

## Updates from MSF's Hebron Project in the West Bank

### Impact of movement restrictions on access to healthcare

During the period from September to November 2024, Israeli forces repeatedly restricted movement and access to basic services in Hebron Governorate, specifically during Jewish holidays when Israeli authorities closed checkpoints, roads and gates, and imposed curfews on the Palestinian population. These movement restrictions severely affected MSF's capacity to provide medical humanitarian assistance, and directly hindered patients' access to healthcare.

**MSF services.** During the first week of September and on 7 October 2024, Israeli authorities closed the gates to Hebron city, preventing many of MSF staff from presenting to work. During the first week of September, Israeli forces repeatedly closed checkpoints and roads without prior notice across Hebron Governorate, and MSF had to cancel all medical and mental health activities due to the impossibility to organize movements. In October, Israeli authorities closed the roads leading to 2 villages in Masafer Yatta, forcing MSF to cancel the mobile clinics in this area. Due to the cancellation of mobile clinics in October, MSF carried out 269 medical consultations during the first week and 372 medical consultations during the second one, while the average number of consultations is 550 to 660 per week. From September to November, MSF had to cancel 26 out of 125 scheduled mobile clinics due to movement restrictions imposed by / lack of validation provided by Israeli forces, or security concerns due to settler presence.

**Patients' access to healthcare.** During the first week of September, many patients from H2 and South Hebron Hills had to cancel their appointments at MSF's mental health clinic due to road closures, feeling unsafe to leave their homes, and Israeli soldiers' harassment at checkpoints. Mothers shared how they did not bring all their children to their appointment as they feared being shot at during the journey.

**H2.** The movement restrictions and barriers to accessing healthcare had an even direr impact on the Palestinian population living in H2. H2 is Hebron city's closed Israeli military-controlled area and the only place in the West Bank where Israeli settlers have settled *within* a Palestinian city. Normally, MSF provides mobile clinics in H2 twice per week, but from September to November, MSF was forced to cancel these clinics 7 out of 26 times. Reasons for cancellation included i) closure of all H2 entrances by Israeli forces, ii) entry restrictions due to Jewish holidays, iii) denied entry at the checkpoint despite previous coordination with Israeli authorities, iv) security reasons due to the presence of numerous settlers. The times when MSF was able to enter H2, MSF had to adapt the mobile clinic schedule to the entry restriction during Jewish holidays, and Israeli soldiers subjected MSF staff to car searches, thorough identity checks, as well as inquisitive questioning, and harassment and intimidation at the checkpoint (e.g., being lined up). The reduced availability of medical services directly affected our patients. MSF patients in H2 reported they could not access sexual reproductive health care. Due to the regular curfews and closure of checkpoints, the population in H2 also struggled to acquire essential supplies, food, and medicine. A patient with a broken leg explained she had to walk for over an hour at night to exit the area and reach the hospital after she was denied exit at the checkpoint. On another incident, an elderly woman with heart disease had to be carried to the checkpoint by her family after the ambulance they had called was denied entry to H2.

### Obstruction of healthcare in al Aroub Refugee Camp

The obstruction of ambulances is an increasingly alarming issue in Al Aroub refugee camp. Israeli forces routinely block the only ambulance available in the camp from transporting patients to nearby hospitals by refusing to open the camp gates or cause life-threatening delays by conducting searches of the ambulance at checkpoints. For most cases, the ambulance is forced to take alternative roads to transport patients safely, delaying by 45min to 1h their arrival to the hospital. In March, an elderly woman died upon arriving to the hospital; she went into cardiac arrest after the ambulance was delayed for one hour due to the closure of checkpoints. In April, the ambulance was blocked from crossing the checkpoint when trying to bring a woman in labour to the hospital; they had to take a detour via Bethlehem to eventually be forced to park the ambulance by the side of the road to deliver the baby, right next to a settlement with a risk of being attacked any moment while assisting the delivery. In September, Israeli forces stopped the ambulance transporting a woman who was shot by Israeli forces, searched the vehicle, and detained the driver for over an hour while the patient was kept in the ambulance. In October, a patient called for an emergency, but Israeli forces denied the ambulance entry to the camp twice; the patient was transported by taxi to the camp gate, where the ambulance could further transport him. In October, Israeli forces threatened at gunpoint medical volunteers attempting to approach a 10-year-old boy shot by soldiers while playing; they prevented them from rescuing the boy until they left the camp. These are just some of many examples the paramedics shared with MSF.

