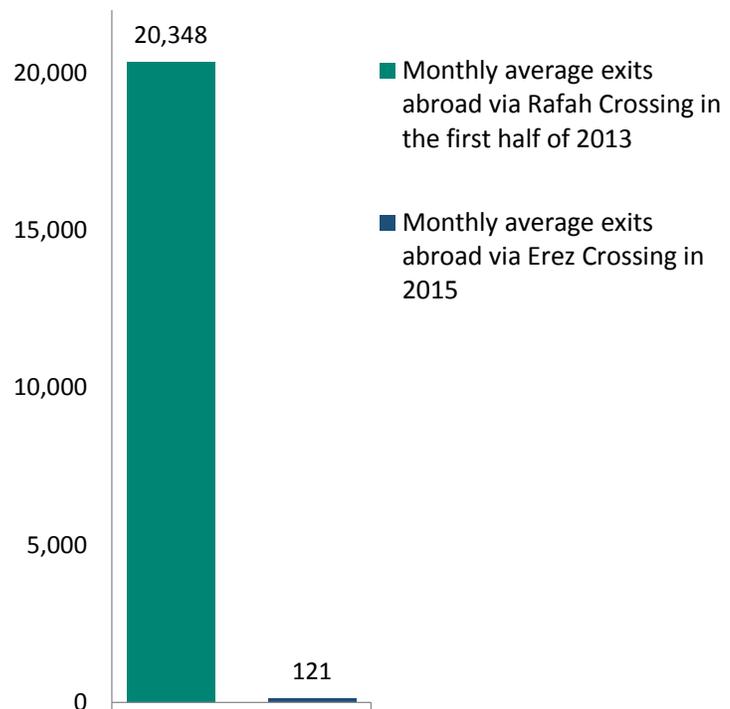
About 18% of the total number of exits via Erez Crossing in 2015 were made by medical patients and their companions, or an average of 2,581 exits per month, an 18% increase compared to 2014. We note that in the last month of 2015, the number of exits by medical patients and their companions dropped by about 28% compared to November, most likely due to [additional restrictions imposed on the exit of medical patients and their companions](#).

### Others

Of the total number of exits by Palestinians through Erez Crossing, 26%, or 3,732 per month on average, were made under the category of “others”. This category includes exits by individuals traveling for Friday prayers at al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (a weekly quota applicable to people aged 60 and over),<sup>2</sup> family visits (permitted only in exceptional humanitarian circumstances), visits to prisoners (organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross) and travel by top Palestinian officials. This category showed a 153% increase compared to 2014, when the monthly average stood at 1,474 exits only.

Most of the exits under the “other” category, about 64%, were marked as travel for “other purposes to the West Bank and Israel”. This category includes family visits in exceptional humanitarian cases. About 25% of the total number of exits were made by worshippers and about 7% by relatives of prisoners.

## Does increased activity at Erez compensate for the closure of Rafah Crossing? A look at travel abroad



In the first half of 2013, some 20,000 exits from Gaza to Egypt via Rafah Crossing were recorded every month. The monthly average of exits abroad via Erez Crossing and Allenby Bridge was only 121 in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In March 2016, the age criteria for worshipper permits was lowered to age 50.

