



مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان  
AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

**act:onaid**

## **Fact Sheet**

# **" Gaza in the face of two viruses: COVID-19 and occupation"**

The effects of Israel's closure and practices in the Gaza Strip  
on health services during the COVID-19 pandemic



5 March 2020- 11 September 2022



مركز الميزان لحقوق الإنسان  
AL MEZAN CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



**act:onaid**

## Fact Sheet

on the challenges faced in tackling COVID-19 under Apartheid in the Gaza Strip.

### **"The effects of Israel's closure and practices in the Gaza Strip on health services during the COVID-19 pandemic "**

5 March 2020- 11 September 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the Gaza Strip against the backdrop of already very difficult living conditions endured by more than two million Palestinians due to the suffocating closure and blockade imposed by Israel. The closure cripples all aspects of life in Gaza, affects economic, social, and cultural rights, and reduces the ability of service sectors—particularly the health sector and infrastructure facilities—to serve the population and meet its needs, making it difficult to respond effectively to the outbreak of the pandemic, which aggravated the humanitarian crisis in Gaza in an unprecedented way.

International human rights law (IHRL) pays great attention to the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. Under both international human rights and humanitarian law, Israel, as the occupying power, has obligations toward the civilian population living in the territory it occupies—particularly concerning the provision of healthcare services to civilians, including detainees. In defiance of international law, Israeli authorities have imposed a regime of institutionalized discrimination, oppression, and apartheid against Palestinians and flaunted the provision of vaccines while also tightening movement restrictions on Palestinians—particularly the residents of the Strip—and obstructing the delivery of vaccines and medical equipment to Gaza. As a consequence, the health crisis had worsened and the threats to patients’ and people’s lives have increased, with Gaza’s Ministry of Health declaring its inability to control the spread of the virus due to the limited resources available.<sup>1</sup>

This fact sheet, which covers the period between 4 March 2020 to 11 September 2022, outlines Al Mezan’s monitoring of developments in the Gaza Strip in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the measures and policies implemented by Israeli authorities that have limited the ability of residents and institutions to respond to the virus.

### **Restrictions on Gaza’s crossings and health challenges**

- Despite the strict preventive health measures imposed by the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MOH), on 24 August 2020 it was confirmed that several COVID-19 cases were detected within Gaza’s community. At that point, controlling the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the Gaza Strip was a mission impossible, particularly considering the high population density, the restricted area of the Strip, and the scarce health resources. At the time of writing, the total number of people infected with COVID-19 and its variants in the Gaza Strip was 272,193, with 2,004 confirmed deaths. 32.24% of Gaza’s population was vaccinated, including 56% of those aged 16 and above.<sup>2</sup>
- Israeli authorities banned the entry of medicines, medical devices, equipment, spare parts, and other materials necessary to fix and maintain medical devices. These

---

<sup>1</sup> Palestinian Ministry of Health, Press conference on the developments of the epidemiological situation in the Gaza Strip, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvj85GHjekE>

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health, the Health Information Database Unit (last updated on 11 September 2022), available at: <https://www.moh.gov.ps/portal/coronavirus/>

policies prevented Gaza's hospitals from accessing certain essential diagnostic and therapeutic resources.<sup>3</sup>

- Medical facilities in the Gaza Strip faced shortages of devices and equipment to diagnose the virus. During the pandemic, there has been a shortage of laboratory materials for coronavirus testing. As a result, the MOH had stopped testing for COVID-19, especially after PCR testing kits ran out,<sup>4</sup> adversely affecting the ability of doctors to monitor the development of patients and prescribe appropriate medicines.<sup>5</sup>
- The health crisis has been further exacerbated due to shortages in Intensive Care Units (ICU) beds equipped with ventilators, medical oxygen, and preventive means in medical facilities.<sup>6</sup>
- Workforce development in the health sector has been hampered by Israel's frequent denial of exit permits to medical personnel seeking to leave Gaza to attend external training courses, scientific conferences, and other professional development opportunities that would equip them with up-to-date skills and knowledge.
- The acute and chronic electricity deficit doubled during the pandemic, with the hours of electricity declining up to four hours followed by 20 hours of a power cut.<sup>7</sup> The MoH had to keep and store vaccines—which require a special cold chain between -20 C° to -80 C°—in the refrigerators of blood banks. Electricity shortages also affected patients and their living conditions and limited the ability to operate essential and vital facilities and structures. In August 2020, the Israeli authorities banned the entry of industrial fuel at the peak of the COVID-19 outbreak, leading to a reduction in the hours of electricity supplied.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the water distribution schedule got affected and many households were deprived of receiving sufficient water for domestic use. The crisis of health, hygiene, and environmental pollution have together deepened and multiplied the seriousness of the disease.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Majdi Dheir, Director of Preventive Medicine Department at the Ministry of Health, interviewed by Al Mezan's researcher Basem Abu Jray on 28 August 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Al Mezan Center for Human Rights (Al Mezan), *Al Mezan Calls on the International Community to Ensure the Steady Supply of COVID-19 Testing Kits to Gaza*, 7 December 2020, available at: <https://mezan.org/en/post/23886>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Al Mezan, *Fact Sheet: Water Shortage in the Gaza Strip Amid COVID-19 Outbreak*, 30 September 2020, available at: <https://mezan.org/en/post/23794>

<sup>8</sup> Mohammed Thabet, Director of Public Relations and Media in the Gaza Electricity Distribution Company, Press Conference, available in Arabic at: <https://www.palinfo.com/279998>

<sup>9</sup> Above note 7.

