

Why Israel Is Suddenly Granting Gaza Thousands of Work Permits

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Israel’s 2021 assault on Gaza failed to significantly damage Hamas, with many blaming poor intelligence. What better way to extort information than to offer work to the desperate?

In October 2021, a [photograph](#) of a crowd of Palestinian men scrambling to submit applications for low-skilled work in [Israel](#) went viral on social media.

In the photograph, the men frantically wave their filled-in forms through a grill towards clerks at a chamber of commerce in the enclave blockaded by Israel since 2007; a blockade that has devastated Gaza’s economy, seen unemployment running at 50 percent and left Palestinians largely cut off from the outside world.

For those impoverished men, unable to feed their families and desperately waving their applications, the prospect of work in Israel, however menial, must have been tantalising.

To better understand the scene in the photograph, you have to go back to September, a month before the picture was taken and four months after [Israel](#) had launched its brutal [11-day-military operation](#) on the Gaza Strip.

For it was in September that the Israeli authorities announced that they were going to [allow](#) 7,000 Palestinian from Gaza to be employed doing low-skilled jobs in Israel.

A few days later, the Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (Cogat) – the body in charge of Palestinian civilian affairs – said that Israeli authorities would allow an additional 3,000 Palestinians from the blockaded Strip to work in Israel, bringing the total to 10,000.

Last month, the quota was increased again to [20,000](#).

Israel’s move has been seen by many as an attempt to strengthen the fragile calm between

Israel and Hamas, the de facto ruling authority of the Gaza Strip, home to over two million residents.

In easing the economic pressures on the Gazan economy by allowing some of its citizens to work in Israel, the theory goes, the uneasy peace following Israel's devastating military onslaught in May might just hold.



The 15-year Israeli blockade of Gaza has devastated its economy (MEE/Mohammed al-Hajjar)

However, as Middle East Eye has discovered, there are many others, among them Palestinian and Israeli experts, as well as rights groups on the ground, who believe that there may be other, undeclared, reasons behind Israel's move.

For there is a view in Israeli political and military circles that the May offensive against Gaza was a failure, that although the Israeli military caused much destruction and loss of life, it failed to significantly damage Hamas' missile-launch system and it failed to eliminate any senior members of Hamas's military or political leadership, meaning the future threat from Hamas remained largely undiminished.

One of the main reasons for these failures, some experts believe, was poor intelligence on the ground identifying targets and the location of key Hamas personnel. And what better way to gain intelligence than to have a steady supply of desperate, impoverished Palestinian men passing daily through checkpoints, where they can be interrogated and perhaps coerced into passing on information?

Work permits

To gain a permit and pass through the Beit Hanoun (Erez) crossing - which Israel controls in the north of the Strip - Palestinians have to meet very strict [Israeli criteria](#) and undergo individual security screenings.

Since the blockade was put in place, the vast majority of Gaza residents have found

themselves unable to meet such criteria, meaning they are denied medical treatment, the chance to study abroad, work in Israel or the occupied West Bank, or to be reunited with their families.

Between 2015 and 2020, only 0.1 percent of Palestinians from Gaza were permitted to work in the West Bank, according to the [Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics](#).

However, in the fourth quarter of 2019, Israeli authorities quietly started [granting a limited number](#) of merchant and work permits to Gazan Palestinians, in what appeared to be a gesture to restore calm with Hamas. This process was suspended shortly afterwards with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fast forward to September 2021 and the Israeli announcement of the resumption of work permits.

“The decision to increase the quota of merchants was made by the political echelon following a security assessment on the matter,” Cogat said in a [statement](#).

The statement added that the decision was “conditional upon the continued preservation of the region’s security stability for the long term”.

‘Intelligence gap’

In May 2021, Israel launched its devastating military attack on the Gaza Strip, codenamed Guardian of the Walls, less than one month after the Israeli army declared that it had prepared a bank of targets to deter the armed groups, primarily Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

During the attack, General Hidai Zilberman, an Israeli military spokesman, [told](#) the Israeli network Army Radio that the country’s forces had a “bank of targets that is full and we want to continue and to create pressure on Hamas”.

On 15 May, the sixth day of the offensive, Israeli cabinet ministers called for an end to the operation since Israel’s target bank had “exhausted itself”, according to [Israel’s Channel 13](#).