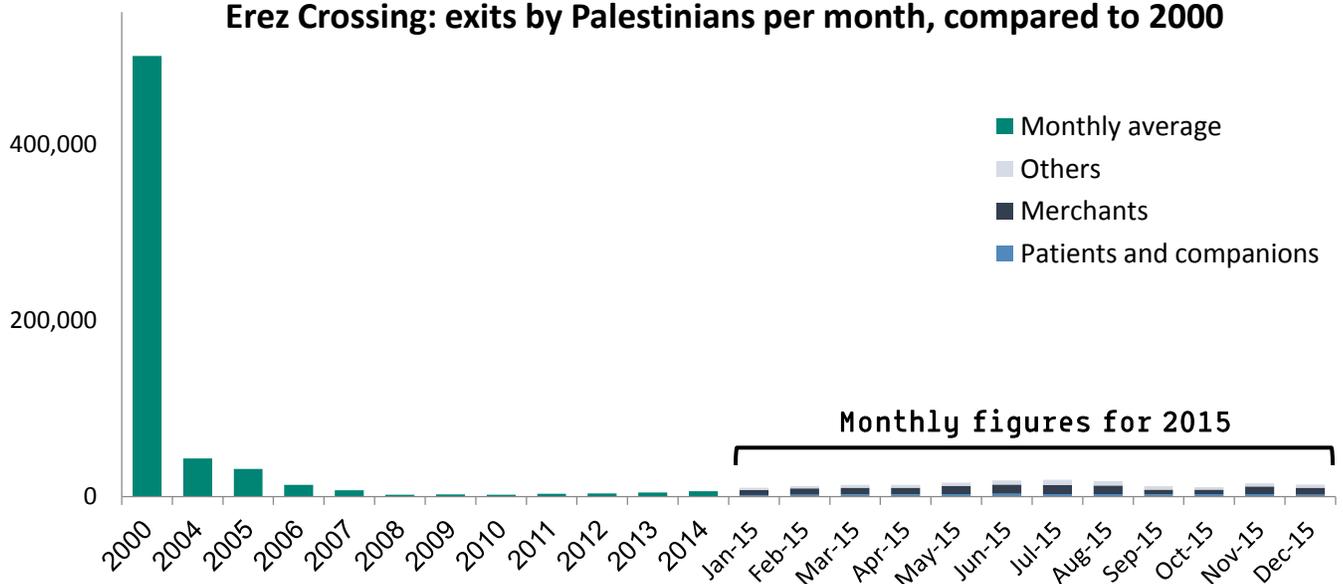
## Students

Given severe restrictions on travel via Rafah Crossing, in the second half of 2015, Israel established a mechanism with the Palestinian Authority to allow some students from the Gaza Strip to exit through Erez for travel via Jordan to academic institutions abroad. Although the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee says it submitted more than ten lists including the names of hundreds of students to the Israeli authorities, only 295 students traveled from Gaza in 2015 through this mechanism, on ten different occasions, mostly with no correlation to the dates of the academic year.

The fact that only a small number of students have been able to exit Gaza is the result of several factors: delays in sending applications on the part of the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee, delays in responses from the Israeli side and difficulties obtaining a transit visa from the Jordanian authorities. In addition, Palestinian sources told Gisha that beginning in November 2015, permit-holding students have been required to undergo security interviews by Israeli officials at the crossing and some of them had their permits revoked in the process and were sent back to Gaza.

Gaza students have been barred from studying in the West Bank since 2000. The policy remained unchanged in 2015.

### From 500,000 a month to just a few thousands Erez Crossing: exits by Palestinians per month, compared to 2000



The monthly average number of exits by Palestinians via Erez Crossing in 2015 was less than 3% of the monthly average number of exits by laborers through the crossing in 2000.  
(Figures for 2004-2009 kindly provided by UNOCHA)

## Medical patients and companions

In November, Israel imposed additional restrictions on exit by medical patients and their companions. Israel further restricted the types of illnesses for which treatment can be sought outside the Strip, making it difficult for kidney patients and individuals with ophthalmic, neurological and orthopedic conditions to receive exit permits in order to receive treatment. The Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee says Israeli officials have claimed that the restrictions were imposed because in the past, patients in these categories were “late to return” to the Gaza Strip.

Also, Israel determined that companions younger than age 55 would be being required to undergo additional security screening, beyond the routine screenings that already take place for each person seeking a permit. According to Palestinian officials, the additional screening process is so lengthy that it effectively serves as a ban on companions younger than age 55. Medical patients in need of urgent treatment aren't able to wait for the approval of their companion's permit and thus are essentially compelled to find someone older to travel with them. Gisha [noted with concern](#) that given that parents of young children are unlikely to be over 55, the policy change compels children to enter for medical treatment accompanied by someone other than their parents. With Gaza's population being very young, only 6% of the population are over 55, thus making it difficult for people to identify a companion able to travel to assist them during their treatment.

