



Gaza Up Close

High unemployment; long blackouts, severe shortages of clean water, limited economic opportunities; a very young, educated population with immense potential, and a closure that undermines their chances of succeeding. This is life in Gaza today.

September 2020

Introduction

Many Israelis believe that with the implementation of the Disengagement Plan in 2005, Israel unburdened itself of Gaza and no longer bears responsibility for what happens there. The reality is that Israel still denies sea and air access to Gaza and controls all but one of its land border crossings, Rafah. Israel oversees coordination of entry of goods to Gaza and demands to know the purpose of the goods, who receives them and who pays for them. Israel decides what goods produced in Gaza can be sold outside the Strip, how much, when and where. Israel also decides how much electricity will be sold and supplied to the Strip, reducing supply at will. [This is not disengagement; this is remote \(but not too remote\) control.](#)

How did we get here?

On September 11, 2005, Israel removed its last remaining troops from inside the Strip. In 2007, after Hamas took control of the Strip, Israel's Security Cabinet [declared](#) Gaza a "hostile entity" and severely tightened restrictions on movement for its residents. Entry of goods was reduced to the bare minimum required to stave off a humanitarian crisis; export of goods outside Gaza was fully banned; severe restrictions were imposed on the entry of fuel, and travel between Gaza and the West Bank and Israel, which was already limited, was even further restricted.

Over the years, a doctrine the military refers to as the "[separation policy](#)" was developed. The idea is to sever Gaza from the West Bank, to obstruct contact between the two parts of the Palestinian territory, which were not only meant to make up the Palestinian state according to international resolutions and agreements, but also share the same language, culture, and [economy](#), as well as [family ties](#). Security officials have [said](#) that the purpose of the policy is to put pressure on Hamas and help the Palestinian Authority, but in practice, the separation policy has been used by Israel to advance political-demographic goals that cannot be justified on "security grounds:" Reducing the number of Palestinians living in the West Bank, weakening Palestinian institutions that would underpin a state, and advancing annexation at the expense of fundamental human rights. As a result of the policy, students from Gaza cannot study in West Bank universities, medical teams, academics, [employees of](#)

[civil society organizations](#), and technical experts cannot travel between the two parts of the territory, not even for meetings or training. Families split between Gaza and the West Bank cannot reunite except in the most exigent circumstances, such as a wedding, or a death or terminal illness in the family. Even then, only first-degree relatives are eligible to apply for a permit.

[Some of the restrictions have been lifted or changed over the years](#) (details below). The principle, however, remains the same, despite the fact that the restrictions have clearly failed to achieve their original goal of [toppling Hamas](#) or preventing rocket fire on Israeli communities. What the restrictions have done is unravel conditions on the ground to the point that, as a United Nations report predicted, [Gaza would be unliveable by 2020](#). The already dire situation has been made [worse](#) since March 2020 and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Israel further tightened movement restrictions under the guise of averting the spread of the virus, meaning that even the few residents who were previously eligible to apply for permits are now denied travel. In May 2020, the Palestinian Authority stopped coordination with Israel in response to the Israeli government's plan to annex parts of the West Bank, resulting in additional economic shortfalls amidst a global financial crisis.

Movement of people

Erez Crossing

Currently, only two crossings are used for pedestrian travel into and out of Gaza – Rafah, into Egypt, and Erez, into Israel. When Rafah Crossing is closed, Erez Crossing, controlled by Israel, is Gaza's only gateway to the outside world. Even when Rafah is open, Erez is the only gateway from Gaza to Israel and the West Bank, entry into which is [completely controlled by Israel](#).

Passage through Erez Crossing is subject to Israeli security clearance and interpretation of a [narrow and fluid list of criteria for travel](#). Sometimes, residents who have received permits and have ostensibly been cleared for travel are still denied passage upon arrival at Erez Crossing. For example, traders are told that their permits have been denied due to a "[security block](#)," with no further explanation, including veteran, well-known traders who have traveled back and forth between Gaza and Israel for years, doing business (mostly purchasing goods) in Israel.