On that day, Israeli air strikes flattened a [12-story building](#) in the middle of Gaza City used by a number of news outlets, including Middle East Eye, Al Jazeera and the Associated Press.

The total number of Palestinians killed had reached 140, including 39 children.

But according to Israeli experts, although the operation succeeded in causing great damage to the military capabilities of Hamas, it had failed to achieve its objectives.

Omer Dostri, an Israeli strategy and security specialist, said that the operation had “gaps at the operational level”, failing to deter the armed groups in the coastal enclave.

“In the last operation, as in those that preceded it, the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] failed to significantly thwart and destroy the rocket- and missile-launch system,” Dostri said in an [article](#) published in the IDF Maarachot journal.

“Many of the main strategic weapons of the Gaza terrorist forces are still usable... the IDF failed to eliminate any senior members of Hamas’ military or political leadership,” he added.

Dostri said the reason the Israeli army failed to achieve its goals may be “an intelligence gap, a gap [in identifying the targets] by the Air Force, or the fear of harming those uninvolved”.

Following the attack, Israeli army officials said that Hamas could “attack Israel” again, despite the attempts to deter it.

According to the Israeli newspaper [Haaretz](#), a week after a ceasefire was reached between Israel and Hamas last May, senior army officials said in internal discussions that it was “impossible to determine how much Hamas had been deterred and how the damage in Gaza would affect its decision whether to launch another campaign soon”.

Keep dropping bombs’

During the 11-day operation, Israeli forces killed 256 Palestinians, of whom 66 were children. Another 1,948 Palestinians, including 610 children, were injured, [according](#) to the Gaza Ministry of Health.

Hundreds of places were targeted in densely populated areas of the Strip, including civilian neighbourhoods, using around [2,750 aerial attacks](#) and 2,300 artillery shells.

This may be further proof that the Israeli military failed to properly identify its targets.

In an [interview](#) with the UK’s Independent newspaper in 2020, a member of the Israeli air force said that during operations if there was “a lack of targets, the orders were to simply keep dropping bombs” anywhere in order to “make noise”.



Israeli shells land on the Gaza Strip during Israel’s May 2021 bombardment (MEE/Mohammed al-Hajjar)

Palestinian officials and Israeli experts believe that there are “undeclared reasons” the Israeli authorities opened the door for thousands of Palestinians from Gaza to work in Israel. One of them, so some experts believe, is to “fill an intelligence gap” by recruiting Palestinian collaborators to collect information on members of the armed groups or certain

activities in the Strip.

“Many of those who recently went to attend interviews with the Israeli intelligence service at the Beit Hanoun crossing returned to report having been extorted by the Ministry [of Interior],” Rami Shaqra, a colonel at the Gaza Ministry of Interior, told Middle East Eye.

“Some were offered to collaborate with Israeli officers for work and travel permits or money, and others were not asked to collaborate, but were instead asked suspicious random questions about certain people affiliated with the resistance, their relatives, friends, or even residents in their neighbourhoods.”

He added:

“We are aware that Israel will use this step to attempt to recruit Palestinians to collect information on residents of the Strip, especially as Gaza is now almost a completely closed area and it is getting harder for the occupation to collect certain kinds of information.”

Shaqra said that the security services in Gaza were aware of the threat such a step posed and would “keep a close eye on the matter”.



Mural near the Beit Hanoun crossing between Gaza and Israel which reads ‘What do you think about working for Israel?’, with the response ‘The Palestinian is not a traitor’ (MEE/Mohammed al-Hajjar)

Hillel Cohen, an Israeli scholar and author of [Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaborators with Zionism 1917-1948](#), believed that the Israeli authorities were issuing work permits for Palestinians in Gaza as a way of maintaining calm in the Strip - but that they were also aiming to recruit new collaborators.

“The primary [motivation] was to reduce the tension in the [Gaza Strip]. But sure enough, it is used also as a tool [to recruit collaborators],” he told MEE.

Coercion of Palestinians

Since the imposition of the Gaza blockade, human rights organisations have documented dozens of [cases](#) in which Israel has used its control over the crossings to coerce Palestinians into collaborating with its intelligence services in exchange for travel and work permits or medical treatment.

The Israeli human rights group Gisha has recently documented cases where Palestinians were denied work permits for refusing to collaborate with Israeli security officers at the Beit Hanoun crossing.