### [Further reading](#)

#### **Palestinian citizens of Israel**

At the end of July, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) announced a "temporary ban" on entry into Gaza by Palestinian citizens of Israel, who were already restricted from entering the Strip other than in exceptional humanitarian circumstances. The "temporary" policy has been in place for at least nine months and impacts the following groups of people: those who previously would have been able to visit first-degree relatives in exceptional humanitarian circumstances; staff of international organizations who entered the Strip as part of their work, and; Palestinian citizens of Israel who live permanently in the Gaza Strip with their spouses who are Gaza residents (what is known as "divided families"). As part of the implementation of the new policy, Israel prevented Israeli members of divided families who were visiting Israel from returning to the Strip. COGAT retreated from the full ban for a time, following pressure, including casework and advocacy by [Gisha](#). However, later in the year restrictions were again applied and fewer people able to travel. The policy is applied inconsistently and with little to no transparency.

The number of entries by Palestinian citizens of Israel into the Gaza Strip dropped by 72% in August 2015, compared to July, and remained low throughout the second half of 2015. In the five months prior to the announcement of the new restrictions on entry into Gaza by Palestinian citizens of Israel, the monthly average of entries was 337. In the following five months, the monthly average decreased to just 138 entries, a drop of approximately 60%.

### [Further reading](#)

#### **"Security interviews" at Erez Crossing**

In the last few months of 2015, Gisha noted an increase in the number of permit holders being called in for "security interviews" or interrogations by Israeli officials at Erez Crossing. The Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee staged a strike for several days toward the end of the year to protest the fact that so many traders were being called in for security interviews. Some of them were even veteran traders who have been doing business with Israeli companies for years and are required, [according to Israel's criteria](#), to have financial dealings higher than two million shekels per year. In some cases, traders permits were revoked and in other cases permits were issued, noting that this was despite a "security preclusion". Gisha [has protested](#) to the authorities that this practice violates accepted norms for issuing permits.

The number of medical patients and companions, as well as students, who are called in for security interviews has also risen, even when they have exit permits. In some cases, the exit permit is revoked following the security interview or if a person declines to attend the interrogation.

[Further reading](#) (in Haaretz) and [here](#) for Gisha's activities on the matter.

## Travel through Rafah Crossing

### Rafah Crossing, between Gaza and Egypt was closed for 333 days throughout 2015, blocking travel into and out of Gaza

Rafah Crossing operated for only 32 days throughout 2015, and only on 25 of those days was travel from Gaza to Egypt made possible (other days were for return to Gaza only). In 2014, the crossing operated for 156 days, on 144 of which travel from Gaza to Egypt was possible.

The monthly average number of crossings through Rafah was only 2,396 in 2015, a drop of approximately 70% compared to the monthly average in 2014 (8,119) and a 90% drop compared to the monthly average in 2013 (25,147).

Particularly because of Israel's closure of Gaza and severe restrictions on transit abroad, Rafah Crossing is of vital importance to Gaza's residents. The crossing, though it doesn't meet need for travel between the parts of the Palestinian territory, has served as Gaza's main gateway abroad for years. During the first half of 2013, an average of 20,348 exits were recorded at Rafah *every month*, which is more than the total number of exits throughout *the entirety* of 2015: only 14,458. Prior to severe restrictions in mid-2013, the crossing operated daily and a monthly average of 40,816 entries and exits were recorded.

Since the second half of 2013, Egypt began scaling down activity at Rafah. On the days the crossing operates, only people belonging to certain approved categories can exit – medical patients with referrals to Egyptian hospitals, students studying abroad, foreign passport and residency holders and at pre-determined times also pilgrims traveling to Saudi Arabia.

## Movement of goods

### Entry of goods into Gaza via Kerem Shalom Crossing

**While Israel allowed entry of construction materials through an internationally supervised mechanism, this delayed reconstruction and rendered it more costly to a population in tremendous need. Israel added more items to the list of "dual use" materials restricted for entrance to Gaza, including wood planks**

#### Construction materials

Until Operation Protective Edge, Israel allowed construction materials to enter Gaza only for approved projects managed by international organizations, with rare exception, claiming that construction materials could be used for military purposes. However, after more than 17,000 homes were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable and more than 100,000 additional homes and infrastructure damaged during the 2014 military operation, Israel decided to change its policy and allow the monitored entry of construction materials for reconstruction in Gaza.