Beyond routine restrictions on travel, Israel uses its control over Erez Crossing as a lever of pressure on the civilian population, sometimes shutting down the crossing entirely. For instance, Israel shut down Erez Crossing in response to weekly [demonstrations](#) that were held between March 2018 and late 2019 near the Gaza perimeter fence. It has also closed the crossing in response to [rocket fire](#) towards Israel or during military operations, even when there is no direct link to the safety of civilians or officials at the crossing itself.

Three main categories of people are eligible to request permits to cross at Erez, though this does not guarantee they will receive a permit: traders or merchants, medical patients and their companions, and other "exceptional humanitarian cases," i.e. people traveling to attend the wedding or funeral of a first-degree relative, or visit a terminally ill first-degree relative. Application processing times, even for those meeting the narrow criteria, are [unreasonably long](#). According to the [official directive](#), an application to visit a sick child

or parent may take up to 50 business days. Applications by patients from the Gaza Strip to exit for medical treatment may take as long as 23 business days, regardless of the medical appointment date. Often, Israeli authorities don't respond to permit applications within these timeframes, or don't respond at all.

The average number of exits by Palestinians via Erez Crossing in 2019 was about 14,960 exits per month, a 43% increase compared to the monthly average for 2018 (8,607 exits). Despite this increase, the average number of exits is still only a fraction of the roughly 500,000 exits by Palestinian day laborers recorded at Erez Crossing each month in 2000, before the start of the Second Intifada.

Additional travel restrictions enforced by Israel at Erez Crossing on [March 8](#), 2020, for the Jewish holiday of Purim, have remained in place since under the guise of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Despite the pandemic-related lockdown being mostly lifted in Israel and the West Bank, Israel continues to limit entry into Gaza to returning residents. Exit is being restricted almost entirely to patients in need of critical (non-COVID related) medical treatment that is unavailable in the Strip. In February 2020, before movement restrictions were tightened further by Israel, a total of 21,032 exits were recorded at Erez Crossing. By March, the number had dropped by 76%, reaching 5,533 exits in total. In May and April, only 222 and 213 exits were recorded, respectively, less than 2% of the monthly average in 2019.

In [late May](#) 2020, the Palestinian Authority decided to halt civilian coordination between its representatives in Gaza and the Israeli authorities. Despite its [obligation to do so](#), Israel has not indicated any alternate mechanism by which Palestinians can apply for permits to cross to and from Gaza, other than [medical patients](#).

Rafah crossing

The Gaza-Egypt border crossing point is Rafah Crossing. From mid-2012 to mid-2013 the crossing was open regularly, with some 40,000 exits and entries recorded each month. Beginning in July 2013, the crossing remained closed most of the time, until it resumed more regular operations in [May 2018](#), as the Great March of Return protests began and humanitarian conditions in Gaza deteriorated. Given the grim economic reality in Gaza, [many young adults](#) took advantage of the crossing's relatively regular operation to leave the Strip in search of a better future.

In March 2020, Egypt closed the crossing in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and has opened the crossing only on [a few occasions](#) since. In April and May 2020, the crossing shut down entirely; exits to Egypt dropped to zero, and only 2,804 entries into Gaza were recorded.

Even when the crossing is open more regularly, only people who meet Egypt's criteria may travel through Rafah, subject to preregistration: Gaza residents with foreign residency or passports, patients with referrals for medical treatment in Egypt, and individuals with study, work or family visitation visas for third countries. Getting permission to cross can take time and transit through the Sinai desert is arduous, and often dangerous. Israel's policy is to forbid return to Gaza via Erez to people who exited the Strip via Rafah. Importantly, Rafah Crossing does not provide a solution for Gaza residents who need to access the West Bank and Israel, including for medical care and to visit family members who live there. Israel does

not allow Gaza residents to enter the West Bank without an Israeli-issued permit, whether they cross via Israeli territory or attempt to enter the West Bank from Jordan.