“This practice isn’t new. Israel uses its control over the land crossings to pressure Gaza residents to supply information on members of their communities,” Shai Grunberg, Gisha’s spokesperson, told MEE.

“Residents understand that should they fail to provide the information, Israeli Security Agency (ISA) interrogators may deny them exit, even if they need life-saving medical treatment.”

Grunberg told MEE that following Israel’s decision to grant thousands of Gaza residents work permits, her organisation had documented cases where Israeli officials had extorted permit holders over their right to work.

“One of our clients, who holds a trader permit, told us recently that when he entered the crossing, he was taken aside by Israeli representatives who asked him to collaborate with Israel. He was told that if he refused to do so, he would not be able to complete his journey and exit to Israel,” she said.

“He refused, and the permit that was issued for him at the Palestinian side of the crossing was taken away, and he was sent back to Gaza. He told us that the same thing had happened to him three times in the past two weeks.”

Interrogate, extort, pressure

Muhammed Abu Harbeed, a Palestinian security expert, said that Israeli officers’ interviews with Palestinian workers are used as one of the main tools in the recruitment of collaborators.

“The crossings and the occupied territories are the two main places where the recruitment officer can meet with the victim [collaborator] in order to interrogate, extort and pressure him into [providing information],” he said.

“Israel uses its control over the boundaries for this reason because every day, there are approximately 1,200-2,400 Palestinians who cross the Beit Hanoun crossing, including workers, students and visitors.”



Guards check documents at the Beit Hanoun crossing (MEE/Mohammed al-Hajjar)

While workers report dozens of similar experiences, Grunberg said that Gisha had also received complaints from patients who are regularly extorted by Israeli officers over their right to movement and medical treatment.

The Israeli authorities deny claims that such interrogations are used to collect security information or to recruit collaborators.

However, in 2015, Israel's Channel 10 published a conversation in which Lior Lotan, the Israeli prime minister's representative for prisoners and missing persons, [admitted](#) that the Israeli intelligence services at the Beit Hanoun crossing used their control over the boundary to coerce Palestinians into sharing security information.

“When people, relatives of Hamas big boys, senior people... When they wanted to enter Israel for medical treatment, we told them, ‘no, bring us information on Avera’,” he said, referring to Avera Mengistu, an Israeli who crossed into Gaza in September 2014 and was detained by Hamas.

‘Domestication policy’

Since the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of 1967 - which resulted in the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip - Israel has recruited tens of thousands of Palestinians to serve as collaborators and collect information, according to a 1994 [report](#) published by the Israeli human rights organisation B'tselem.

As the governing power over Palestinians, Israel is responsible for providing vital services for the occupied people. Their dependence on such services has helped Israel coerce many of them into collaboration - including by extortion, threats and inducements. This is despite international law prohibiting all acts of compelling individuals to collaborate with an occupying power.

According to Hillel Cohen, the Israeli scholar, Israel's recruitment of Palestinian collaborators was most intense in the [1970s and 1980s](#), when it used them to collect information on members of Palestinian armed groups, many of whom were later assassinated.

A source close to the Gaza Ministry of Interior told MEE that by allowing thousands of Gaza residents to travel and work in Israel under strict conditions, the Israeli authorities were attempting to implement a "domestication policy".

"They want to make the Gaza population see this opportunity as a privilege they would not want to lose by joining or supporting the resistance," the source said.

According to Muhammed Abu Harbeed, the Palestinian security expert, Israel was trying to "change the equation in the Strip", using its control of crossings to impose a policy of "collective recruitment" of the population.

"Israel imposes different policies and uses various tools to change the current situation [...] The political dimension behind this step is greater than the security and operational dimension," he said.

"Israel wants to give Gaza something that it becomes afraid to lose in case the resistance [attacks] Israel. It works on making the resistance think twice before launching a rocket on the occupied territories, fearing that thousands of Gaza residents would lose their work and thus poverty and unemployment rates would soar."

Favours not obligations

Less than a month after the Israeli Ministry for Regional Cooperation said the government would raise the number of permits for Palestinians in Gaza to a total of 20,000, Cogat announced the [closure](#) of Beit Hanoun crossing in what it said was a response to rockets fired from the Strip amid tensions in Jerusalem over Israeli [raids on al-Aqsa Mosque](#).

