

An 80-year-old Gaza woman died after being stopped at the closed Rafah terminal gate midday on May 27, a day of extreme heat (40° Celsius). Travelers had been stranded in the Egyptian terminal building when Egyptian authorities closed the border to returning Gazans after the computers malfunctioned. The waiting hall inside the terminal was also closed when it became overwhelmed with travelers.



Rafah crossing was closed for exit from Gaza in May 2015 © WHO

The elderly woman, laying on her luggage cart in the sun and unconscious, was found by an Egyptian soldier. She was transferred by ambulance to a health facility in Rafah, Egypt, but her condition became critical and she required transfer to a hospital. Meanwhile her family in Gaza tried to arrange her passage across the border to Gaza for treatment. After special coordination, an ICU ambulance from the Palestinian side received the woman and transferred her to the European Gaza hospital. She died in the emergency department one hour later.

Referral of Patients from the Gaza Strip

Ref: RAD 5 (June 18, 2015)

Summary: May 2015

Rafah opened to returnees only; high demand for Erez exit

- **Rafah border: No access out to Egypt in May.** The Egyptian side of the Rafah border with Gaza remained closed for exit in May but 1,629 people, including patients, were allowed to return to Gaza on three days, May 25 to 27, alleviating the humanitarian problem of stranded travellers. The border has been opened for only 5 days this year, in January for 3 days and March for 2 days, allowing only 42 patients to cross.
- **Access: the number of patients' applications to exit Gaza via Erez in May was the highest ever:** 1,814 patients applied for permits to cross Erez checkpoint: 84.29% of patients were approved. 13.23% received no response to their applications (240 patients, including 84 children and 12 over 60 years) and 2.48% were denied permits (45 patients, including 2 children and 8 over 60 years).
- **Interrogations:** 20 patients (5 females and 15 males) were requested to attend Israeli security interviews after applying for a permit. 4 patients were approved later.

High need for MoH referrals

- **Ministry of Health referrals of Gaza patients in May was the second highest month recorded by WHO:** According to the Ministry of Health Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza, 1,948 referrals were issued in May for specialized treatment unavailable in Gaza MoH health facilities. (March totals of 2,191 referrals were the highest ever recorded.) The increased need may be a result of the cumulative shortages in medicines and medical capacity in Gaza, as well as the closure of Rafah which has reduced access particularly for private patients and encouraged more patients to seek treatment from the Ministry of Health.
- Oncology, nuclear medicine and orthopedic surgery were the 3 top specialties needed in May (see page 2).
- **Gender gap:** The gender gap in Gaza referrals remained very wide: 57.29% male patients versus 42.71% female patients. 27.3% of all referrals were for children aged 0-17 years and 17.8% were for patients aged over 60 years.
- **Estimated cost of referrals for April:** NIS 9,344,595.

REFERRALS

Referrals of Gaza patients

The Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH) issued 1,948 referrals for Gaza patients in May, according to the Referral Abroad Department (RAD) data in Gaza,¹ a slight increase over pre-war levels (and the second highest month after March recorded by WHO since 2009) (**Table 1; Chart 1**). An accumulation of patients who delayed travel in the post-conflict period, especially as a result of the closure of Rafah, may explain the increase. In particular, referrals to East Jerusalem and to West Bank hospitals increased sharply compared to 2014, and at a historic high.

