

Security blocks restricting travel through Erez Crossing

- 1,900 permit revocations of 3,500-3,700 trader permits granted
- Almost 280 permit revocations of 350 "Businessman Gaza" (BMG) permits granted to prominent businesspeople in Gaza, including 2 of the 4 BMG permits granted to women
- 52% rate of permit denial for UN national staff based in Gaza in October; an increase from 3% in January
- 44% approval rate for entrance of medical patients from Gaza compared to 92.5% approval rate in 2012

Erez Crossing is the primary crossing for nearly 2 million residents of Gaza, connecting them to medical care, professional opportunities, and family in Israel and the West Bank. Given the ongoing closure of Rafah Crossing between Gaza and Egypt, Erez is also increasingly important as a transit point for Gaza residents seeking to travel abroad. [Narrow criteria and quotas](#) guide the decision-making process about who can and cannot travel through Erez Crossing. The policy on access itself is a result, as Israel says, of both political goals as well as security considerations about individuals wishing to travel.

Since the 2014 military operation, there has been an increase in the overall number of crossings via Erez, though the rate of travel is still just 2% of what it was in the year 2000. Nonetheless, we note with concern an alarming new trend of the Israeli authorities blocking travel for thousands of people on the basis of unspecified "security preclusions", an increase in interrogations taking place at the crossing, and instances of the authorities turning people back from the crossing even after they have received a permit to travel. According to data [provided](#) by the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) to the Associated Press, so far this year, only 46% of exits permit requests have been approved, compared to 80% of exit permit requests that were approved in 2013.

These practices violate human rights and run counter to Israel's stated policy goals. The following fact sheet summarizes Gisha's research on the topic and our recommendations for reversing this egregious and harmful practice.

What are security blocks?

An individual can be blocked for security reasons under a variety of circumstances. Besides the obvious reason of taking part in hostilities or being an active member of an armed group, a person can be blocked if he or she is believed to be motivated to seek revenge on or harm Israeli citizens or interests. Thus individuals who have lost family members or have had their homes damaged in the course of military operations are sometimes blocked. Security blocks can also be imposed as a means of pressuring individuals to collaborate with the Israeli security apparatus. In some cases, individuals are informed that the block will be in effect for a certain time period, after which he/she can ostensibly submit a permit request for reconsideration of the block. The time period is usually from three months to one year and in some cases individuals have been told the block is in effect for 100 years.

Given the large rise in blocks, Gisha is concerned that blocks are being applied not in proactive way, meaning that there is evidence or information that would lead to a block, but rather that not enough time or resources are available to complete screenings and thus individuals are being blocked de facto. If this is the case, an individual does not benefit from the presumption of innocence but is rather deemed “guilty” before the appropriate screening could prove him/her innocent.

When did the trend begin and how many are impacted?

Gisha noted a sharp increase in the number of security blocks applied to traders in late 2015. Since then and with greater frequency over the past several months, cases brought by our legal department are being routinely blocked. These include a range of types of cases and demographic profiles – people seeking to visit family in clearly humanitarian circumstances, individuals seeking to reach professional trainings and conferences, students seeking to reach their studies and others. In addition, even where people are approved for travel, we note an **increase in people being delayed for long periods, interrogations and revocations of permits after they have already been issued.**

Who is impacted?

Our research indicates that all categories of travelers via Erez Crossing are being impacted. The [criteria for who can travel to and from Gaza](#) are narrow, however, we are aware that individuals in all categories are being impacted: businesspeople, medical patients, staff of international organizations, people traveling to receive consular services and for family visits in humanitarian circumstances. The following are some examples:

Businesspeople

- Sources indicated to Gisha that, since the start of the year, [Israel has revoked 1,900 of the 3,500-3,700 permits granted to businesspeople in Gaza.](#)
- The people being blocked include prominent businesspeople with longstanding relationships in the West Bank and Israel, including **two of the only four women** granted exclusive Businessman Gaza (BMG) permits. Some have been told that the security block would be in effect for at least a year.
- Permits enable many of Gaza’s leading businesspeople to travel for the sake of establishing professional relationships and realizing business opportunities. The large-scale revocations and refusals of permits has an **immediate ripple effect**, impacting all those who are reliant on the economic activity generated by the permit carriers and undermining what little economic activity exists in the first place.