To this end, the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM), a UN supervised mechanism agreed upon by Israel and the Palestinian Authority was put into place to coordinate the entry of construction materials into Gaza. The GRM allows Israel to pre-approve and monitor participants at all stages of planning and implementation, including suppliers, contractors and beneficiaries. International construction projects in Gaza required Israeli preapproval and monitoring even before the GRM.

As a result of the GRM and the need for construction materials to repair vast damage in the Strip, 2015 saw a spike in the number of trucks entering Gaza through Kerem Shalom. An average of 7,836 truckloads of goods entered Gaza every month, compared to 3,966 in the previous year, an almost 100% increase.<sup>3</sup> However, the average number of trucks entering Kerem Shalom every month carrying non-construction related goods was 3,611, compared to 3,483 in 2014 – only a minor increase.

In the 16 months that passed since the end of Operation Protective Edge from September 2014 to the end of 2015, 3,255,184 tons of construction materials entered Gaza via Kerem Shalom, about 14% of the overall need for construction materials in the Strip, estimated at 23 million tons. These needs include cumulative need from natural growth during the years that construction materials were less available as well as due to damage from past military operations. A January 2014 [estimate](#) put the Gaza housing shortage at 75,000 housing units.

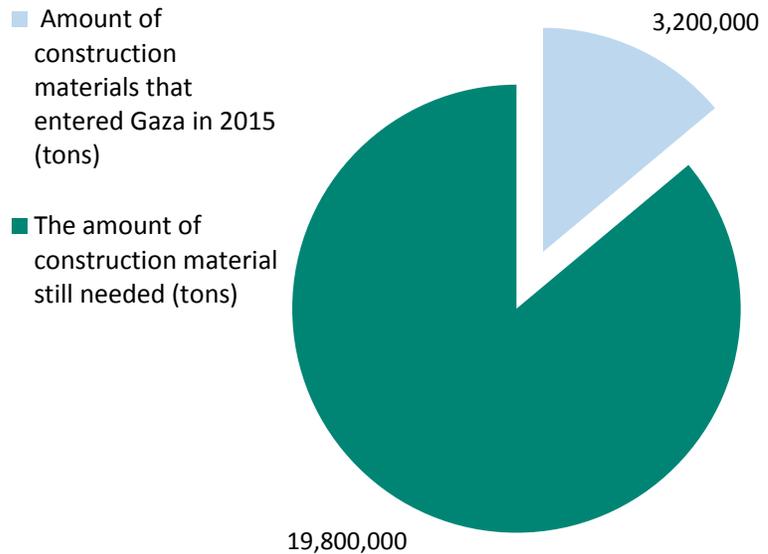
One major reason for the slow progress on reconstruction was the GRM itself and disagreements about the formula to be used for entrance of construction materials for destroyed homes. In its first few months of its operation, the GRM allowed for the entry of construction materials only for homes that were lightly to moderately damaged. In the following months, a significant percentage of the construction materials that entered Gaza were for international projects started prior to the military operation. To illustrate, according to a [Shelter Cluster report](#) from December 2015, over the course of 2015, only **three housing units** out of the 11,000 units that were completely destroyed during Operation Protective Edge were fully rebuilt. It is worth noting, however, that work on rebuilding housing units damaged in the operation began in 2015 and in January 2016, it was announced that 326 of the units destroyed during Operation Protective Edge had been rebuilt and that 1,844 of some 6,800 housing units that were rendered uninhabitable had been fully repaired.

[Further reading on the GRM](#)

**Restrictions on the entrance of “dual-use” goods into the Gaza Strip**

In 2015, Israel expanded the [list of “dual-use”](#) items and materials restricted from entering the Gaza Strip. Limitations were put into place on the entrance of castor oil, uninterrupted power supply (UPS) components, batteries, wood and other items.