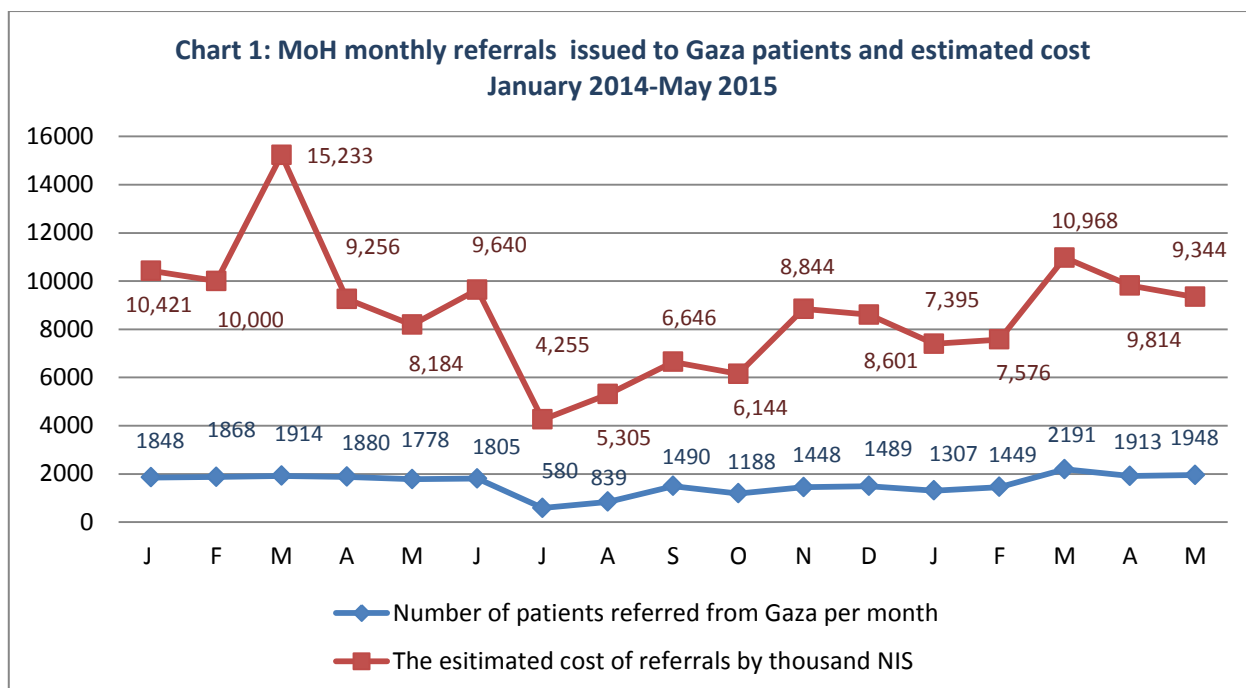


Table 1: Palestinian MoH referrals, by destination, January-May 2015

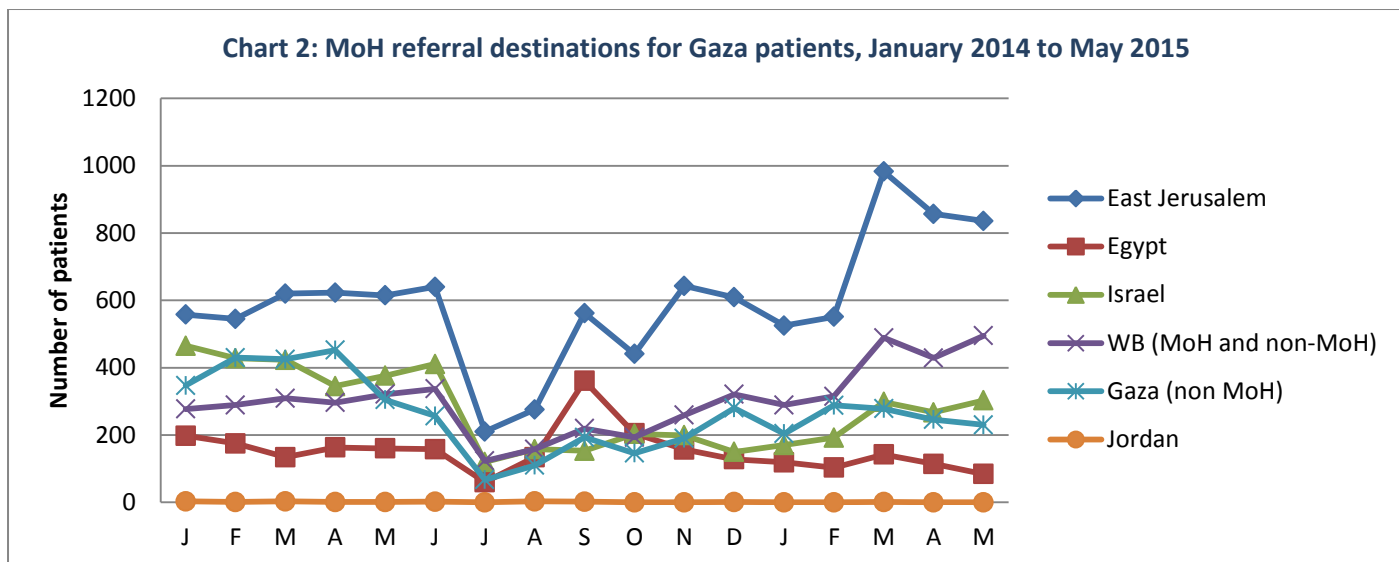
Referral Destination	January 2015	February 2015	March 2015	April 2015	May 2015	TOTAL
Gaza (non-MoH facilities)	204	288	278	246	230	1,246
WB (MoH and non-MoH)	289	315	489	429	495	2,017
East Jerusalem	525	551	983	857	836	3,752
Jordan	0	0	1	0	0	1
Israel	170	192	298	267	303	1,230
Egypt	119	103	142	114	84	562
Total	1,307	1,449	2,191	1,913	1,948	8,808