Medical patients

- There has been an **increase in security blocks placed on [medical patients seeking treatment](#)** (Hebrew) not **available in Gaza.** Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PHR-I) reports an increase in the number of cancer patients turning to them for assistance after their permit requests were refused. Between January-June 2016, PHR-I helped 43 cancer patients in need of medical treatment, compared with a total of 48 cases of cancer patients in all of 2015, an increase of 75% in the monthly average number of cancer patients whose permits requests were rejected and turned to PHR-I for help.
- In 2015, PHR-I received 243 requests for assistance from Gaza, mainly regarding permit request denials. In 61.7% of the cases, PHR-I's intervention secured the permit and helped remove security blocks. However, since the beginning of this year there has been a dramatic decrease in successful requests. In only 25% of cases were negative decisions reversed following the organization's intervention.
- The World Health Organization also [reported](#) that approval rates for exit of medical patients seeking treatment outside the Strip declined from 92.5% in 2012 to 77.5% in 2015. In October 2016, the rate was as low as 44%.

National staff of international organizations

- According to United Nations officials, there has been an increase of 49% in the rate of permit denials for UN national personnel based in Gaza (the denial rate in January 2016 was 3%, while in October it was 52%). True to October, over 100 permit applications have been denied; of these, 40 UN staff and staff of other international organizations (INGOs) were prohibited from requesting permits again for another 12 months.
- **The number of permit revocations at Erez Crossing has also increased.** True to September, at least eight UN and INGO personnel had their permits confiscated by Israeli security authorities so far in 2016, compared to two permits confiscated in all of 2015.

Case study: Student blocked from returning to his studies in Europe

M., a 33-year-old Gaza resident traveled from Gaza through Rafah Crossing in 2014 to pursue a PhD in a European country. In the course of his studies, he received a permit from the Israeli military authorities to conduct field research in the West Bank and Gaza, planning to return to Europe after a few weeks to continue his studies. After applying for and receiving a permit from COGAT to exit Gaza and return to his studies through Jordan, M. arrived at Erez Crossing. He waited several hours at the crossing before being told that he would not be allowed to leave Gaza for his studies. Gisha contacted the Gaza DCO and was told that M. is blocked for 'security reasons', this despite the fact that he had been granted a permit and had been allowed to travel from Gaza just a month before for follow-up research in the West Bank. Gisha applied for another permit on M.'s behalf, explaining that M. had to return to Europe before his residency expired. A week before the expiry date, Gisha was informed that M. was granted a permit and was approved to cross through Erez in two days. When he arrived at Erez, he was once again told that he would not be able travel as there is a security block against him. Neither M. nor Gisha, as his legal representation, have received information about the reasons M. is blocked, thus limiting our ability to challenge the block.

Challenging security blocks

Individuals who are blocked for security reasons are not provided information about the nature of the block, often even in the course of legal proceedings, leaving them and their legal representation unable to challenge it.

We have found that in several cases, where Gisha has challenged the block, either through media work or legal intervention, the Israeli authorities will **reverse their decision and grant a travel permit, either to avoid negative media attention or to avoid going to court.** This calls into question the arbitrary and slack decision-making process for assigning a security block in the first place.

In response to Gisha's [attempts](#), via Freedom of Information proceedings, to receive more information and statistics about the numbers of people who are security blocked or how many permits are issued despite security blocks, the state claimed that to reveal such information would result in a "threat to national security, public safety or personal safety", which the court accepted without reservations. State officials [also cited](#) in the course of legal proceedings that the practice of issuing security blocks is tied to the October 2015 rise in violence and instability in the West Bank and Jerusalem; however, it's difficult to see the connection given the lack of transparency about the objectives behind the practice and how widely it is being applied.

Conclusion

Limitations on access, particularly for Gaza's most prominent businesspeople, students, and others, fly in the face of the logic embraced by many [Israeli politicians and security officials](#) that economic well-being in Gaza will benefit Israeli security. Our concern is that the lack of proper oversight and scrutiny of these decisions result not only in the denial of individual rights, but also an overall chilling effect in requests for travel, deterrence on Israeli businesspeople to trade with Gaza, and a reduction in economic activity which also harms regional stability.