From May 2018 till the end of February 2020, a monthly average of 5,231 entries into Gaza and 6,610 exits was recorded at Rafah Crossing.

Movement of goods

Exit and entrance of goods via Kerem Shalom

From the time the closure was tightened in 2007 and until the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident of 2010, Israel banned entrance of a [long list of goods](#) to Gaza, including coriander, paper, toys, and chocolate. As a matter of fact, other than a narrow list of items *permitted* for entry, which was never published, everything was banned. Since 2010, Israel has allowed goods to enter Gaza but severely limits, and in some cases bans, the entry of items [it defines as dual-use](#), that is, items that are civilian in nature but that Israel believes can also be used for military purposes. The list is long and vague. It includes broad categories like “communications equipment,” as well as basic materials needed by the farming and fishing sectors, greatly impeding economic development. Contrary to media [reports](#) (Hebrew) from late 2019 that suggested Israel would remove some materials from its dual-use list as part of ongoing talks with Hamas, no materials were actually removed. Israel [continues](#) to severely restrict the entry of vital materials into the Strip.

Basic construction materials, like cement and steel, designated for both internationally-funded and private sector projects, enter Gaza almost exclusively through a [mechanism](#) for coordinating entry of building materials and goods agreed upon by Israel and the Palestinian Authority with monitoring by the United Nations, and established according to Israel’s conditions after Operation Protective Edge (Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (GRM)). The GRM monitors thousands of items. In early 2020, [Israel permitted cement](#) to enter Gaza for the private sector, independently of the GRM.

The exit of goods from Gaza is critical for its industries. Toward the end of 2014, Israel announced it would remove one of the most restrictive economic sanctions imposed on the Gaza Strip – the ban on selling Gaza-grown and manufactured goods in the West Bank and in 2015 it began allowing goods to go to the Israeli market in limited quantities. In November 2014, for the first time in seven years, a truck carrying produce from Gaza made its way to Hebron. It was followed by furniture, textile and other goods from Gaza that were shipped out to West Bank markets.

Currently, the types of Gaza-grown produce permitted for sale in the West Bank, according to a list [published by COGAT](#), are tomato, cucumber, pepper, eggplant, zucchini, sweet potato, strawberry, cabbage, cauliflower and dates. Onions also appear on this list, but in practice, they cannot be marketed in the West Bank. It is unclear [why](#) the list is limited to these items. In March 2015, Israel permitted [the sale of tomatoes and eggplants](#) from the Gaza Strip in certain markets within its own territory. At present there is a cap on how much can be sold per month: 350 tons of tomato and 50 tons of eggplants. Furniture, textiles and scrap metal are also permitted.

Sales of goods from Gaza in Israel and the West Bank are [far from reaching their potential](#). From the time the closure was tightened in June 2007, until the end of 2014, an average of only 14.7 truckloads of goods exited Gaza every month. In 2019, the average was 262 per month. From January to May 2020, an average of 330 truckloads exited the Strip each month, still only about 30% of the volume of goods to exit in early 2007, before the closure was tightened, when more than 1,064 truckloads left Gaza each month. Many types of products are still banned for sale in the West Bank and Israel, for instance, [processed foods](#).

In 2019, Israel shut down [Kerem Shalom Crossing, the only commercial crossing between Gaza and Israel](#), located in the southern Gaza Strip, on a total of 10 days as a [punitive](#) measure (in addition to closing the crossing on Jewish holidays), including in retaliation for rocket fire toward Israeli communities. Lengthy closures kept essential humanitarian supplies, including fuel, from coming into Gaza. Every time Kerem Shalom is closed, Gaza's industry and businesses, already strained by more than a decade of closure, suffer serious [financial losses](#). In the first half of 2020, Israel limited transit of goods through Kerem Shalom as a punitive measure for [three days](#). In August 2020, Israel blocked entrance of fuel and other essential materials needed for construction and industry, resulting in the [shutting down](#) of Gaza's sole power plant.

