



Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 2 (March. 17, 2015)

Summary: February 2015

Access restrictions tighten

- **Rafah border:** The Rafah border with Egypt was completely closed by Egypt in February in both directions; no patients were able to travel to Egypt for medical treatment and no medical aid or medical delegations entered Gaza.
- **Access through Erez:** 2 in 10 patients who applied for Israeli permits to travel through Erez checkpoint to access medical treatment in February were not approved. Of the 1,429 patients who applied, 63 patients (15 females and 48 males, including 8 children and 2 elderly) were denied permits, and 218 patients (80 females and 138 males, including 69 children and 12 elderly people over 60) received no response to their applications, and missed their medical treatment appointments.
- **Interrogations:** 10 patients (5 females and 5 males) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit to cross Erez. None was approved later.
- The District Liaison office of the MoH reported that access for patients who do not have Israeli issued ID cards recently became very difficult. This category includes people who entered Gaza legally with Israeli permits but their permit expired.
- 1 war-related casualty patient was approved for referral during February, referred by the Ministry of Health for vascular surgery in Makassed hospital.

MoH referrals

- **Higher numbers:** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza, 1,449 patients were issued referrals in February to non-MoH health facilities for specialized treatment, higher than in January but 4.1% less than the monthly average in 2014. Oncology treatment was the main reason for referrals outside Gaza.
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in referrals was the widest since 2010: 61.01% male patients versus 39.99% female patients. 23.6% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 19.25% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for January:** NIS 7,576,623 (MoH Ramallah data).

MoH Referrals

Referrals of Gaza patients

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,449 referrals in February, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Gaza, 142 (10.8%) higher than in January but similar to the months following the summer 2014 war (**Chart 1**). The recent decrease in Gaza referrals is a result of new MoH policy guidelines to reduce the cost of referrals for specialized treatments, especially to higher cost Israeli hospitals.

The lack of capacity (personnel, equipment and medicines) for specialized treatments within the Ministry of Health and the private sector within Gaza is the main driver for referrals.

Approval of financial coverage for Gaza patients is issued by the Ministry of Health central RAD in Ramallah which refers patients to Israeli hospitals only as a last resort, when specific care is not available in a Palestinian hospital. In February, referrals to Israeli medical facilities dropped by 32.6% from the monthly average of 2014 (285) (**Table 1, Chart 2**).

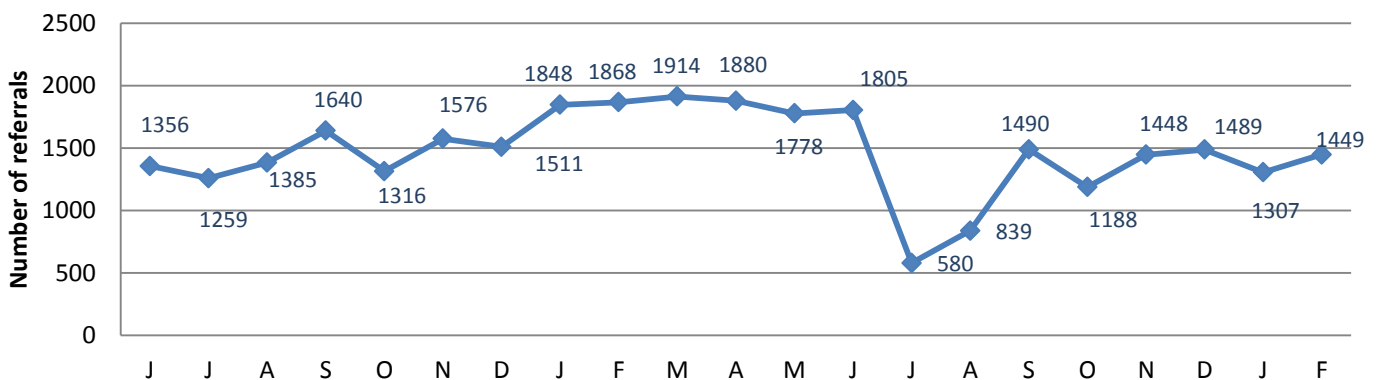
The closure of Rafah border has also reduced Gaza referrals to Egypt and virtually eliminated access to specialized medical treatments outside of Gaza for private patients.

