



MONTHLY REPORT

May 2021

Health Access

Barriers for patients in the occupied Palestinian territory

 **6,420**

referrals issued to access health facilities outside the Palestinian MoH

1,168 Gaza

5,175 West Bank

 **31%**

of Gaza patient permit applications approved

21%

of Gaza companion permit applications approved

 **88%**

of West Bank patient permit applications approved

82%

of West Bank companion permit applications approved

 **0**

Gaza patients called for security interrogation.

IN FOCUS

My kids need me, I just want to get the best treatment that I can

Part 1 Referrals

May referrals by the Ministry of Health

In May, the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 6,420 referrals to health care services delivered by non-MoH providers, 15% less than the monthly average (7,597) of the first quarter this year. Gaza patients' referrals decreased by more than 30% in May compared to the monthly average of first quarter of the year (1,689), with closure of the Services Purchase Unit (SPU) office of the Ministry of Health in Gaza and in the context of severe access restrictions during and after the 11-day escalation in May.

Referrals from the West Bank comprised 81% (5,175) of the total, including 789 referrals for patients from East Jerusalem, while the West Bank population comprises approximately 60% of the total population in the oPt. Referrals from the Gaza Strip, which makes up around 40% of the population in the oPt, accounted for 18% (1,168) of the total. The origin of 76 (1%) of referrals was not reported, and one was to Jordan.

While referrals from the West Bank have recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels, in the Gaza Strip the number of referrals issued for May 2021 represents a 53% reduction from the first quarter of 2020 (2,492).

Palestinian MoH referrals to hospitals in the West Bank, outside East Jerusalem, comprised less than half (47%) of all referrals in May; to East Jerusalem hospitals more than two-fifths (41%) of the total; to Israeli hospitals 6%; within the Gaza Strip 3% (a decrease from 8% in 2020); to Egypt 2%; and to Jordan 0.3% (21).

The top needed specialties for referrals were oncology (33%); urology & nephrology (8%); ophthalmology (6%); cardiac catheterization (5%); and cardiology, haematology, medical imaging, and radiotherapy (4% each). The remaining 32% were for 25 other medical specialties.

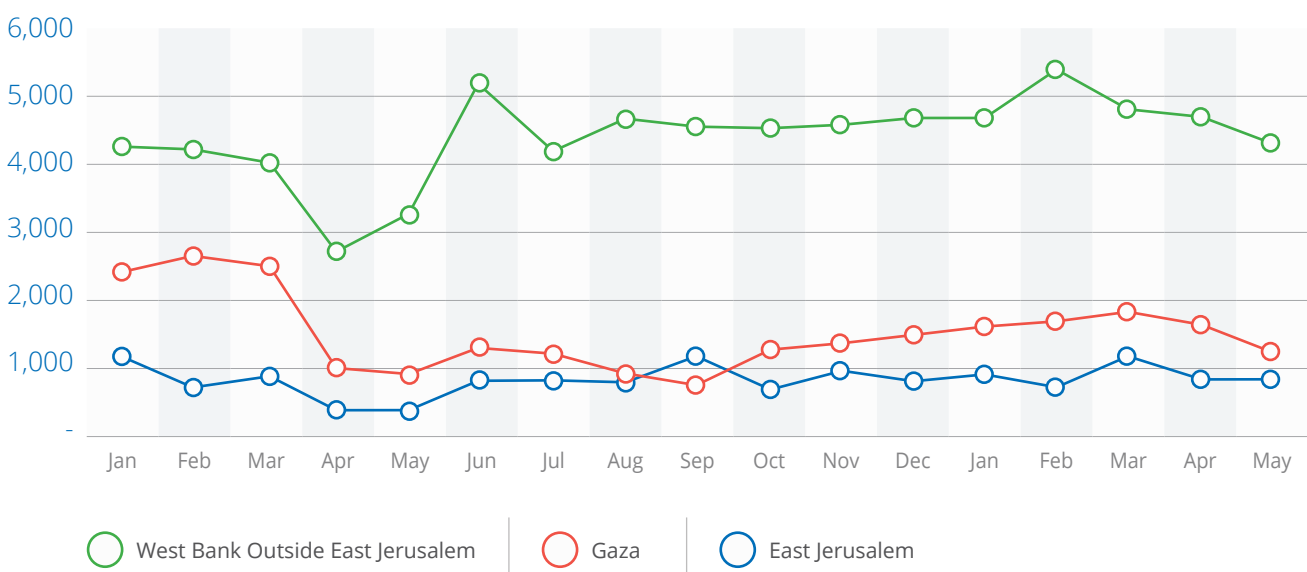
Referrals for patients under 18 years of age comprised 19% (1,247) of the total, while 31% (1,962) were for those aged 60 years or older. Referrals for female patients comprised 46% of the total.