In addition to restrictions on the movement of goods via Kerem Shalom, other restrictions also undermine economic development, including by curtailing the growth of [small businesses](#) which relied in the past on the use of commercial mail or transport of items in personal luggage – both of which are banned by Israel.

Entrance of goods via Egypt

In February 2018, goods began coming into Gaza from Egypt via the Salah a-Din gate near Rafah Crossing. This crossing is under the civilian and security control of Hamas and Egypt. In 2019, 23% of the total amount of cement entering Gaza and 86% of cooking gas came in through the Salah a-Din gate. In the first half of 2020, 27% of the cement and 77% of cooking gas to enter Gaza came in via Egypt.

Despite a growing volume of goods entering via Salah a-Din, the volume is still significantly less than what passes through Kerem Shalom, and it cannot substitute for the latter, all the more so given that goods are not shipped out of Gaza via the gate. The gate has no clear or transparent working procedures, and sometimes, items denied by Israel at Kerem Shalom are denied at Salah a-Din as well.

Land, sea and air

Israel's control of the Gaza Strip does not end with the commercial and pedestrian land crossings. Israel also controls Gaza's sea and air space, as well as a "[buffer zone](#)" it established inside the Gaza Strip. This "buffer zone," also known as the Access Restricted Area (ARA), officially stretches 300 meters into Gaza from its border with Israel. Israeli officials say farmers are permitted to advance to a distance of about 100 meters from the border, subject to prior coordination. Gisha has found no indication that such coordination is, in fact, obtainable. Conversations with people living and working in the area reveal that

people experience a sense of [uncertainty and insecurity](#) about the potential for use of lethal force.

According to figures released by Gaza-based Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, between 2007 and 2010, some 1,300 incidents of use of live-fire at farmers, shepherds, scrap metal collectors and protestors were recorded. At least 161 Palestinians were killed in these incidents and more than 3,000 were injured. Israeli snipers [used live fire against](#) protestors participating in the Great March of Return demonstrations alongside Gaza's perimeter fence, which began on March 30, 2018. According to figures published by the [United Nations](#) in April 2020, 214 Palestinians were killed by Israeli soldiers at the protests, including 46 children; more than 36,100 people were injured, 20 percent of them from live ammunition.

In addition to enforcing restrictions on access to the area, in late 2015, the army [confirmed](#), for the first time, that it sprays areas close to the Gaza perimeter fence with herbicides, to maintain a line of vision into the Strip. In a February 2019 response to a request Gisha filed under the Freedom of Information Act, the state [admitted](#) that between 2014 and 2018 it had conducted aerial spraying along the Israeli side of the Gaza perimeter fence on a total of 30 occasions. Monitoring conducted by human rights organizations reveals that the [spraying](#) harms crops [well beyond](#) the official 300 meters of the "buffer zone," leading to huge losses for farmers. The long-term effects of the spraying on people's health are unknown.

In 2019, the first and only year since 2014 when herbicide aerial spraying was not conducted, farmers in the areas near the fence [saw](#) an [improvement](#) in yield. In January 2020, however, Israeli planes [resumed](#) aerial herbicide spraying along the perimeter fence, damaging large swaths of farmland. The harmful practice was carried out [again](#) in April 2020, amid the coronavirus pandemic lockdown and in breach of Israel's duty to protect food security for Gaza's residents.

Israel also restricts access to Gaza's territorial waters, limiting fishing to a "fishing zone." The Israeli navy enforces the restrictions using warning shots and also live-fire, resulting in the [death](#) and injury of fishermen and damage to their equipment. Fishermen deemed to have exceeded the boundaries by Israel's navy [are also at times detained](#), and their boats are [seized and held](#) by Israel for months, even years. The Gaza Fishermen's Union reports fishermen being detained [even within the permitted fishing zone](#). According to Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, in the first half of 2020, there were 171 incidents of navy fire at Gaza fishing boats. In [May 2020](#), there was also [an uptick](#) in the Israeli navy's use of violent measures and incidents of fire at fishermen working off Gaza's coast.