Table 1: Palestinian MoH Referrals, by destination, January-February 2015 compared to 2014 monthly average

Referral Destination	2014 (monthly average)	January 2015	February 2015	Total
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	267	204	288	492
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	259	289	315	604
East Jerusalem	529	525	551	1,076
Jordan	1	0	0	0
Israel	286	170	192	362
Egypt	169	119	103	222
Total	1,511	1,307	1,449	2,756

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

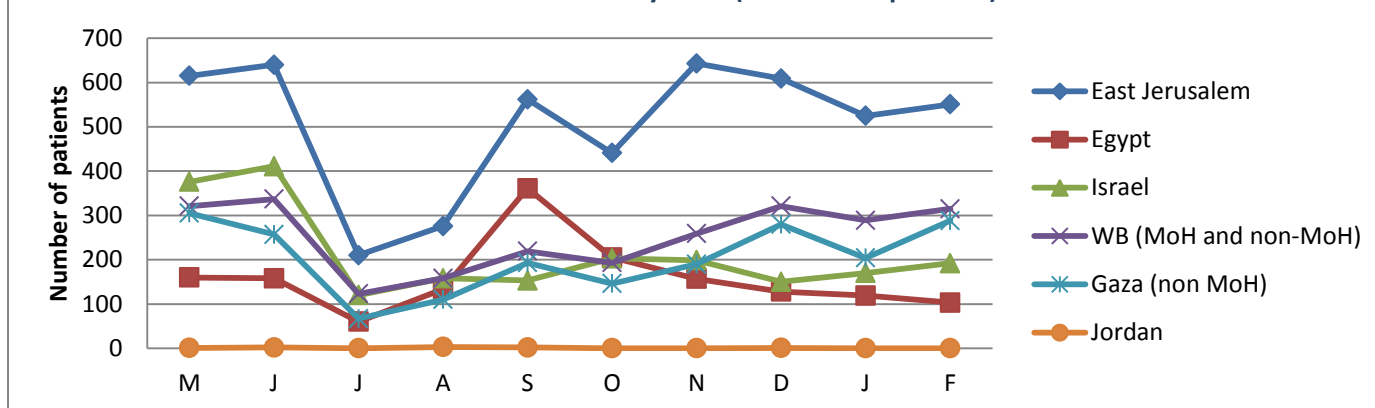
Chart 1: Trend of total MoH monthly referrals of Gaza patients, June 2013 - February 2015



The new MoH referral guidelines have caused some delays in making hospital appointments and in securing financial approvals for referral treatment: almost one-third of patients had to wait more than 30 days for approvals. Receiving hospitals are operating at full occupancy, so appointment management is currently very difficult. Delays can increase the suffering of patients and families and can lead to deterioration of health, especially for those with life-threatening conditions.

Referral costs represent one-third of the MoH budget. Budget shortfalls caused by a post-2012 drop in donor aid and Israeli failure to transfer tax reimbursements to the Palestinian Authority (PA) have caused high debts to referral hospitals and pharmaceutical suppliers. Jordanian hospitals no longer accept MoH referral patients due to outstanding PA debt. Israeli hospitals, however, are paid fully by the Israeli government from the PA monthly withholdings.

Chart 2: Trend of last 12 months of referrals of Gaza patients, March 2014-February 2015 (numbers of patients)



Note: Data from the central RAD office in Ramallah indicate 148 more referrals for Gaza patients than registered by the Gaza RAD. The discrepancy is due to the fact that referrals refers to financial decisions and not number of patients. A single patient may have subsequent referrals for additional procedures or hospital admissions in the same month. The estimated cost for February referrals based on the central RAD data in Ramallah was NIS 7,576,623.

Of the 1,449 patients issued Ministry of Health Gaza referrals in February, 1,161 (80%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 1058 patients (73%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 103 required approvals from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

In February, the 288 referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza were mainly for: MRI (92), heart catheterization (59), urology (33), rehabilitation (26), pediatrics (14), general surgery (12) and the remaining (52) were for 11 other specialties.

23.6% of all patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 19.25% were elderly patients over 60. Female referral patients were 38.99% of the total, compared to 61.01% male patients. 92.13% of referrals in February were for hospital admissions and 7.87% for outpatient clinics.

