

PALESTINE

Humanitarian needs after the escalation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip - September 2021

OVERVIEW

Four months after the escalation of hostilities in the Gaza Strip, humanitarian needs remain, and reconstruction efforts are stalled. The consequences of the violence in May have further deteriorated the already poor humanitarian conditions faced by the Palestinian population across Gaza and the West Bank, including pre-existing movement restrictions, administrative and physical barriers to accessing basic services, the destruction and confiscation of homes and assets, as well as increasing poverty and unemployment rates (OCHA 28/07/2021; World Bank 06/07/2021). 1.3 million people, including 611,000 children, have experienced additional challenges in accessing basic services, such as water and healthcare, as a result of the conflict escalation in May (UNICEF accessed 21/09/2021).

Background: rising tensions and violence between in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in April led to an escalation of hostilities from 10–21 May, with Palestinian armed group Hamas firing rockets into Israel, and the Israeli army carrying out airstrikes and artillery attacks in densely populated civilian areas of the Gaza Strip (OHCHR 27/05/2021; Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 01/09/2021). During the escalation, 260 Palestinians, including 66 children, were killed and thousands of houses, livelihood structures, and critical infrastructure were destroyed (OCHA 08/09/2021 and 06/06/2021; Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 01/09/2021). In the West Bank, 26 Palestinians were killed in protests during the escalation, and about 6,900 people were injured. Hamas rockets killed 13 people in Israel, including two children, and damage to civilian infrastructure and houses was reported (OCHA 04/06/2021; OHCHR 29/07/2021). The conflict escalation was prompted by a series of events that occurred in East Jerusalem in April and May. A violent police response to Palestinians protesting against forced evictions in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, as well as the use of force against worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque and in the Damascus Gate area triggered the unrest that culminated in the escalation (ICG 14/05/2021).

About this report

The analysis provides an update on the humanitarian situation and needs in Gaza since the escalation of hostilities in May 2021. It is based on a review of secondary data and key informant interviews in August–September. This report is a follow-up to the **Escalation of hostilities and insecurity in the Gaza Strip and West Bank report** (ACAPS 08/06/2021), which highlighted the immediate humanitarian needs in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The analysis aims to highlight unaddressed needs and information gaps in relation to the escalation of hostilities, focusing on Gaza as the needs are high in the area. There are also information gaps that complicate an assessment of the current impact of the escalation in the West Bank.

Limitations

Very little updated information has been available on the humanitarian situation in Palestine since May, including the scale of rebuilding efforts, making the triangulation of information particularly difficult.

Information gaps

Though the escalation of hostilities was partly triggered by protests in the West Bank, there are information gaps on its direct impact on Palestinians in the West Bank, beyond the number of deaths. For instance, it is unclear whether the livelihoods of West Bank Palestinians were affected as a direct result of the hostilities or because of the decreasing livelihood opportunities in the West Bank. There is no information on the effect of import restrictions in Gaza on the reconstruction of different types of infrastructure (donor-funded, private, or public). There is also limited information on the impact of the escalation on different population groups.

This report is part of a series of independent analysis products to support humanitarian decision-making in Palestine in the aftermath of the escalation of violence in May 2021. Read more [here](#). The project benefited from support by the H2H Network's H2H Fund, which is supported by UK aid from the UK government.

CRISIS IMPACT

Impact on critical infrastructure

The electricity distribution network in Gaza was significantly damaged by Israeli airstrikes and failed Hamas rockets during the conflict escalation. As a result, there was a severe power supply shortage (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 01/09/2021; OCHA 06/06/2021). This affected the sustainability of existing livelihoods and the provision of emergency healthcare and other essential services in the Gaza Strip. Significant reductions in the availability of building maintenance and construction material in the local market, combined with the continued ban on the entry of 'dual-use' materials into Gaza, created additional challenges to the operation and maintenance of the only power plant in Gaza (UNICEF 25/08/2021). The number of average hours of electricity per day dropped from 15 in April to 9 in May, and by July had recovered to pre-escalation levels of 13 hours per day. On average, there is a 227 MW/day gap between electricity supply and demand (OCHA accessed 24/09/2021).

