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As the Gaza war dominates, Israeli actions tip the West Bank into an economic and security crisis

‘You don’t know what new checkpoint will be set up, and which group of settlers you will be attacked by.’



With all eyes understandably on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, the economic and security crisis unfolding in the Israeli-occupied West Bank risks being overlooked, as funds to address the growing needs evaporate, according to aid groups and Palestinian residents.

Escalating violence by the Israeli military and settlers, intensified restrictions on mobility, tens of thousands of cancelled work permits, and the withholding of tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority (PA) are combining to tip the territory into a humanitarian crisis, they say.

“Road blocking and closures mean my days are wasted in going from one place to another,” Ibrahim BuNasrah, a 42-year-old street vendor in Ramallah who has seen his earnings cut in half over the past two months, told The New Humanitarian. “Commuting between districts of the West Bank has become like travelling to the unknown: You don’t know what new checkpoint will be set up, and which group of settlers you will be attacked by.”

Since 7 October, Israel has stepped up military raids in the West Bank, and violence by Israeli settlers – already [on the rise](#) – has increased sharply: At least 291 Palestinians, including 75 children, have been killed, [according](#) to the UN’s emergency aid coordination body, OCHA. This represents a massive rise. In all of last year, Israeli forces killed 146 Palestinians in the West Bank (and that was the highest annual number since 2004), [according](#) to the Israel human rights group B’Tselem.

After being threatened by settlers who were being protected by the Israeli military, Mahmoud al-Kaabana and his family were [expelled](#) – along with 37 other families – on 12 October from Wadi

al-Siq, a village of Bedouin herders in the mountains east of Ramallah. “We were physically assaulted, and threatened with murder, and forced to leave our homes to the neighbouring town of Taybeh,” the 57-year-old father of seven told The New Humanitarian.

More than 700,000 Israeli settlers live in settlements and outposts in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, which are [illegal under international law](#). This includes tens of thousands of [ideological settlers](#) – many of whom [are US citizens](#) – who seek to push Palestinians off their land and prevent the creation of a Palestinian state.

The West Bank is governed by the PA, which is controlled by the Palestinian political party [Fatah](#), while the Gaza Strip is governed by the Palestinian political party and militant group [Hamas](#). A post-election conflict between the two groups led to Hamas pushing the PA out of Gaza in 2007. Israel has since imposed a blockade on Gaza, severely limiting the movement of goods and people in and out of the enclave.

On 7 October, Hamas launched an unprecedented raid into Israel, killing around [1,140](#) people, according to Israeli officials, and taking some 240 hostages back into Gaza. More than half of those killed were civilians. Since then, Israel has been bombarding Gaza and has imposed a near-total siege on the enclave, cutting off electricity and water and blocking the entry of food, fuel, medical supplies, and other essentials – except for a trickle of humanitarian aid. An Israeli ground invasion began in northern Gaza on 27 October.

As of 19 December, the Israeli bombardment and campaign had killed around [19,500](#) people, according to health officials in Gaza, and forced more than [82%](#) of the enclave’s 2.3 million residents from their homes.

With the population increasingly squeezed into a sliver of southern Gaza, food supplies are running out, clean water for drinking and sanitation is in short supply, the health system has all but collapsed, outbreaks of disease are spreading, and aid operations have [ground to a halt](#). More than three quarters of hospitals in the enclave are now non-operational, while nine out of 10 people in the enclave do not eat every day, [according](#) to UN agencies.

Kazem Abu-Khalaf, a spokesperson for the UN’s agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), the largest aid provider in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, said the situation facing the [nearly 3.2 million](#) Palestinians living in the West Bank was “not comparable to what is happening in the Gaza Strip [but]... still very significant.”

"Israel's continued raid operations and destruction is causing a massive crisis in the West Bank," Abu-Khalaf told The New Humanitarian. “With hundreds of thousands losing their jobs, Palestinian families are experiencing destitution in addition to an overall drop in quality of life amidst an absence of safety and as facilities and utilities are targeted and destroyed.”

Revoked permits, job losses, and unpaid salaries

After 7 October, the Israeli government suspended all permits allowing Palestinians living in the West Bank to work in Israel or in Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) [estimates](#) that this move eliminated around 208,000 jobs – about 24% of all employment in the West Bank. Israel's agriculture and construction sectors are dependent on Palestinian and foreign workers who take on low-paid jobs that Israeli citizens refuse.

For tens of thousands of government employees, the situation is equally bleak. Israel collects taxes on Palestinian imports and exports to both the West Bank and Gaza. It transfers the revenue – after taking a [3%](#) commission – to the PA, but [frequently uses](#) it to exert pressure on the Palestinian leadership.

A transfer hasn't been made in more than two months due to [disagreements](#) over a [portion of the money](#) that goes to pay public employee salaries in Gaza. As a result, the PA has been left without enough funds to pay public employees, although an [agreement](#) brokered by the United States on 17 December may see the transfers resume.

Usama Abdelqader – a father of five, and a teacher employed by the PA – said he has had to use his savings to pay bills and buy essentials because he hasn't been paid in months. “[The PA] has been slashing our salaries for years, and now we're not paid at all. How can a family live with no income?” Abdelqader asked.

According to the UN's [flash appeal](#) issued in early November, an estimated 900,000 people in the West Bank are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Around 95% of the donations made to the Palestinian Red Crescent (PRC) are being directed to Gaza, leaving the West Bank “high and dry”, Mahdi al-Jamal, the head of the PRC's crisis and emergency response unit, told The New Humanitarian. “The donations we receive land into one account, but donors specify that the support they're making goes to Gaza,” he explained.