### Changes in conduct of Israeli Forces in Hebron Governorate

Starting September 2024, Israeli forces conducted large-scale military incursions in Dura, Yatta, and Al Fawwar refugee camps. While Israeli military incursions are common throughout the West Bank, the scale, duration (10 to 14 hours), and level of violence during the incursions are unprecedented in Hebron Governorate. The communities—including MSF patients—shared with MSF that during the incursions Israeli soldiers detained, physically assaulted, and humiliated Palestinians. Israeli forces turned houses into interrogation centers, and wrecked the interior of people's homes, including destroying their food and medication, which families had purchased with their limited resources. Patients reported practices which they marked as unusual, such as male Israeli soldiers touching Palestinian women and taking out the lingerie from the cupboards and playing with them. This is in line with an increase in reports by MSF patients of Israeli soldiers engaging in verbal sexual harassment of Palestinian women at checkpoints. While the scale remains seemingly small<sup>1</sup>, it has a large psychological impact on Palestinian women who started to fear and avoid crossing checkpoints, even further shrinking their freedom of movement and forcing them to use 'alternative routes' which pose additional risks (e.g., risk of settler violence or detention by soldiers). From September to November, MSF's mental health team provided psychological first aid to an average of 71 survivors of home incursions per month—compared to a monthly average of 22, from January to August 2024. They noted the lack of sleep among parents as they stayed awake to be prepared to flee and protect their children in case the Israeli forces would come back. At times, they even refuse medication with 'sleepiness' as side effect; they are hypervigilant and need to remain alert at all times. People are in a permanent state of anxiety, stress, and fear following the incursions.

### Access to Medication

The combined effect of Israel's halting of work permits, movement restrictions, and attacks on livelihoods contribute to financial hardship in Hebron Governorate. Financial hardship and ruptures at pharmacies drive patients, who were previously accessing health care elsewhere, to MSF's mobile clinics. Among the 16 new chronic patients MSF received during the previous month, 11 experienced a stockout at an MoH clinic, of which eight had stopped taking their medication. 55% of MSF's patients had health insurance before 7 October 2023, but have not renewed it since.

### Forced Displacement

Since late August 2024, MSF provided mental health support and/or social assistance to 179 Palestinians (i.e. 24 families) who were forcibly displaced from five different communities in Hebron Governorate.

**Cause of Displacement.** All 24 families reported to have experienced violence and exposure to threats and intimidation, triggering their displacement. Other contributing factors were fear for more violence (96%), fear for safety of their children (63%), and attacks on their agriculture or herd (54%). 46% of the violent incidents triggering the displacement were perpetrated by Israeli settlers, and 54% by Israeli soldiers and settlers together.

**Ability to return.** All 24 families said it was not safe for them to return to their home. 50% said that when they tried to return, Israeli settlers came and attacked them (9 out of 12 times settlers attacked them under the 'protection' of the Israeli army). Others said that Israeli settlers are now occupying their home (21%) or that Israeli forces declared their homeland as a 'closed area' (17%).

**Current situation.** Before the displacement, 21 out of the 24 families depended on herding and farming as their main source of income. Out of these 21, only 7 are still able to derive an income from herding; the other families remain without income. 50% of the families say they are still not safe where they are now; many displaced families, but also the communities hosting them, continue to be exposed to physical violence, and threats and intimidation by Israeli soldiers and settlers. Some families sleep in a nearby cave as it is not safe for them to stay in the shelter they were displaced to during the night. They lost everything, and, still, they are not safe.

**Home Demolitions.** In October and November 2024, MSF provided support to 120 people who lost their home in a total of 14 home demolitions; all indicated to remain unsafe after the demolition. After their homes are demolished, many families cope by living in tents, however, often, Israeli forces come and confiscate or destroy their tents as well.

The acceleration and intensification of Israel's coercive actions is pushing Palestinians out of their homes and off their land, into a different environment where the violence and coercion against them stays the same. This systematic government policy may amount to **forcible transfer**, which is a war crime under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

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<sup>1</sup> MSF received numerous reports on sexual harassment by Israeli forces from patients in Tel Rumeida and Jaber in H2, and al Fawwar refugee camp.