**Construction materials: 2015 vs. need**



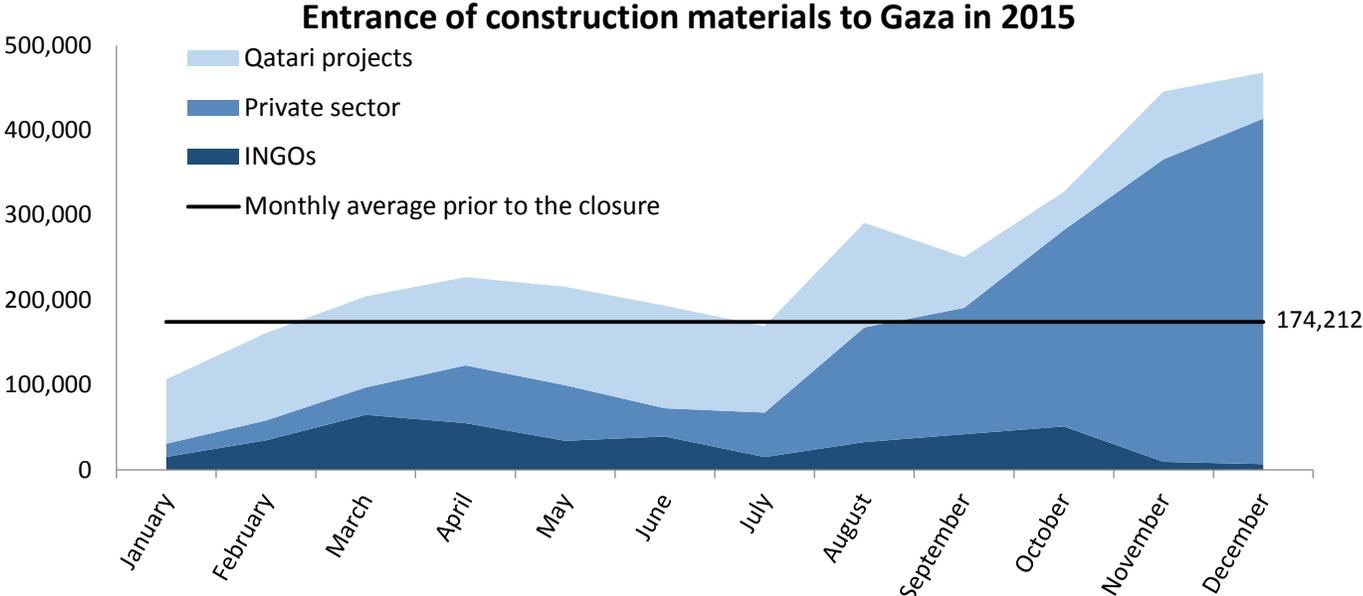
The overall need for construction materials in Gaza includes damage caused during Operation Protective Edge and cumulative shortage that resulted from years of restrictions on construction materials and damage caused in previous military operations.

<sup>3</sup> This figure excludes trucks carrying fuel.

In April 2015, COGAT announced that wood planks thicker than 5 cm and wider than 20/25 cm would be restricted from entering the Strip, on the claim that these could be used for building tunnels. The restrictions were tightened again in August and November and today no wood plank thicker than 1 cm and wider than 5 cm may be brought into Gaza, without rare exception. These measures have harmed Gaza’s [furniture industry](#). Manufacturers in the sector spoke to Gisha about massive layoffs and significant increases in the price of wood.

In October 2015, Israel removed gravel from the dual-use list. The decision was followed by a sharp drop in the entrance of gravel for international organizations, but an increase in the entrance of gravel for the private sector.

[Further reading](#)



More construction materials entered Gaza in 2015 than in 2007, before the closure, however since then need, including need created by three military operations and years of chronic shortages in construction materials in the Strip, has multiplied. The GRM allows Israel extensive control over construction in Gaza, including

**Export and sale of goods outside Gaza**

**The decision to allow the sale of Gaza-grown and -produced goods in the West Bank and Israel was reflected in the number of trucks departing Gaza. However, a slew of access restrictions continue to inhibit trade**

Prior to the ban on exit of goods imposed in 2007, the West Bank and Israel were Gaza’s main markets - 85% of goods that exited the Strip were sold there. The November 2014 decision to [permit](#) the sale of some goods from Gaza in the West Bank, and the subsequent March 2015 decision to [permit](#) the sale of some Gaza-grown produce in Israel, raised hope among many in Gaza who had suffered for years because of Israeli-imposed restrictions on trade.