Medical reasons for referrals: The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—246 referrals (16.98%), ophthalmology—162 (11.18%), MRI —98 (6.76%), nuclear medicine—91 (6.28%), paediatrics—83 (5.73%), heart catheterization—83 (5.73%), orthopaedic surgery —79 (5.45%), urology—74 (5.11%), neurosurgery—70 (4.83%), haematology—60 (4.14%), and the remaining 403 (27.81%) referrals were to 21 other specialties.

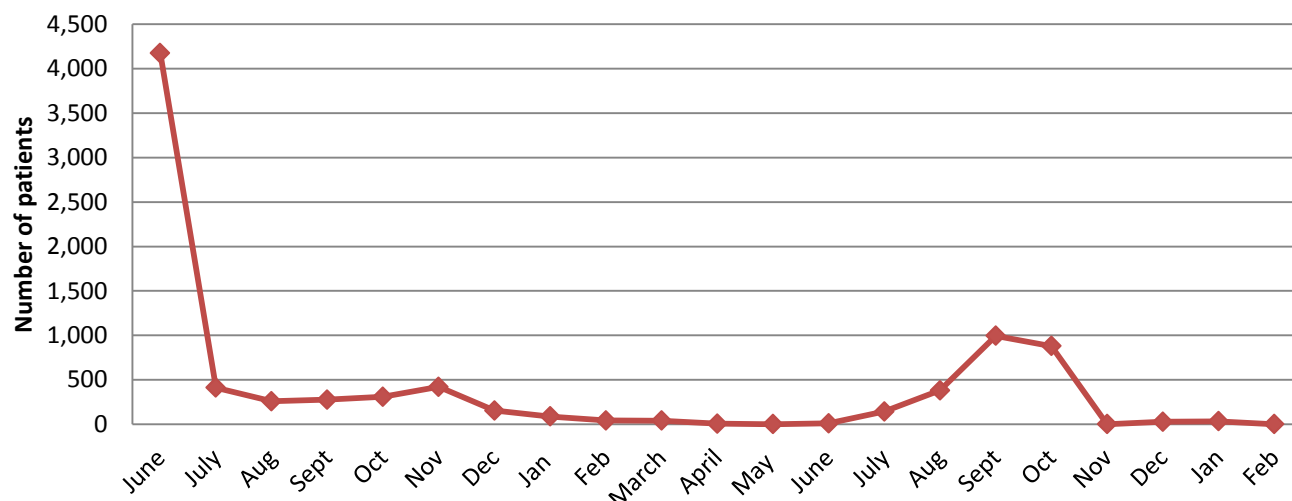
Referrals of casualty patients: the Ministry referred 1 casualty patient with complicated injuries of the lower limbs for vascular surgery department in Makassed hospital in East Jerusalem.

Access through Rafah terminal

No access to Egypt in February: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was completely closed in both directions by the Egyptian authorities for the whole month of February, and for all travellers, including patients and humanitarian cases. Since July 2013, Rafah terminal has been opened by the Egyptian authorities for only 2-3 days a month for persons who have humanitarian need to exit Gaza. Humanitarian cases include patients, returning foreign nationals (foreign passport holders or Egyptian passport holders), students or Palestinians who have a legal residency in a third country. The terminal was also completely closed in May and November 2014 (Chart 2). The Palestinian side of Rafah terminal tried to coordinate the return of the body of a deceased patient from a Cairo hospital in late February but the coordination was unsuccessful.

According to Palestinian authorities no medical aid or delegates entered Gaza through Rafah in February. Health access to Egypt is an important alternative for Gaza patients, especially those with advanced cancer, renal and heart diseases, and orthopedic and ophthalmological conditions, but has been restricted since July 2013. In 2014 the terminal was totally closed on 241 days (66% of days). During and immediately after the July-August military attack on Gaza, however, access was facilitated for casualty patients and others (Chart 3).