Forced evictions, violence, and detention

Since 7 October, OCHA has [recorded](#) at least 344 attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank, displacing around 1,250 people.

Al-Kaabana, from Wadi al-Sadiq, is one of them. “We fled with our families and livestock and left everything behind,” he said. “We were forcibly displaced and abandoned everything overnight, and [we] are now living in homes that are not ours and facing extreme difficulties to make ends meet.” Al-Kaabana said they were receiving some assistance from relief agencies, but he didn't specify which.

“We have raised our level of preparedness and equipped our branches with enough relief support to provide immediate shelter for some 3,500 families across the West Bank's cities and rural and Bedouin areas.”

Mahdi al-Jamal, head of the Palestinian Red Crescent's crisis and emergency response unit

The Israeli military has stepped up activities in the West Bank over the past two and a half months, carrying out raids it says are targeting Palestinian [militant groups](#). But [evidence](#) has emerged of Israeli forces using excessive and indiscriminate force, leading to civilian deaths.

Additionally, Israeli forces have detained more than [3,000](#) Palestinians in the West Bank. Israel says those detained have ties to Hamas or other militant groups. But Amnesty International and other rights groups [accuse Israel](#) of arbitrarily detaining Palestinians without charge or trial as a form of collective punishment and persecution.

Amidst the surge in attacks, raids, killing, displacement, and harassment, the PRC has declared a state of emergency across the occupied territories, including in the West Bank, according to al-Jamal.

“We have raised our level of preparedness and equipped our branches with enough relief support to provide immediate shelter for some 3,500 families across [the] West Bank's cities and rural and Bedouin areas,” al-Jamal said. The PRC is preparing for the possibility that the “West Bank could come under a wide-scale invasion, which will require much more relief aid”, he added.

Aid and rebuilding work disrupted

Israeli settlements, military checkpoints, and [roads](#) designated for use by Israelis only already made travelling between areas of the West Bank difficult and time-consuming prior to 7 October. But according to residents, Israeli authorities have further divided the West Bank into isolated areas over the past two and a half months, disconnecting provinces and towns by installing dozens of new checkpoints and closing all crossings into Israel, which has impeded movement and contributed to the deteriorating economic situation.

The intensified restrictions have also prevented aid workers from carrying out their work. UNRWA's Abu-Khalaf told The New Humanitarian that – since 7 October – the agency's West Bank staff have been prevented from reaching the main offices in Jerusalem despite carrying special permits.

“In the case of Jenin refugee camp, UNRWA received funding from the United Arab Emirates before 7 October to rebuild it. But the continued raids have prevented the completion of projects and caused repeated destruction to the infrastructure.”

Kazem Abu-Khalaf, a spokesperson for the UN's agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA)

“The division of the West Bank through military checkpoints also means UNRWA teams need to coordinate beforehand with the Israeli forces to be able to cross the checkpoints, which causes delays in reaching their destinations and doing their work,” he added.

Such hindrance has affected the rebuilding of Jenin refugee camp, despite the availability of funding, Abu-Khalaf said. The camp was [raided](#) by Israeli forces multiple times this year, and a number of the houses were bulldozed by Israeli forces.

“In the case of Jenin refugee camp, UNRWA received funding from the United Arab Emirates before 7 October to rebuild it. But the continued raids have prevented the completion of projects and caused repeated destruction to the infrastructure,” Abu-Khalaf said, adding that movement restrictions had also hampered reconstruction efforts in many other refugee camps throughout the West Bank.

The mobility restrictions are most severe near Israeli settlements and are “isolating Palestinian communities and severely limiting their access to essential services including health and education”, according to [OCHA](#).

Limited charity as needs grow

The OCHA [report](#) also stated that movement restrictions have slashed the working capacity of the private sector in the West Bank by half, while “trade with Israel or outside Palestine, which accounted for one-third of the GDP of the West Bank economy, is lost”.

“Increasing economic hardship in the West Bank is already prompting demand for humanitarian assistance and essential services among vulnerable and marginalised communities,” it noted.

“Access restrictions to Israel's labour market has cost the Palestinian economy losses at \$500 million since 7 October [and] the unemployment rate reached a record 52%,” Shaher Saad, president of the Palestine Workers Syndicates Union, told The New Humanitarian, describing the economic and humanitarian situation in the West Bank as “disastrous”.

As more and more Palestinians feel the pain of the deepening economic crisis, requests for support are rising, said Alaa Maqbool, president of the Nablus-based [At-Tadamun](#) charity.

“Since 7 October, the association has seen a significant increase in the number of families asking for cash support, clothes, and food boxes,” he told The New Humanitarian. “While we focus on the

well-being and financial needs of orphans, we have had to provide support for thousands of families that are not beneficiaries of our services,” he said.

But the suspension of salaries for PA workers and the lost wages of those who worked in Israel mean people’s ability to donate and support charity organisations is dwindling. “Many of the sponsors already have limited income and, with the disruption of the economic cycle, their revenues have declined, forcing them to end their sponsorships of orphans,” Maqbool added.

The Islamic Charity Society (ICS), one of the major non-profit organisations in Hebron, has also seen its operations and services hindered by the economic crisis.

“Since 7 October, we have recorded a massive decline in donations by organisations and businessmen,” said ICS Director Imad Jaaba.

“Even funding from external donors has dropped, because the majority was redirected to Gaza and the massive needs there,” Jaaba said, adding that ICS might soon be unable to support the 3,500 orphans under its care or pay salaries to employees in the eight schools where it operates.

This article was published in collaboration with [Egab](#). Edited by Dahlia Kholaiif and Eric Reidy.