Source: MoH Referral Abroad Department, Gaza

Referrals to Egypt decreased to 84 (half of the monthly average in 2014). However, no patients could travel to Egypt in May due to the closed border. In 2015 so far, 562 patients were referred to Egypt but only 42 were able to travel on the 5 days the border was open. Referrals to Israeli medical facilities increased slightly while referrals to non-MoH facilities in Gaza were slightly lower (**Chart 2**). There were 230 referrals to non-MoH facilities within Gaza and mainly for heart catheterization (89), MRI (75), rehabilitation (17), cardiology (8), pediatrics (8), ICU (6), vascular surgery (6); the remaining 21 referrals were in 11 different specialties.

¹ The MoH Referral Abroad Department (RAD) in Gaza data reflects the number of patient applications approved for financial coverage by the Service Purchasing Department (SPD) in Ramallah.

Chart 2: MoH referral destinations for Gaza patients, January 2014 to May 2015



In May the processing time of patients' applications for referral by the local office in Gaza and the central Service Purchasing Department (SPD) in Ramallah improved significantly compared to recent months (**Table 2**). This is partly due to WHO's provision in March of a web-based approval tracking system to facilitate communications between the Gaza and Ramallah offices. However, management of hospital appointments is still difficult due to high occupancy rates in hospitals, especially in Israeli hospitals.

Table 2: MoH referral processing time

Month	% processed within 7 days
Jan 2015	9.19%
Feb 2015	20.7%
March 2015	46.92%
April 2015	65.19%
May 2015	70.02%

Of the 1,948 patients issued Ministry of Health referrals in May, 1,718 (88%) were to health facilities outside Gaza: 1,634 patients (84%) required permits from Israeli authorities to exit through Erez crossing and 84 (4.3%) required approvals from Egypt to exit through Rafah.

27.3% of all patients referred were children aged 0-17 years and 17.8% were patients over 60. Female referral patients were 42.71% of the total, compared to 57.29% male patients. 91.43% of referrals in May were for hospital admissions and 8.57% for outpatient clinics.