 **1,168**
Gaza Strip

 **5,175**
West Bank

referrals approved financial coverage for healthcare outside the Palestinian Ministry of Health

Chart 1 Number of referrals issued by the Palestinian MoH by place of origin, January 2020 to May 2021



Part 2 Access

The Gaza Strip

There were 898 (M: 479; F: 419) patient permit applications for patients from the Gaza Strip to Israeli authorities in May 2021. This represents a 20% reduction from the monthly average number of patient permit applications for January to April, with severe restrictions on access during and following the 11-day military escalation in May. All permit applications for patients and companions were not approved during the 11-day escalation in the Gaza Strip from 11-22 May. After the ceasefire on 23 May, restrictions on patient access continued with only 13% (32 out of 241) of patient permits approved for exit via the Israeli checkpoint at Beit Hanoun (Erez) during this period.

More than a quarter (27%) of applications were for children under 18 and close to a fifth (18%) were for patients aged 60 years or older. 47% were for female patients, while 85% were for referrals funded by the Palestinian MoH. Close to three-fifths (58%) of applications to cross Beit Hanoun/Erez were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals; more than a quarter (26%) for West Bank hospitals outside East Jerusalem; 16% for Israeli hospitals; and 1 application for a hospital in Jordan. More than half (51%) of applications were for appointments at either Augusta Victoria Hospital (36%) or Makassed Hospital (15%), both in East Jerusalem. The top five specialties accounted for 75% of permit applications: oncology (43%); haematology (10%); ophthalmology (9%); cardiology (10%); and neurosurgery (3%). The remaining 25% of applications were for 23 other specialties.

Approved permit applications: 278 (M: 129; F: 149) or 31% of the 898 patient applications to cross Beit Hanoun/Erez in May 2021 were approved, a decline in the approval rate by nearly three fifths (58%) from 73% in April. More than half (54%) of the approved applications were female patients; slightly more than a fifth (22%) were for children under 18; and similarly 22% were for patients aged 60 years or older. Over half (53%) of approved applications were for oncology patients, 12% for haematology and 10% for cardiology.

898
patient applications
to Israeli authorities to cross
Beit Hanoun/Erez to access
health care

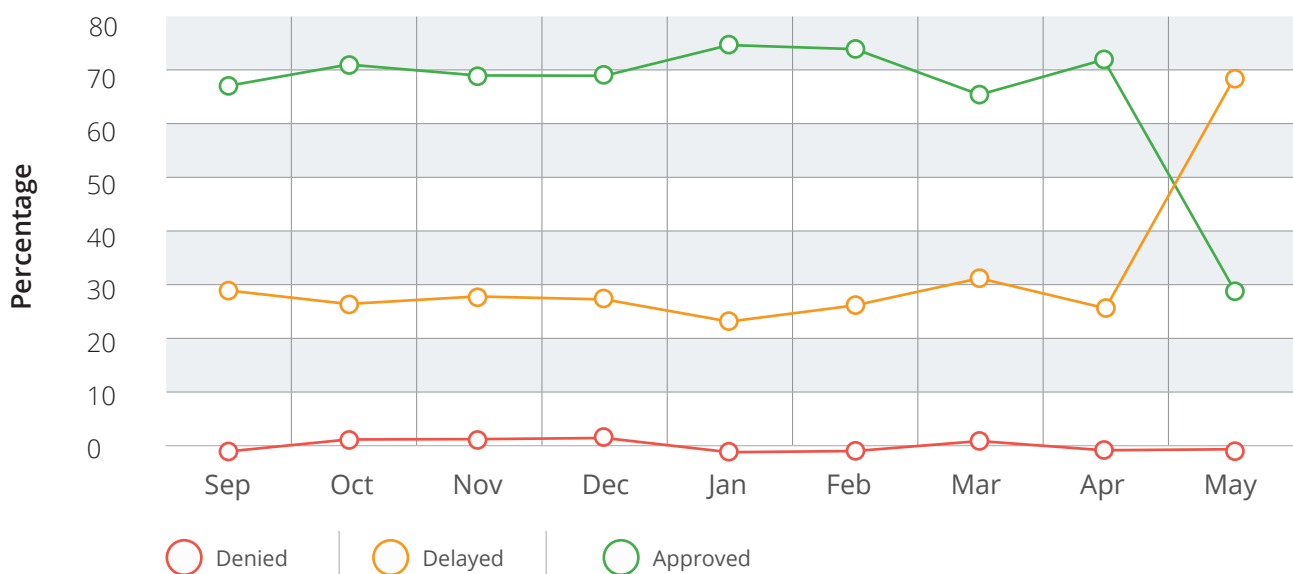
31%
approved

0%
denied

69%
delayed

Chart 2

Israeli responses to Gaza patient permit applications, September 2020 to May 2021 (%)



Denied care: No patient permit applications were denied in May.