The partial re-opening of markets in the West Bank and Israel to Gaza-made and -grown goods was immediately reflected in the number of truckloads departing the Strip. While the average number of trucks exiting Gaza in

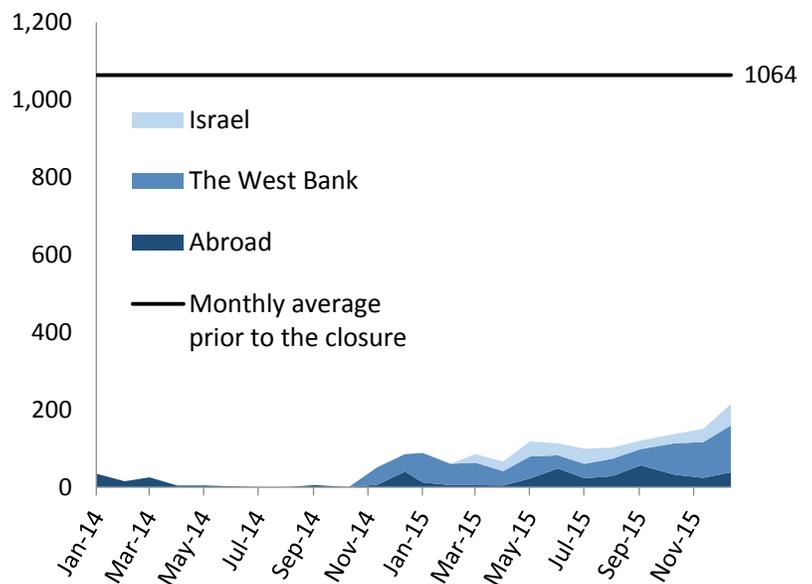
2014 was around 19 per month, in 2015, about 113 trucks left Gaza on average each month, a spike of about 500%. At the same time, the average number of trucks leaving Gaza remains extremely low, only 10.6% of what it was before the closure, for various reasons:

- Israel still limits the type of goods that can be sold in the West Bank and Israel. For instance, in January 2015, Israel [forbade](#) the sale of Gaza strawberries in the West Bank, claiming some of these strawberries had found their way to markets inside Israel (strawberry sales were renewed in January 2016). Produce sales in Israel were restricted to tomatoes and eggplant for the duration of the *shmita* year only (a Jewish custom according to which the land is left fallow for the year), and according to a quota. The sale of non-agricultural goods to Israel, [though officially permitted towards the end of the year](#), has been delayed due to internal issues with collecting sales tax, and is currently limited to scrap metal only.
- Shortly after Operation Protective Edge, Gisha brought together several leaders in various industries in the Gaza Strip in a bid to understand how they had been affected by the removal of the ban on sales in the West Bank. They [described](#) several difficulties they face, including high transaction costs for shipping goods through Kerem Shalom and risk. Though many of the problems they described can be solved with relative ease, most persisted throughout 2015.<sup>4</sup>
- Restrictions on entrance of raw materials and inputs for industry continue to hamper the economy. Gaza’s furniture industry which could have been a major beneficiary of the reopening of West Bank and Israeli markets was seriously hurt by Israel’s decision to restrict the [entrance of wood into Gaza](#), and has in fact, all but collapsed.

In 2015, 1,352 truckloads of goods departed Gaza for destinations in Israel, the West Bank and abroad. About 54% of all trucks (375 trucks) were destined for the West Bank, about 24% for Israel (320 trucks) and about 22% for markets abroad (297 trucks).

Of all the trucks that departed Gaza in 2015, only 13% (180 trucks) did not transport agricultural goods: 122 truckloads destined for the West Bank and 58 trucks of scrap metal to Israel.

**Exit of goods from Gaza in 2014 and 2015**



Despite an increase of some 500%, the average number of trucks departing Gaza remains extremely low, only 10.6% of what it was prior to the closure in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> In February 2016, [Israel allowed](#) trucks to be loaded with agricultural produce up to a height of 1.5 meters. Before the change, Gaza suppliers complained that the decision to allow goods to be stacked at a height of no more than 1.2 meters greatly increased shipping costs.