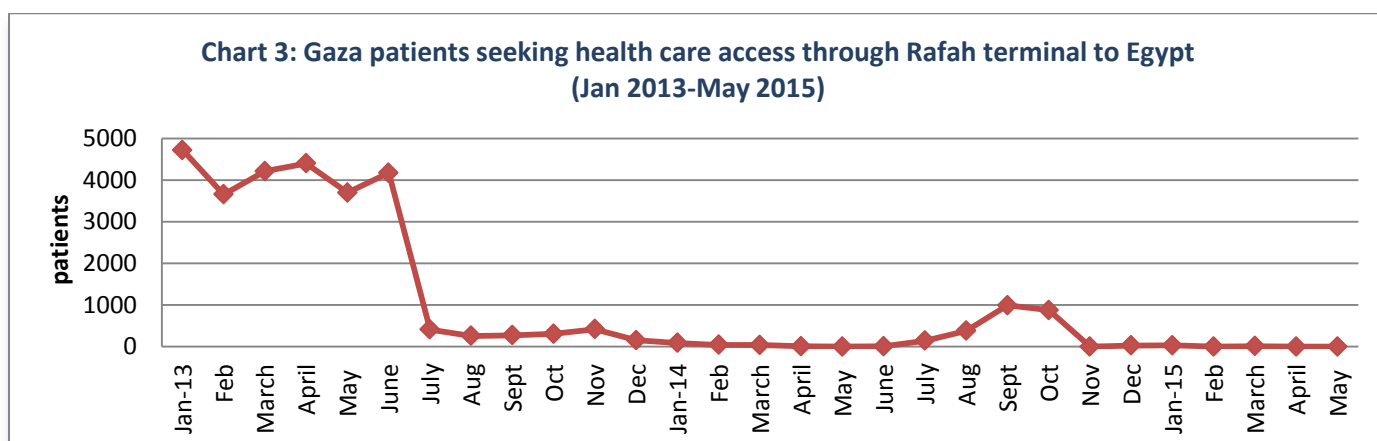
Medical reasons for referrals: The top ten specialties requiring referrals for treatment were: oncology—346 referrals (17.76%), nuclear medicine—146 (7.49%), orthopaedic surgery —140 (7.19%), ophthalmology—135 (6.93%), paediatrics—123 (6.31%), heart catheterization—123 (6.31%), haematology—108 (5.54%), neurosurgery—103 (5.29%), MRI —85 (4.36%), heart surgery—71 (3.64%); the remaining 568 (29.16%) referrals were to 21 other specialities. The estimated cost for May referrals based on the central SPD data² in Ramallah was NIS 9,344,595.

Access through Rafah terminal

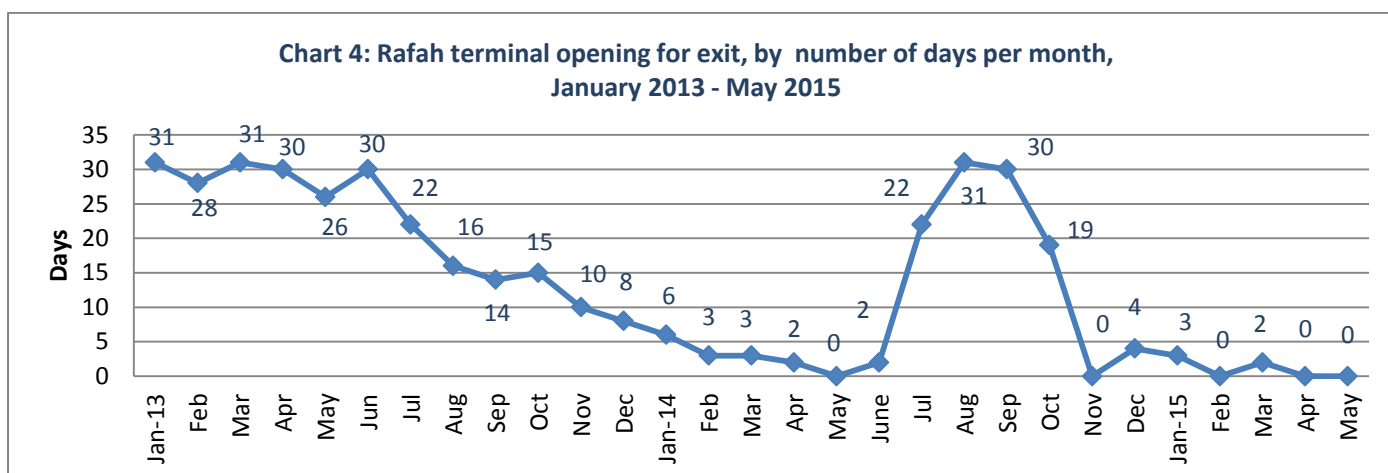
No access out to Egypt in May: According to Palestinian officials at Rafah terminal, the terminal was closed for exit by the Egyptian authorities on all days of May and no travellers were allowed to leave including patients (**Chart 3**). The Egyptian authorities opened the terminal on 3 days for the return of 1,629 travellers stranded in Egypt. The terminal was partially opened May 25 for 507 persons, on May 26 for 1,073 persons and on May 27 for 49 people to return to Gaza, including patients.