Delayed care: 620 (M: 350; F: 270) patient permit applications, or 69% of the total, were delayed access to care, receiving no definitive response to their application by the date of their hospital appointment. 30% (184 applications) were for children under the age of 18; 55% (340) for patients aged 18-60 years and 15% (96) for patients over 60 years old. Close to two-fifths (38%) of those delayed had appointments for cancer care (oncology); 12% for ophthalmology; 10% for cardiology; 10% for haematology, 7% for paediatrics, 5% or orthopaedics. The remaining 18% were for 19 other specialties.

Of delayed applications, 57% were for appointments in East Jerusalem hospitals, 26% for the West Bank, and 17% for Israeli hospitals. Most delayed applications (618 or 99.7%) were 'under study' at the time of appointment and two applications were cancelled by hospitals.

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Security interrogation

In May, no patients or patient companions were recorded to have been requested for security interrogation as a prerequisite to processing their permit application.

Patient companions

The Health Liaison Office submitted 1,045 companion permit applications to Israeli authorities to accompany patients in May. These applications include parents or other companions applying to travel with children. Patients are eligible to apply to Israeli authorities for one companion to accompany them for health care outside the Gaza Strip. In May, 223 companion permit applications (21.3% of the total) were approved, one application (0.1%) was denied and the remaining 821 (78.6%) were delayed, receiving no definitive response by the time of the patient's appointment.



Patients and companions crossing Beit Hanoun/Erez

The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 294 Gaza patients and 237 companions exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint in May to access hospitals outside the Gaza Strip. Of the 294 patients, 41 patients were transferred by back-to-back ambulance with 41 companions. These numbers show that close to a fifth (19%) of patients crossed Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint in May without a companion. 9 bodies of deceased patients were returned to Gaza. During the month, Beit Hanoun/Erez checkpoint was open for 16 days for daytime working hours and closed on 15 days (11 days during the military escalation, 4 Saturdays).