WASH

Water production capacity in Gaza has deteriorated, as some of the WASH infrastructure repairs have been done superficially owing to limited means and the inability to source needed materials. This has undermined humanitarian efforts to improve access to WASH (KII 15/09/2021; UNICEF 25/08/2021). In May, over 290 WASH facilities were destroyed, leaving roughly 1.3 million people in the Gaza Strip without access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation facilities, and hygiene materials. More substantial repairs are necessary (UNICEF 25/08/2021). The damages further compounded pre-existing access challenges to adequate WASH services, such as lack of safe drinking water, pollution of water from sewage, and lack of electricity restricting the ability to pump water. There is also limited functional WASH infrastructure as a result of Israel's policy of limiting the importation of 'dual-use' materials such as cement and iron, which are needed to maintain and repair water and sewage systems (Oxfam 25/05/2021; OHCHR 23/09/2021). Proper sewage disposal remains an issue throughout Gaza and is negatively affected by fuel shortages. Damage to WASH facilities directly affects the communities' health needs and may increase the transmission of communicable diseases (KII 23/09/2021 a).

More than 280,000 people, particularly in low-lying areas, are at risk of flooding after rainfall or from overflow of wastewater reservoirs and pumping stations (OCHA 18/03/2019). This is heightened during the winter season and expected to worsen with the effects of climate change (MA'AN Development Center 09/09/2021). The inability to repair and maintain WASH facilities is a contributing factor. The escalation of violence in May destroyed and damaged

WASH facilities and the delay in reconstruction is likely to heighten the risk of flooding. 90.6% of the people surveyed for the REACH Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA)¹ in the West Bank and Gaza had their daily activities affected by flooding over the last three years (REACH 16/08/2021).

Health

Almost 2,000 Palestinians were injured during the hostilities in Gaza, including 600 children, some of whom may be affected by long-term disabilities (OCHA 06/06/2021). The bombing of an agricultural and chemical warehouse may affect the population's health in the long term (Al Mezan Center for Human Rights 09/09/2021; Al-Monitor 14/06/2021). Nine hospitals and 19 primary healthcare centres were damaged or destroyed, including Al Rimal clinic, Gaza's only COVID-19 testing laboratory (UN, EU, World Bank 06/07/2021; NYT 18/05/2021). Testing has continued despite damage to the building, and repairs are planned (KII 23/09/2021 b). On 9 September, there were over 19,000 active cases in Gaza, with a positivity rate of 29% and the number of deaths tripling over one week (WHO accessed 09/09/2021).

The type of healthcare and procedures that the population can access in Gaza is limited and was further constrained during the escalation. Patients must travel outside of Gaza for more intensive and complex treatments and require exit permits to transit through the Erez Crossing (KII 23/09/2021 b). Stricter limitations on movement at the crossings resulting from the conflict meant that the number of approved applications for health-related travel was severely limited, with only 531 permits provided to patients and companions in May 2021. 955 permits were provided for patients in August, out of 1,484 applications. This constitutes the highest number of applications per month since February 2020, and is 34% above the monthly average number of applications in the first half of 2021 (WHO 29/09/2021; Gisha accessed 30/09/2021).

Humanitarian organisations provided initial healthcare to those in need after the escalation, but continued assistance and psychosocial support are required (KII 23/09/2021 b; MSF 30/06/2021; Islamic Relief 13/09/2021). The public health system in Gaza is not equipped to manage continued assistance for those needing intensive treatments as a direct result of the escalation (KII 23/09/2021 a). COVID-19 and the May escalation further strained health services and resulted in other diseases and services, including oncological services, being neglected (KII 23/09/2021 a). Hospitals and clinics in Gaza are still suffering the effects of the conflict escalation, including shortages of medicine and equipment, as a result of Israel's blockade and tightened restrictions of movement into Gaza (MAP 24/08/2021; KII 23/09/2021 a). Medicine has been held up at transit points, resulting in it expiring and no longer being fit for consumption (KII 23/09/2021 a).

¹ The data was collected across 7,514 households (4,126 households in Gaza; 3,219 households in the West Bank; 169 households in East Jerusalem) between 4–28 July. Weighting has been applied for all of the results. Data specific to the escalation in May was only collected from Gaza households.