² Referral totals differ between Gaza and the Ramallah central RAD office (called now the Services Purchasing Department). Gaza tabulates the number of patients referred while Ramallah tallies the total number of financial approval decisions for patients on one referral, which may include additional procedures or hospital readmissions for the same patient. SPD data for May indicates 207 additional referrals for Gaza. For monthly comparisons, WHO uses the data from the MoH RAD in Gaza.

According to Palestinian authorities at the terminal, there were no medical delegations allowed to Gaza during the month. 100 wheelchairs were entered to the Ministry of Social Affairs. Rafah terminal has been closed by the Egyptian authorities since July 2013 except for the exit of a small number of humanitarian cases (Chart 3).



From January to May 2015, the terminal was opened for exit on only 5 days. Access has been extremely restricted to Egypt since July 2013 (Chart 4).

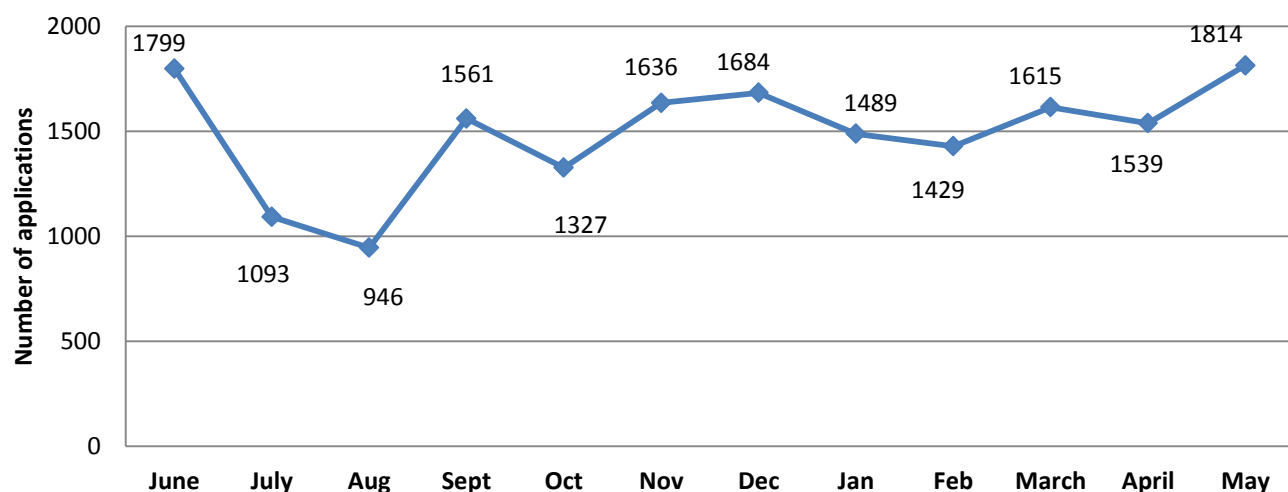


Access through Erez

In May, the total number of patients' applications for Israeli permits to cross Erez was 1,814, the highest number of applications ever submitted in one month since 2006 (Chart 5). This reflects the high demand for referrals as well as shortages and lack of specialized services available in the health sector in Gaza. Out of the 1,814 permit applications, 907 (50%) were for patients destined to hospitals in East Jerusalem, an increase of 20% above the 2015 average. 475 (26.19%) were to Israel, 419 (23.1%) to West Bank, and 13 (0.72%) to Jordan.

25.85% (469) of applications to cross Erez during May were from patients having appointments in Makassed hospital, 15.2% (267) in Augusta Victoria hospital, 8.77% (159) in Najah national university hospital, 4.96% (90) in St. John hospital, 3.97% (72) in St. Joseph hospital (all except Najah are located in East Jerusalem). Applications from patients having appointments in Israeli hospitals increased significantly in May, 40% more than the average this year. 6.06% (110) for appointments in Assuta hospital, 5.95% (108) for Tel-Hashomir, 3.69% (67) for Hadassa Ein-Karem, 3.58% (65) for Ikhlov and 2.21% (40) for Wolfson hospital. The remaining 358 (19.7%) applications were for patients with appointments in 27 other Israeli and Palestinian hospitals.

