



Access through Rafah Border Crossing, the Gaza Strip

November 2015

The following provides a factual overview of the situation regarding access to the Gaza Strip via Egypt based on publicly available sources (noting that UNHCR does not have a presence in the Gaza Strip).¹ This document is based on information available up to 15 November 2015.

Since mid-2013, severe restrictions on the movement of people have been imposed on the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt in the context of political uncertainty and military operations in northern Sinai.² Following a deteriorating of the security situation in Northern Sinai since October 2014, the Rafah Crossing has remained mostly closed.³ According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), between 24 October 2014 and October 2015, the Rafah border crossing was open for passage for a total of only 37 days. During the months of February, April and July 2015, the border remained completely closed.⁴ Egyptian authorities opened the border for three days, on 8, 9 and 17 September 2015, but limited passage to Palestinian pilgrims travelling to Mecca, in one direction only, from the Gaza Strip to Egypt.⁵ The border reportedly was subsequently opened for five days in September/October 2015, also in one direction, mostly to allow Palestinian Hajj pilgrims to return to the Gaza Strip.⁶ The sustained near-closure of

¹ UNHCR's *Position on Deportations to Gaza* (February 2015) is available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5448f2bea.html>. For an overview of the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, see UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Internal Displacement and Humanitarian Situation in the Gaza Strip*, November 2015, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/564ec6914.html>.

² Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian Territories (OCHA oPT), *Rafah Border Crossing Continues to be Largely Closed for the Sixth Month in a Row - Humanitarian Bulletin Monthly Report April 2015*, April 2015, p. 3, <http://bit.ly/1SGtX3o>.

³ "Egyptian officials cite recent attacks on army and police personnel in the northern Sinai Peninsula when justifying Egypt's closed-border policy"; Egypt Independent, *Ministry: 17,000 Gazans Await Permission to Leave Strip*, 23 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/1IsfU5n>. See, e.g., OCHA oPT, *Rafah Crossing, Movement of People Into and Out of Gaza*, [regularly updated] <http://bit.ly/1NDBFG3>; See also, Swedish Migration Agency, Lifos, Center för Landinformation och Landanalys inom Migrationsområdet, *Gränsövergången i Rafah – Status, Kriterier och Procedurer vid Passage till och från Egypten*, 20 February 2015, p. 3, <http://bit.ly/20YCxyK> (English summary on page 3).

⁴ OCHA oPT, *Rafah Crossing, Movement of People Into and Out of Gaza*, [regularly updated] <http://bit.ly/1NDBFG3>. See also successive *Gaza Situation Reports* by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/emergency-reports>.

⁵ "The Rafah Crossing was exceptionally opened on 17 September for Palestinian pilgrims travelling to Mecca (Saudi Arabia), allowing over 500 to cross into Egypt. The crossing has been continuously closed, including for humanitarian assistance, since 24 October 2014, except for 33 days of partial openings"; OCHA oPT, *Protection of Civilians Weekly Report | 15-28 September 2015*, 1 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/1MyH7dn>. "The Rafah Crossing was exceptionally opened on 8 and 9 September for Palestinian pilgrims heading to Mecca (Saudi Arabia), allowing over 1,500 to cross into Egypt. The crossing has been continuously closed, including for humanitarian assistance, since 24 October 2014, except for 32 days of partial openings"; OCHA oPT, *Protection of Civilians Weekly Report | 8 - 14 September 2015*, 14 September 2015, p. 2, <http://bit.ly/1WX8Bn6>.

⁶ Ahram Online, *Egypt Partially Opens Rafah Border Again for Pilgrims Returning to Gaza*, 15 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/1j4GwY8>; Albawaba News, *Egypt Opens Rafah Crossing for Palestinian Pilgrims after Hajj*, 30 September 2015, <http://bit.ly/1LjiteR>. See also UNRWA, *Gaza Situation Report 115*, 22 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/1X3WylY>; UNRWA, *Gaza Situation Report 114*, 15 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/20YASsU>; UNRWA, *Gaza Situation Report 113*, 9 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/1SUXI4N>; UNRWA, *Gaza Situation Report 111/112*, 2 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/1NAzjYs>.