The disruption of maternal and child health services during the escalation (UNICEF 17/05/2021) is likely to compound the long-term impact of pre-existing limitations on movement and access to services and medicine. It is unclear whether services have returned to pre-escalation levels considering the destruction to health facilities. Maternal and child health remains a priority for humanitarian organisations (OCHA 03/09/2021).

Noise from rockets and missiles, widespread destruction, sustained injuries, and witnessing the loss of lives has caused trauma and fear in the community. The need for mental health and psychosocial support services has increased, especially among children. Approximately 675,000 children in Gaza require mental health and psychosocial support services (UNICEF 25/08/2021 and 17/05/2021). During the escalation of hostilities, Palestinian children were at increased risk of being arrested and detained by Israeli forces (UNICEF 17/05/2021). Children who were held captive are likely to need specialised psychosocial support.

Shelter

An estimated 2,173 houses were destroyed or severely damaged as a result of the conflict, with another 57,000 partially damaged housing units in the Gaza Strip (OCHA 03/09/2021; Shelter Cluster 29/07/2021). The REACH MSNA found that 31% of respondents in Gaza reported shelter damages as a result of the conflict escalation in May. A significant proportion could not repair their shelters as at July. Roughly 21% of households were displaced temporarily because of the conflict, with northern Gaza reporting the highest percentage at 43% (REACH 16/08/2021).

Rebuilding efforts have primarily been stalled, with roughly 2,000 homes still uninhabitable (KII 15/09/2021; Al Jazeera 25/09/2021; OCHA 03/09/2021). Approximately 8,000 people are still displaced. IDPs are staying with family or friends, in rented accommodation, or residing in their destroyed or damaged housing (KII 15/09/2021; OCHA 03/09/2021). This heightens the risk of contracting COVID-19 (KIIs 23/09/2021 a and b).

Food security and livelihoods

The escalation of conflict affected Gaza's livelihood structures, such as production and service facilities and agricultural areas. This directly and indirectly compounded financial stresses from COVID-19-related measures and years of restrictive policies and practices.

Livestock has died as a result of the blockade of imports across the crossings into Gaza since May and the subsequent disruption to animal feed supply (Al-Monitor 02/06/2021; OCHA 21/05/2021). The death of livestock has likely caused a loss of income and an erosion of income opportunities for breeders.

Continuous attacks on industrial parks in the Gaza Strip and the restriction of access for emergency teams such as fire services to the area damaged more than 100 factories, companies, and shops. Hundreds of workers were left without an income (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 01/09/2021).

According to the Ministry of Labour, 19,766 workers were affected by damage to facilities – 55% of them in the Gaza governorate (WFP 25/06/2021). 50% of Gaza respondents from the MSNA reported that their livelihoods and assets were affected as a result of the escalation. 5% of households permanently lost their income. This has resulted in increased debt for affected households. Basic household expenditure has been the primary reason for debts in roughly 50% of responding households in Gaza. The second-most reported reason for debt, occurring in approximately 10–15% of households, was the reconstruction of shelters. MSNA data shows that 75% of households in Gaza borrowed money for food as a coping mechanism, and 50% reduced expenditure. Families continue to revert to negative coping mechanisms as they cannot meet their food needs, with 10–15% of Gaza respondents reporting having resorted to risky behaviour (REACH 16/08/2021). 83% of families consumed less preferred food or food of lower quality, 68% bought food on credit, heightening their risk of debt, and over half relied on friends or family (WFP 21/09/2021). These figures remain consistent with other WFP reports published since May 2021 (WFP 31/07/2021 and 15/07/2021).

During and after the escalation of hostilities, Palestinian access to the sea was increasingly limited by further restrictions on the allocated fishing area. This affected the incomes of people engaged in the fishing sector (WFP 25/06/2021). The fishing zone was extended to 15 nautical miles on 31 August (Gisha 01/09/2021). Based on the Oslo Accords, fishers are entitled to access up to 20 nautical miles off the coast (Al Jazeera 29/04/2021).