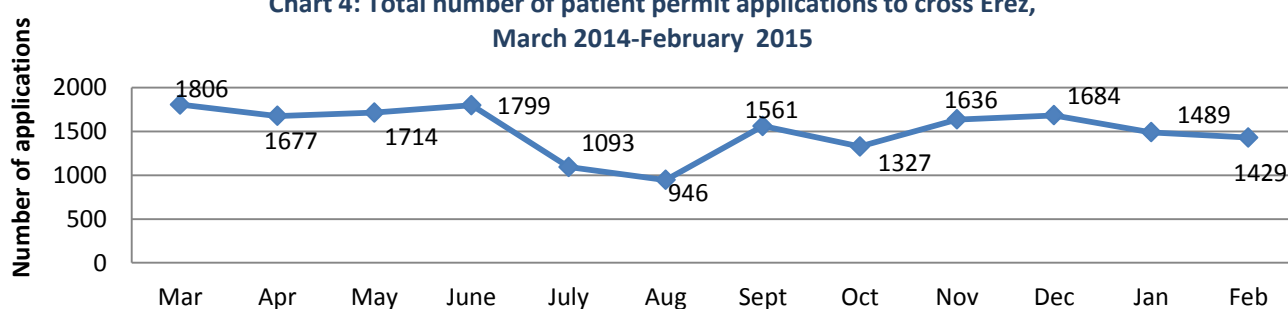
**Chart 3: Patients seeking health care access through Rafah terminal to Egypt
(June 2013-February 2015)**



Access through Erez

In February, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez was 1,429, 4.2% lower than the previous month and 16.8% lower than the pre-conflict monthly average of 1,670 applications (**Chart 4**). Out of the 1,429 permit applications, 680 (47.59%) were for patients destined to East Jerusalem, 401 (28.06%) to West Bank, 306 (21.41%) to Israel, and 42 (2.94%) to Jordan.

**Chart 4: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez,
March 2014-February 2015**



In February, 1,148 (80.34%) of patients' permit applications were approved (**Table 2**). 63 applicants (4.41%) were denied access. 218 (15.25%) did not receive a positive answer to their applications in time for their hospital appointments and suffered delay in health care. The volume of permit applications in February 2015 was 3.9% lower and the approval rate was 6.46% lower than the 2014 monthly average (**Table 3**). The average rate of approvals for permit applications so far in 2015 was 80.54% compared to 87.3% for the same period in 2014. **Chart 5** shows a declining trend in Israeli approvals of patients' permit applications.

Table 2: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS risk, February 2014

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called for GSS interrogation	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	55	77	46	62	1	0	8	15	0	0
4 - 17	115	155	90	127	2	5	23	23	0	0
18 - 40	184	216	132	121	11	29	41	66	5	4
41 - 60	205	211	201	172	1	12	3	27	0	1
Over 60	96	115	91	106	0	2	5	7	0	0
Sub-total	655	774	560	588	15	48	80	138	5	5
Total	1429		1148		63		218		10	

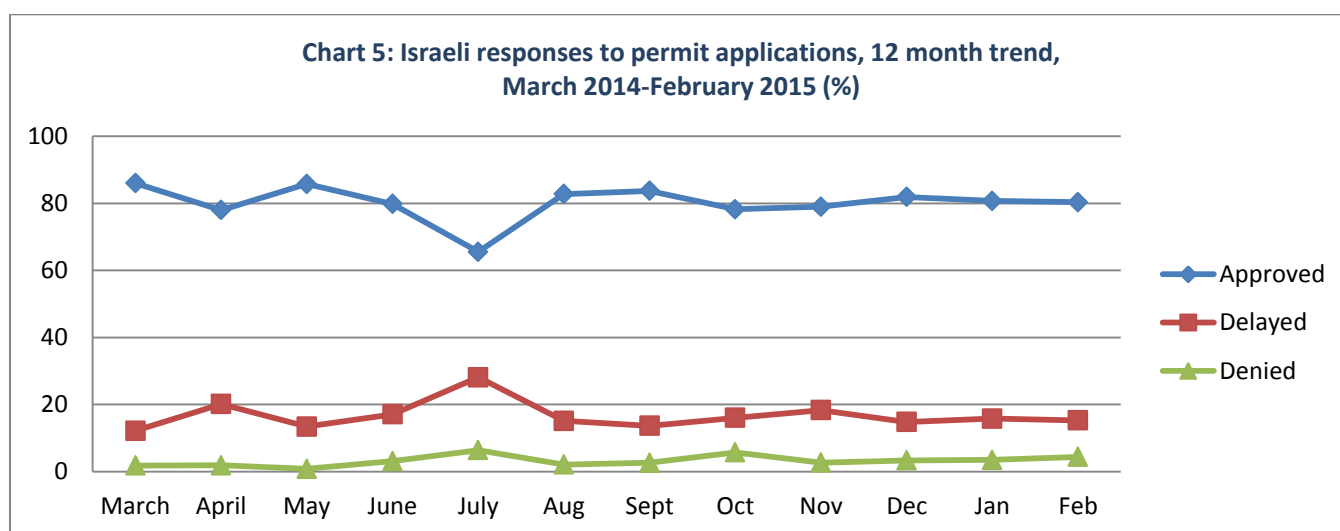
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Table 3: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on permit requests to cross Erez by response, sex of applicant in 2015 compared to corresponding periods in 2014 (number and %)