"Following the rockets fired towards Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip last night, it was decided that crossings into Israel for Gazan merchants and workers through the Erez Crossing will not be permitted this upcoming Sunday," Cogat said in a statement on Saturday.

The closure will likely end when relative calm is restored, but similar punitive measures are nothing new to Gaza.

Moshe Dayan, Israel's then defence minister, [said](#) in 1967:

"Let the individual know that he has something to lose. His home can be blown up, his bus licence can be taken away, he can be deported from the region; or the contrary: he can exist with dignity, make money, exploit other Arabs, and travel in [his] bus."

In his 1995 book *The Carrot and the Stick*, Shlomo Gazit, Israel's first coordinator of government activities in the Palestinian territories, [wrote that](#) Israel's policy aimed at "creating a situation in which the population would have something to lose, a situation in which the most effective sanction is the revocation of benefits".

According to B'tselem, since Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, the authorities have seen the granting of vital and civil services to Palestinians as "favours and expressions

of goodwill that can be revoked at any time”, rather than an obligation that it shoulders as an occupying power.

The organisation said that, for years, Israel had used two main methods to recruit collaborators: “Making the granting of essential services and permits conditional on collaboration; and promising individuals suspected, accused, or convicted of security and criminal offences the charges would be withdrawn, their sentences lightened, or their conditions improved in exchange for their cooperation and assistance.”

Israel’s repeated targeting of Gaza’s economic sector, as well as the tight restrictions imposed on the Strip’s borders, have continued to push thousands of its residents into unemployment and poverty.

In 2012, Cogat was forced to release a [2008 document](#) that detailed Israel’s “red lines” for “food consumption in the Gaza Strip”, following a legal battle brought by Gisha.



As a result of Israel’s restrictions, two-thirds of the Gaza population were food insecure by the beginning of 2022 (MEE/Mohammed al-Hajjar)

The document, drawn up nearly one year after Israel tightened its blockade on the Strip, calculated the minimum number of calories every Palestinian needed to keep them from malnutrition.

As a result of Israel’s restrictions, two-thirds of the Gaza population ([64.4 percent](#)) were food insecure by the beginning of 2022.

Following the May offensive, the unemployment rate reached [45 percent](#), while the poverty rate hit [64 percent](#), nearly double that of the West Bank and East Jerusalem – with an increase of at least [19 percent](#) in the 15 years since the imposition of the blockade.

Starvation as a tool

The Israeli offensive had catastrophic consequences on the already-fragile economic sector, resulting in the destruction of 20 factories and rendering at least 5,000 workers jobless.

With the situation in the enclave deteriorating, and with tight restrictions imposed on traders, farmers and fishermen, Gaza's residents found some relief in Israel's easing of restrictions on work permits.

Abujayyab (a pseudonym, as workers prefer to stay anonymous for fear of losing their work permits), who has a master's degree in business administration and previously worked as a university lecturer, currently works as a construction worker in Israel due to the "extremely low wages and lack of job opportunities in Gaza".

He and dozens of others are attending Hebrew courses in Gaza in order to be able to communicate with their employers in Israel. Meanwhile, hundreds of other young men, mostly university graduates, attend the courses in the hope of getting permits to work doing menial jobs in Israel.



Men attending Hebrew courses in Gaza in the hope of getting permits to work doing menial jobs in Israel
(MEE/Mohammed al-Hajjar)

"My pay at the university was around \$420-\$560 every six months. It didn't cover any of my family's needs; I used to spend it on transportation," he told MEE.

"In Israel, I get around 350-400 shekels (\$110-\$140) a day. It's not that I prefer to work in Israel, but I need work that allows me to buy food for my family.

"If I could find a job paying only 50 shekels a day in Gaza, I would stay and work here."

Hanine Hassan, Palestinian scholar and vice-chair of Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, said that Israel has for decades used starvation as a tool of control over Palestinians in Gaza.

“In addition to the imminent threat to Palestinian lives as workers approach an Israeli checkpoint, those work permits are a nuanced form of forced labour under colonial rule, as Palestinian workers are not offered any other means of survival,” she told MEE.

“The colonial besieging and the systematic de-development of the Gaza Strip over five decades have pushed starved Palestinians to seek Israeli work permits.

“These permits not only represent the exploitation of Palestinian bodies and lands but also force Palestinian workers to contribute to the further eradication of their national liberation and aspirations.”

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