the Rafah Crossing has led to significant numbers of Palestinians being stranded on either side of the crossing, including those with urgent medical needs.⁷ According to OCHA, the closure is directly affecting at least 30,000 Palestinians registered as humanitarian cases waiting to leave Gaza via Rafah.⁸ At the time of writing, discussions between Egyptian and the Palestinian authorities were reportedly underway to ease restrictions at the Rafah Crossing, but concrete measures had yet to be announced.⁹

Aside from the Rafah Crossing largely being closed and transiting arrangements therefore being highly difficult to plan, criteria and procedures for access into the Gaza Strip via Egypt require coordination and permission from the Egyptian, and at times, the Palestinian authorities. To enter Egypt, the applicant requires an entry visa for Egypt, for which a passport or travel document is required. Additionally, Egypt reportedly denies entry to the Gaza Strip for Palestinians who do not hold Israeli-approved ID documents.¹⁰

Moreover, amid a reportedly deteriorating security situation in Northern Sinai,¹¹ and particularly in light of escalated hostilities around Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid in Northern Sinai since 1 July 2015,¹² coordination of safe passage across the Sinai is reported to remain extremely difficult and risks exposing civilians to violence, abduction, trafficking and counter-terrorism operations.¹³

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⁷ Al-Jazeera, *Egypt's Siege on Gaza: 'Rafah Opens Only for the Dead'*, 25 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/1MOPkh3>; Egypt Independent, *Ministry: 17,000 Gazans Await Permission to Leave Strip*, 23 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/11sfU5n>; Daily Sabah Mideast, *Egypt's Closures at Rafah Crossing Leave Palestinians Suffering*, 18 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/1WX8BDz>; Al Jazeera, *Palestinians 'Imprisoned' by Rafah Closure*, 2 December 2014, <http://bit.ly/1Mjunt8>; Middle East Eye, *Rafah Closure Punishes Palestinians in Gaza*, 25 November 2014, <http://bit.ly/1PLD0yT>.

⁸ OCHA oPT, *Gaza Crossings' Operations Status: Monthly Update - October 2015*, 13 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/1MOSe5f>.

⁹ Haaretz, *Egypt, PA Agree on Re-Opening Rafah Crossing, Fatah Official Says*, 17 November 2015, <http://bit.ly/1PxxIIL>.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *"Forget About Him, He's Not Here" - Israel's Control of Palestinian Residency in the West Bank and Gaza*, 5 February 2012, pp. 8, 15, 54-55, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4f3374972.html>.

¹¹ "Sinai's security crisis is likely to endure, as long as continuity, not change, is the main feature of military's policies in the peninsula"; Chatham House, *Enduring Repression and Insurgency in Egypt's Sinai*, 14 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/1QrSWYH>. See also media reports on the deteriorating security situation: Reuters, *Egypt Extends State of Emergency in North Sinai by Three Months*, 28 October 2015, <http://reut.rs/1HS1567>; UPI, *Egyptian Security Forces kill 25 Militants in North Sinai*, 25 October 2015, <http://upi.com/6126715t>; Haaretz, *Egypt Says Security Forces Killed 98 Militants in Sinai Operation*, 12 September 2015, <http://bit.ly/1SV1u8S>; Christian Science Monitor, *Sinai Blasts Injure Six amid Deteriorating Security Conditions*, 4 September 2015, <http://bit.ly/1HS0RvC>; Haaretz, *Sinai's ISIS Offshoot Is Most Effective in Mideast, Senior IDF Official Says*, 27 July 2015, <http://bit.ly/1PLEWad>.

¹² Al Jazeera, *Egypt's Sinai Hit by Worst Violence in Years*, 2 July 2015, <http://bit.ly/1GPIZV3>; BBC News, *Egypt: Sinai Operations Will Last 'Until IS Removed'*, 2 July 2015, <http://bbc.in/1f3zEsY>.

¹³ "Four Palestinians were abducted in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula yesterday evening minutes after entering the country through the Rafah Crossing, the Palestinian government in Gaza reported an eyewitness saying. The eyewitness reported armed, masked men opening fire on a bus carrying Palestinians who were entering Egypt; they then called four men by name and abducted them. The bus was only a couple of kilometres away from the Rafah Crossing"; Middle East Monitor, *Four Palestinians Abducted in Sinai after Passing Rafah Crossing*, 20 August 2015, <http://bit.ly/1N8il9A>. See also, HRW, *Egypt: Thousands Evicted in Sinai Demolitions*, 22 September 2015, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/560119714.html>; US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2015*, July 2015, p. 148, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/245365.pdf>.