0

Gaza patients

called for Security interrogation



1,045

companion applications

to Israeli authorities to cross Beit Hanoun/Erez to accompany patients



21% approved



0.1% denied



79% delayed



294

patients

exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez

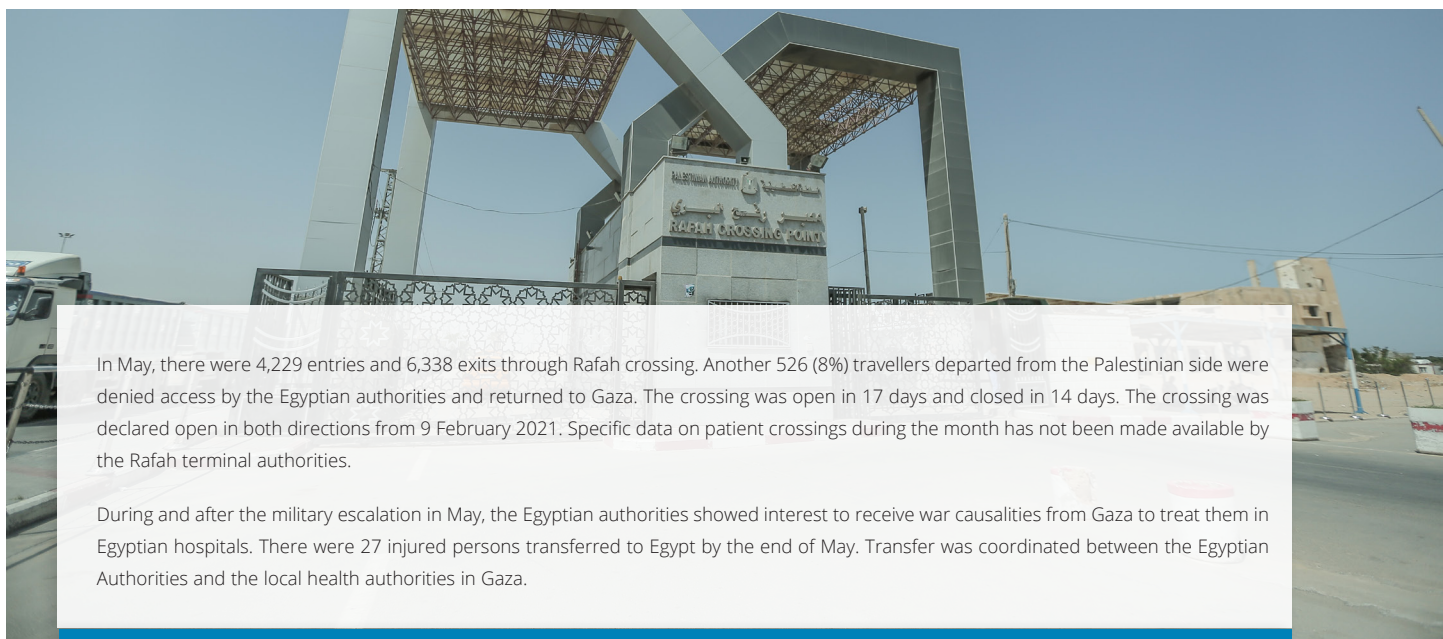


237

companions

exited through Beit Hanoun/Erez

Rafah crossing – Egypt



In May, there were 4,229 entries and 6,338 exits through Rafah crossing. Another 526 (8%) travellers departed from the Palestinian side were denied access by the Egyptian authorities and returned to Gaza. The crossing was open in 17 days and closed in 14 days. The crossing was declared open in both directions from 9 February 2021. Specific data on patient crossings during the month has not been made available by the Rafah terminal authorities.

During and after the military escalation in May, the Egyptian authorities showed interest to receive war casualties from Gaza to treat them in Egyptian hospitals. There were 27 injured persons transferred to Egypt by the end of May. Transfer was coordinated between the Egyptian Authorities and the local health authorities in Gaza.

The West Bank

In May 2021, there were 6,180 applications by West Bank patients to Israeli authorities to access health care in East Jerusalem and Israel.


Restrictions on the movement of Palestinians from the West Bank to Israel and East Jerusalem are less severe for certain sections of the population. Many women older than 50 years of age and men older than 55 years of age, as well as children under 13 years traveling with an approved adult, are exempted from the requirement to obtain a permit to travel – provided they are not traveling on a Saturday, before 8am or after 7pm.


Of 6,180 West Bank patient applications, 5,425 (87.8%) were approved, 542 (8.8%) were unsuccessful (denied) and 213 (3.4%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting.


Of the 6,443 West Bank companion applications, 5,256 (81.6%) were approved, 940 (14.6%) were unsuccessful and 247 (3.8%) were pending reply at the time of monthly reporting.

 **6,180**
patient permit
applications

for Israeli permits to access
healthcare in East Jerusalem
and Israel


 **88% approved**


 **9% denied**


 **3% pending**
at the time of monthly
reporting

 **6,443**
patient companion
applications

to access healthcare in East
Jerusalem and Israel

 **82% approved**

 **15% denied**

 **4% pending**
at the time of monthly
reporting

In Focus

My kids need me, I just want to get the best treatment that I can

Manal is 42 years old from Rafah in the south of the Gaza Strip. She was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in February this year and needed treatment not available in the blockaded stretch of coastline, which has a length less than that of a marathon (41km/25 miles) and a width of just 12km (7.5 miles) at most.

Following her diagnosis, Manal has been receiving chemotherapy treatment every two weeks at Al Hilal Hospital in Gaza. However, to reduce her cancer and to improve her quality of life, doctors in the Gaza Strip referred Manal to An-Najah University Hospital in Nablus in the West Bank to receive immunotherapy, a type of medicine that combats cancer by stimulating the patient's own immune system. The medication is not available in the Gaza Strip and is offered at specialist hospitals in other parts of the occupied Palestinian territory.

To reach An-Najah University Hospital Manal needed a permit from Israeli authorities. She applied three times, but each time Israeli authorities did not approve a permit in time for her to reach her hospital appointment. She was told that her permit applications for hospital appointments on 18 April and 4 May were under study, while she received no response to an application for a hospital appointment on 25 May.

During the 11-day escalation in May, Manal was receiving chemotherapy at Al Hilal Hospital and got separated from her family: "I had to stay two days in the hospital for my chemotherapy. My family took me the hospital, but I was so scared. I had to leave my kids with my mother, and I was worried sick about losing them. No place was safe, it was stressful. I wanted to call them often but I couldn't afford to buy a Jawwal card [phone card]. I prayed those two day would finish quickly so I go back to stay with them."

Manal is married with 4 children, and the family is struggling to make ends meet: "My husband cannot afford to support me or my kids, or even himself right now. We agreed that I would go back to my family with the kids. We don't own a place to live, so I came back to my mother's house. We're currently living with her and my brothers help to support us, but they are struggling themselves." Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, Gaza experienced one of the worst economic performances globally and had the world's highest unemployment rate.

After a delay of two months, Manal finally received a permit to exit the Gaza Strip to reach her hospital appointment at An-Najah University Hospital on 20 June. Delays to accessing essential health care have a significant and negative impact on the survival of patients with cancer, while causing anxiety and distress. WHO calls for unhindered access and urgent review of the permits system to ensure no Palestinian patient is left behind.



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