Chart 5: Total number of patient permit applications to cross Erez, June 2014-May 2015



In May, 1,529 (84.29%) of patients' permit applications were approved (Table 3). 45 applicants (2.48%) were denied access. 240 (13.23%) did not receive a positive answer for their applications in time for their hospital appointments and therefore suffered delay in health care.

Table 3: Israeli responses to permit requests to cross Erez, by age, sex and GSS interviews, May 2015

Age group	Total		Approved		Denied		Delayed		Called by GSS*	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
0 - 3	86	104	75	92	0	1	11	11	0	0
4 - 17	160	213	128	182	1	0	31	31	0	0
18 - 40	246	252	196	163	5	21	45	68	5	11
41 - 60	250	223	241	192	0	9	9	22	0	3
Over 60	131	149	128	132	0	8	3	9	0	1
Sub-total	873	941	768	761	6	39	99	141	5	15
Total	1814		1529 (84.29%)		45 (2.48%)		240 (13.23%)		20 (1.1%)	

* GSS = Israeli General Security Services

Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza

Patients were 3 times more likely to be denied and requested to attend security interviews in May 2015 than in May 2014 (Table 4).

Table 4: Decisions by Israeli District Liaison Office on permit requests to cross Erez by response, sex of applicant (number and %) in 2015 compared to corresponding periods in 2014

Period	May 2014		May 2015		Jan-May 2014		January – May 2015	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total	1714		1,814		8,220		7,886	
	(F:774; M:940)		(F:873; M:941)		(F:3808; M:4412)		(F:3,662; M:4,224)	
Approved	1470	85.76%	1,529	84.29%	6,970	84.79%	6,486	82.25%
	(F:689; M:781)		(F:768; M:761)		(F:3378; M:3592)		(F:3,158; M:3,328)	
Denied	14	0.82%	45	2.48%	165	2.01%	205	2.6%
	(F:6; M:8)		(F:6; M:39)		(F:57; M:108)		(F:37; M:168)	
Delayed	230	13.42%	240	13.23%	1085	13.2%	1195	15.15%
	(F:79; M:151)		(F:99; M:141)		(F:373; M:712)		(F:467; M:728)	
<i>-- of which called for GSS interrogation (of total applicants)</i>	12	0.7%	20	1.1%	80	0.97%	88	1.12%
	(F2; M:10)		(F5; M:15)		(F:10; M:70)		(F:24; M:64)	

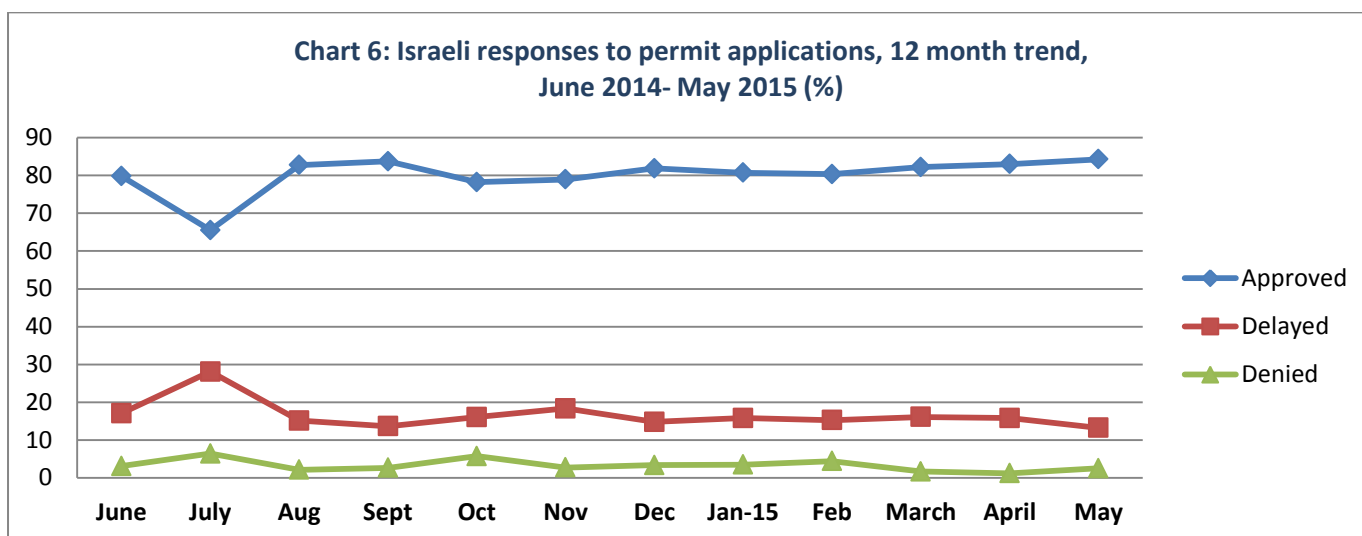
Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Patient companions: In May, 1,977 applications for patient companions were submitted to the Israeli authorities. 73.34% of them were approved, 24.48% were pending and 2.18% were denied.