In Gaza, imports and exports were prevented during the May conflict, as the Kerem Shalom and Erez crossings were closed (OCHA 18/05/2021). This further contributed to the suspension of work within related industries in the Gaza Strip. Although the Kerem Shalom Crossing reopened on 25 May 2021, Israeli authorities still prevented the entry of most goods and raw materials. The movement of materials has not yet returned to pre-escalation levels. The suspension of work for import and export industries continues within certain sectors in Gaza (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor 01/09/2021; KII 23/09/2021 a). This has affected the price of essential foods. The cost of tomatoes, for example, increased by 52% in July as a result of a shortage in supply (WFP 14/09/2021).

The economic consequences of the damages caused by the escalation have been predicted to continue until 2023. There was a 0.3% drop in gross domestic product in 2021 compared to the pre-escalation predicted growth rate of 2.5%. The unemployment rate in Gaza is estimated to reach 50% by the end of 2021 (EU, UNSCO, World Bank 06/07/2021). Poverty and unemployment remain the main drivers of chronic food insecurity (WFP 25/06/2021).

Protection

Palestine is already affected by a protracted protection crisis. Palestinians in Gaza suffered from trauma, insecurity, fear, and a lack of protection during the escalation (UNICEF 18/05/2021; UN Women 23/06/2021).

The constant threat of an escalation in violence significantly affects the normal functioning of Gaza. At the end of August, Israeli forces dispersed protests along the fence between Gaza and Israel (Al Jazeera 25/08/2021; OCHA 09/09/2021).

Explosive remnants of war pose significant risks, including injury or death. At least 16 identified deep-buried bombs need to be excavated in Gaza (OCHA 03/09/2021).

IDPs sheltering within their destroyed homes are exposed to additional protection risks. Women and girls are especially vulnerable and likely to experience heightened distress from the loss of privacy. Displacement and related stressors have previously been identified as drivers of gender-based violence in Gaza (UN Women 23/06/2021). Following the escalation, there has been an increase in victims of gender-based violence who require medical attention, shelter, and food assistance (OCHA 03/09/2021).

The escalation of hostilities was triggered on 6 May 2021, when Palestinians in East Jerusalem protested the Supreme Court of Israel's ruling on the eviction of several Palestinian families (around 300 people) from land claimed by Israeli settlers in the neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah (Reuters 10/05/2021; BBC 26/05/2021). Israeli forces often evict Palestinian households and demolish their property. Evictions and demolitions are also initiated by settler organisations to create and expand Jewish settlements (ACAPS 01/10/2021). Over the next months, demolitions and forced evictions are likely to continue, leading to further displacement. The situation could potentially trigger more protests and violence.

Education

331 education facilities sustained damages, with public schools being the most affected (OCHA 03/09/2021). The school term started again in August after disruptions caused by COVID-19 restrictions and the escalation of violence (OCHA 08/09/2021). Schools have had to run several shifts per day to accommodate the students in the decreased number of functional schools (KII 21/09/2021). Assigning several shifts per day to each teacher negatively affects the quality of learning and is likely to affect students' motivation (KII 21/09/2021).

HUMANITARIAN AND OPERATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

By July 2021, 53% of households in Gaza reported having received some assistance since the start of the escalation. 63% of households experienced challenges in accessing assistance, such as lack of information on how to apply (18%) and lack of understanding of the application (12%) (REACH 16/08/2021). The Ministry of Public Works and Housing for Gaza, the Qatar Committee for Reconstruction of Gaza and other international parties have planned for a USD 1 billion reconstruction plan for Gaza to begin in October 2021. Israel has agreed to remove restrictions on the entry of building materials into Gaza. Concerns remain around whether the lifting of restrictions will be guaranteed throughout the process (Al Jazeera 25/09/2021).

The closure of the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings heavily constrained the movement of goods and people both during the escalation and after the ceasefire was announced. Travel through the Erez Crossing was banned during the ten days of conflict, with humanitarian staff entering for the first time on 21 May (KII 18/08/2021). Entry of construction material through Kerem Shalom was restored by Israel on 19 August but remained restricted for all but humanitarian actors. The Rafah Crossing and Salah a-Din Gate, controlled by Egypt, were closed from 23–29 August. The closure left Gazan residents stranded and delayed the entry of construction materials and fuel (Gisha 01/09/2021). This affected the provision of humanitarian services and economic recovery (UNICEF 25/08/2021). Although restrictions have eased overall, significant delays remain, creating shortages, stalling rebuilding efforts, and impeding quick recovery.