According to the Oslo Accords, Gaza fishermen should be able to sail up to 20 nautical miles off the coast, but this provision of the agreement was never implemented. [Over the years](#), the zone has been changed numerous times. In early 2019, Israel announced it would [expand](#) a section of the fishing zone to 12 nautical miles. Over the course of that year, Israel added a small area, off the southern Gaza coast, where it allows fishermen to sail [up to 15 nautical miles](#) into sea. The rest of the zone is restricted to either 12 or 6 nautical miles. A one-nautical mile strip at each end of Gaza's coastline is strictly off limits.

Israel frequently implements reductions to the fishing zone as a means of collective punishment. In 2019, Israel reduced the fishing zone on at least [nine different occasions](#), imposing a [full maritime closure](#) on four of these. In [2020](#), this practice [continued](#).

Israel restricts and in some cases denies entry of [materials](#) (Hebrew) [required to repair](#) boats damaged by gunfire or marine accidents. The various restrictions have severely impaired this historic sector of Gaza's economy and a once important source of livelihoods. The [number of people employed](#) in the fishing industry dropped from about 10,000 in 2000 to about 3,600 in early 2020.

Israel forbids the building of a seaport that would allow movement of people and goods and prevents the rebuilding of Gaza's airport, which was destroyed in an Israeli air raid in 2001.

Electricity

Long before the implementation of the Disengagement Plan, Gaza suffered from dilapidated infrastructure that was not developed to meet civilian needs. Though it can still be considered the occupying power, Israel not only doesn't invest directly in infrastructure, it hinders the maintenance and development of infrastructure undertaken by Palestinians, often with international assistance, by obstructing entrance of equipment, spare parts and sometimes fuel, as well as blocking travel of individuals. Three major military operations, as well as recurring rounds of violence, wreaked havoc on fragile electrical, water and sewage [infrastructure](#).

For many years, residents of Gaza have endured a chronic shortage of electricity, which results in prolonged blackouts. The supply of electricity sold to Gaza by Israel (and sometimes Egypt), in addition to the electricity produced by the Strip's sole power plant, are not enough to meet even half of actual demand.

Egypt stopped selling Gaza electricity in February 2018. Since late October 2018, Gaza's sole power plant has operated three of its four turbines, more regularly, running on fuel funded by Qatar and purchased from Israel. Supply from three turbines is about 75 megawatts, in addition to the 120 megawatts purchased from Israel. This slightly [improved](#) supply to residents, enabling them to receive up to 15 hours of electricity per day, when weather conditions are optimal and household consumption is low. In the height of summer or winter, when demand rises, every household receives fewer hours of electricity.

External funding has helped mitigate the crisis, but [sustainable solutions](#) are nowhere on the horizon. In addition, Israel has blocked [access to fuel](#) for Gaza's power plant on a [number of occasions](#), most recently in [August 2020](#), knowingly [undermining](#) the already meager supply of electricity and living conditions for Gaza's two million residents.

Gisha's position

Israel's substantial control over so many aspects of life in the Gaza Strip means that under international law, it must facilitate normal life in the Strip, including allowing access for civilians and civilian goods. Alongside this obligation, Israel has the authority to decide by which routes both people and goods enter and leave Gaza and to establish reasonable and proportionate security measures to prevent the transfer of weapons and other military activity. Accordingly, Gisha's position is that Israel must allow free movement of people and

goods to enable economic growth, opportunities for personal development and normal family life, subject to individual security inspections.

Israel has a responsibility to allow regular movement of people and goods between Gaza and the West Bank, which continue to share a single economy, a single education system, a single healthcare system and countless familial, cultural, business and social ties.