Financial coverage: 92.45% of all patients applying for Israeli permits in May were referred by the Palestinian MoH, 2.81% were self-funded, 1.71% were funded by Nour Al-Alam foundation, 1.16% by Physicians for Human

Rights-Israel, 0.99% by Peres Center for Peace, 0.33% by other organizations, 0.17% by insurance companies, 0.17% by Hadassa fund, 0.11% by MSF, 0.06% by the Jordanian field hospital in Gaza, and 0.06% by Turkey.

Chart 6 shows a slight improvement in approvals of patients' permit applications in the last 4 months.



Source: Palestinian District Coordination office, MoH -Gaza.

Denied care: 45 patients (6 females; 39 males) were denied permits to access through Erez, including 2 children and 8 persons over 60 years. 41 of the denied patients had appointments in East Jerusalem and West Bank hospitals, and 4 in Israel. Of the denied patients, 42 were financially covered by the Palestinian MoH, 2 were self-funded and 1 was funded by another organization. 19 patients had waited for a response for 1-7 days, 13 waited 8-14 days, 9 waited 15-30 days and 4 waited more than 30 days before receiving a denial. Of those denied, 9 patients had appointments for orthopedics, 8 for ophthalmology, 7 for neurosurgery, 3 for internal medicine, 3 for cardiology, 3 for neurology, 3 for urology, 2 for general surgery, 2 for ob/gyn, 1 for chest disease, 1 for nuclear medicine, 1 for maxilla-facial surgery, 1 for oncology and 1 for psychiatry.

Delayed care: 240 patient applicants (141 males; 99 females), including 84 children and 12 patients over the age of 60, received no response to their applications and consequently lost their hospital appointments. Of the 240 patients delayed, 77.5% had scheduled appointments in East Jerusalem or West Bank hospitals, 20.83% in Israel, and 1.67% in Jordan. The delayed patients had scheduled appointments in orthopedics (40); oncology (29); pediatrics (25); cardiology (20); ophthalmology (20); hematology (14); neurosurgery (14); nuclear medicine (12); urology (12); general surgery (8); vascular surgery (8); neurology (7); internal medicine (7); Ob/gyn (4); 3 each for ENT, chest, nephrology, and endocrinology; 2 each for infertility and laboratory analysis; and 1 each for chest surgery, heart catheterization, MRI and pediatric surgery.

Non-emergency patient applications for a permit to cross Erez should be submitted to the district liaison office 7-10 days prior to appointment date. Out of 240 delayed patient applicants, 27.08% waited 1-7 days, 45.42% waited 8-14 days, 24.58% waited 15-30 days and 2.92% waited more than 30 days for a response to their permit request. 17 patients out of the delayed were approved within the first 2 weeks of June.

Security Interviews: 20 patients (15 males; 5 females), 16 aged 18-40, 3 aged 41-60, and 1 over 60 years old were called for security interviews by the Israeli General Security Services (GSS). 4 were approved after the interview.

Patients and companions crossed Erez: The Palestinian General Authority of Civil Affairs reported that 1,367 patients (and 1,337 companions) crossed Erez in May to access hospitals in the West Bank including Jerusalem, Israeli hospitals, or Jordanian hospitals, including 83 transferred by ambulance (back-to-back). Erez crossing was open for 25 days with regular day-time working hours and closed for 6 days (5 Saturdays and 1 Israeli holiday) during the month.