

2017: Tightening of the closure A round-up of 10 recent measures imposed by Israel further limiting movement of people to and from Gaza

Following Operation Protective Edge in 2014, there was a noticeable [shift in the rhetoric](#) of Israeli security and political officials, acknowledging that Gaza's recovery and economic development are linked with Israel's security. Unfortunately, Israel's access policy and its implementation on the ground do not reflect this recognition. In fact, since late 2015, we have been witnessing a steep regression in access policy, primarily with respect to movement of people via Erez Crossing. Throughout 2017, new or intensified measures further restricted travel to and from Gaza, making last year the worst for access since 2014.

These measures corresponded with a steady decline in the number of people travelling out of Gaza. [The number of exits by Palestinians](#) through Erez Crossing in 2017 dropped by 51 percent compared to 2016. The monthly average in 2017 was only 5,963 exits compared to a monthly average of 12,150 exits in 2016 and 14,276 exits in 2015. The monthly average number of exits in 2014 was 6,270. What is clear is that these measures were introduced with little to no public discussion, with immediate effect and no prior notice, no justification provided as to their purpose and, it appears, no consideration of the impact they would have on Gaza's civilian population, which is already under great duress.

The following is a round-up of 10 new or intensified obstacles facing Gaza residents wishing to travel via Erez Crossing.

SECURITY BLOCKS RESTRICTING TRAVEL THROUGH EREZ CROSSING: Gisha [began tracking](#) an inexplicable uptick in the use of "security blocks" as early as 2015, which has only increased since. Israel blocks individuals from traveling on the claim of undisclosed "security considerations," which, given the lack of evidence provided to the individual or her lawyers, makes it difficult to challenge the accusations. In some cases, Gisha's legal intervention or public advocacy has led security blocks to be lifted, calling into question their legitimacy, the rationale behind them and the practice as a whole.

TRADER PERMITS CANCELLED AND NEW APPROVALS DECLINED: According to the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee, as of December 2017, there were only 551 valid trader permits, a drop of 85 percent compared with 3,500-3,700 trader permits valid in late 2015. The people being blocked from receiving permits include prominent businesspeople with longstanding relationships in the West Bank and Israel, who discover – only upon submitting a request for renewal – that they are blocked. Permits enable many of Gaza's leading businesspeople to travel for the sake of establishing professional relationships and realizing business opportunities. Israel's large-scale revocations and refusals of permits have an

immediate ripple effect, impacting those who are reliant on the economic activity generated by the permit carriers and undermining what little economic activity exists in the first place.

CANCELLATION OF QUOTA FOR FRIDAY PRAYERS IN JERUSALEM: Travel to Friday prayers at al-Aqsa from the Gaza Strip [was cancelled](#) in December 2016. The Civil Affairs Committee in Gaza was told by the Israeli authorities that the reason for the cancellation was that some worshippers did not return to Gaza on the same day as their travel. Travel for prayer at the al-Aqsa Mosque had been permitted since October 2014, in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge. A quota of 200 worshippers every Friday was put in place and permits were given only to persons aged 60 or over. A separate quota of 100, also cancelled, was set aside for UNRWA employees.

MAKING GAZA RESIDENTS TRAVELLING ABROAD SIGN A COMMITMENT NOT TO RETURN FOR A YEAR: In February 2016, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) added a new criterion to the [Status of Authorizations](#), a document which defines the categories of people in Gaza eligible to apply for exit permits. The criteria says that residents of Gaza can travel abroad via Erez and Allenby Bridge crossings on the condition that they [sign](#) a waiver stating that they will not request to re-enter Gaza for one year via Israel. In 2017, the practice became all the more absurd as Gaza residents whose exit from Gaza had already been approved for other reasons began to be detained at Erez Crossing until they signed the waiver. The authorities are thus essentially conditioning exit on signing the waiver. Our casework reveals that residents are being made to sign even when they do not intend to stay away one year nor have paperwork to allow them to reside in third countries and that minors were made to sign without guardians' consent. The practice is a violation of one of the most fundamental rights - to leave and enter one's place of residence.

FREEZE ON TRAVEL TO THE AMERICAN CONSULATE: On June 14, 2017, Gisha received responses to two applications made by Gaza residents to exit the Strip for the purpose of attending visa interviews at the American Consulate in east Jerusalem. The responses [revealed](#) that a new directive was put into place, instating a sweeping prohibition on exiting Gaza for interviews at the consulate, regardless of individual circumstances. In its response to a petition Gisha filed on this issue, the state claimed that the prohibition was necessary to stop individuals from exploiting their permits and overstaying their terms. In late November, following a petition submitted by Gisha, what is being called a "pilot program" was launched whereby travelers would need to travel via shuttle to reach the consulate. The shuttle can carry up to 100 people and is meant to operate once every two weeks.

INTRODUCTION OF SHUTTLE SERVICES: Starting in 2017, individuals who are approved for travel abroad or returning from abroad must travel via shuttle between Erez Crossing and Allenby Bridge, accompanied by a representative of the Palestinian Civil Affairs Committee. This marks a change from the previous policy that allowed Palestinians to travel on their own once they were approved for travel and issued a permit. In late November, exit for the

appear to have increased in recent years, according to our casework. Palestinians report that during these interrogations their cellphones and other personal items are examined. They are asked to identify and state their connections to people and places in Gaza. If they do not answer, or answer incorrectly, they know that their ability to travel, now or in the future, could be jeopardized. Receiving a permit to travel is conditional on satisfactory conduct during these security interviews and at times, willingness to collaborate. Forcing Palestinians to undergo distressing interrogations in order to realize their right to travel, even when they fit the criteria for travel and, sometimes, when they have already been told that their application for a permit has been approved and is waiting for them at the crossing, is an abuse of power. One Gisha client, after being forced to undergo a particularly upsetting security interview to receive a permit, gave up on travel when her 17 year-old daughter was summoned to a security interview, deciding that she would rather not travel at all than expose her daughter to a similar situation.

Other restrictive measures taken in 2017 included [a prohibition](#) announced in late June on visits to prisoners allegedly affiliated with Hamas, [fewer permits](#) given as “holiday gestures” during Eid al Adha and Christmas, extended closures of the crossings [during Jewish holidays](#), and the [closure of Erez](#) as a punitive measure in response to rocket fire. While not all these tactics are new, we are concerned by the overall trend pointing to a severe and inexplicable tightening of the closure.