Period	February 2014		February 2015		Jan-Feb 2014		January – February 2015	
Total	1485 (F:714; M:771)		1,429 (F:655; M:774)		3,023 (F:1415; M:1608)		2,918 (F:1,352;M:1,566)	
Approved	1289 (F:654; M:635)	86.8%	1,148 (F:560; M:588)	80.34%	2,639 (F:1299; M:1340)	87.3%	2,350 (F:1,160;M:1,190)	80.54%
Denied	50 (F:16; M:34)	3.37%	63 (F:15; M:48)	4.41%	87 (F:26; M:61)	2.88%	115 (F:20;M:95)	3.94%
Delayed	146 (F:44; M:102)	9.83%	218 (F:80; M:138)	15.25%	297 (F:90 M:207)	9.82%	453 (F:172;M:281)	15.52%
<i>-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)</i>	13 (F:2;M:11)	0.88%	10 (F:5; M:5)	0.70%	45 (F:6; M:40)	1.52%	32 (F:12;M:20)	1.10%

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Financial coverage: 91.32% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in February were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 4.27% were self-funded, 2.31% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.05% by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 0.63% by the Peres Center for Peace, 0.21% by insurance companies, and 0.07% each by MSF, medical military services, and UNRWA.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Denied care: 63 patients (15 females; 48 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 8 children and 2 persons over 60 years. 42 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, 12 in Israel and 9 in Jordan. Of the denied patients, 49 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 10 self-funded, 2 by Noor Al-Alam Foundation, 1 by UNRWA and 1 by Physicians for Human Rights. 57 patients waited 1-7 days, 5 waited 8-14 days, and 1 waited 15-30 days before receiving denials. Of those denied, 8 patients had appointments for orthopedics, 7 for nephrology, 6 for neurosurgery, 6 for ophthalmology, 5 for cardiology, 4 for general surgery, 4 for nuclear medicine, 4 for oncology, 4 for vascular surgery, 3 for pediatrics, 3 for urology, 2 for gynecology, 2 for hematology, 2 for chest surgery, 1 for ENT, 1 for neurology, and 1 for internal medicine.

The District Liaison office of the MoH reported that access for patients who do not have Israeli issued ID cards recently became very difficult. This category includes people who entered Gaza legally with Israeli permits but their permit expired.

Delayed care: 218 patient applicants (138 males; 80 females), including 69 children and 12 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. 76.15% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 21.1% in Israel, and 2.75% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in: ophthalmology (47), orthopedics (33), cardiology (22), pediatrics (21), oncology (19), hematology (10), nuclear medicine (9), neurosurgery (8), neurology (7), vascular surgery (6), nephrology (6), general surgery (5), and the rest were 25 for 13 different specialties. Non-urgent patient applications for a permit to cross Erez should be submitted at the district liaison office 7-10 days prior to

appointment date. Of the 218 dealed patients, 62 (28.44%) applied 1-7 days before appointment, 112 (51.38%) applied 8-14 days before appoinmtnet, 40 (18.35%) 15-30 days, and 4 (1.83%) over 30 days.

Security Interviews: 10 patients (5 males; 5 female), 9 aged 18-40, and 1 aged 55 years, were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS) as a condition to process their application. None of them was approved after the interview.

Patients and companions crossed Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1032 patients (and 990 companions) crossed Erez in February to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals. Of the 1032 patients, 77 were transferred by ambulances (back-to-back). (The District Liaison office of the MoH reported coordination of 88 patient transfers by ambulance (back-to-back) during February.) Erez crossing was open for 24 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 4 days (4 Saturdays) during the month.