## Israel's discriminatory policies and obstruction of vaccines

- Israel distributed vaccines to its population while depriving Palestinians of their share. The then Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated that “Israel is likely to be the first country to come out of COVID-19 crisis because our health system is the most developed internationally and serves as a model for other nations”.<sup>10</sup> Yet Israeli authorities obstructed the shipment of 50,000 doses of the Sputnik vaccine, ordering the shipment to be stopped and unloaded at an Israeli checkpoint in Beitunia (west of Ramallah, West Bank) and again at Kerem Shalom crossing (Gaza).<sup>11</sup>
- During the Israeli military offensive carried out in May 2021, the direct and indirect military attacks inflicted various levels of damage on four hospitals, 34 medical centers and clinics, three laboratories, and nine pharmacies. Among these, three clinics, a laboratory, and a pharmacy were destroyed. Damage to doors, windows, walls, hospital beds, and equipment—including testing devices and computers—impacted a large portion of the facilities. Israeli airstrike partially destroyed Al-Rimal Clinic—Gaza’s only laboratory for the processing of COVID-19 tests—and the administrative building of the MOH in Gaza,<sup>12</sup> rendering the laboratory inoperable and disrupting services in maternal health, pregnancy monitoring, family planning, and fetal medicine departments.<sup>13</sup>

## The suffering of Palestinian detainees during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Palestinian detainees in Israeli prisons endured additional suffering during the outbreak of COVID-19. Israeli authorities failed to heed UN calls and warnings of the risks of COVID-19 to detainees and did not take sufficient preventive measures to control the spread of the virus.<sup>14</sup> Confirmed cases among Palestinian detainees were recorded in various Israeli prisons—including Gilboa, Ramon, Negev, and Ofer.
- On 24 December 2020, the Israeli Minister of Internal Security issued a decision to begin vaccinating the staff of the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) and excluding Palestinian detainees, thereby violating by that their rights to health.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> I24 News, *Netanyahu: Israel likely to be first country to come out of COVID-19 crisis*, 24 December 2020, available at: <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/coronavirus/1608836195-netanyahu-israel-likely-to-be-first-country-to-come-out-of-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>11</sup> Palestinian Ministry of Health, Facebook post in Arabic available at: <https://www.facebook.com/mohps/posts/4159490157510164>

<sup>12</sup> Al Mezan, *Under Heavy Attacks and Tightened Blockade, Gaza Health Services are at Risk of Collapse*, 19 May 2021, available at: <https://mezan.org/en/post/23989>

<sup>13</sup> Palestinian Ministry of Health, *The Impact of Israeli Military Attacks on the Ministry of Health and Al-Rimal Clinic*, available in Arabic only at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZOGhOH2PPo>

<sup>14</sup> WHO, UNODC, WHO, UNAIDS, and OHCHR joint statement on COVID-19 in prisons and other closed settings, 13 May 2020, available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-05-2020-unodc-who-unaid-and-ohchr-joint-statement-on-covid-19-in-prisons-and-other-closed-settings>

<sup>15</sup> Al Mezan, *Al Mezan condemns Israel's decision not to vaccinate Palestinian prisoners and calls on the international community to urgently intervene*, 30 December 2020, available at: <https://mezan.org/en/post/23894>

- At the same time, Israeli authorities also banned family visits and phone calls to 250 Palestinian detainees from Gaza under the pretext that it was a preventive measure amid the spread of COVID-19.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the burden on the residents of Gaza, who have been suffering for years a draconian, stifling closure that serves to intentionally aggravate Gaza's health situation and deepen the humanitarian crisis. The ban on the entry of fuel and medical necessities has further exacerbated the humanitarian conditions and crippled the health sector.

To this end, Al Mezan presents the following recommendations and calls for action:

1. The international community must work effectively to end Israel's closure and blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip, put an end to the system of apartheid imposed on the Palestinian people, pressure Israel to stop its military attacks against civilian and civilian infrastructures, including on health and infrastructure facilities, and ensure Israel's compliance with its obligations under the international humanitarian and human rights law.
2. The international community must support projects which would improve health determinants in the Gaza Strip and enable Palestinians, in different geographic areas, to overcome the Israeli policy of fragmentation, and support the development in the economic, cultural, and social fields.
3. International health agencies and organizations shall continue to support the health sector in Gaza, assist in centralizing healthcare services, and ensure the provision of basic healthcare necessities and equipment to the Gaza Strip—including vaccines, medicines, and COVID-19 testing devices.

---

<sup>16</sup> Al Mezan, *HaMoked and Al Mezan petitioned the High Court of Justice to renew family visits to 250 Palestinian inmates from Gaza who are held inside Israel*, 22 December 2021, available at: <https://mezan.org/en/post/24092>