Compelled to Flee:
Cycles of Israeli forced displacement of Palestinians

Photo: Camp for Internally Displaced People on the Egyptian border.
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Another day here in the north of Gaza, and I can guarantee that 99% of families here cannot find anything to eat. You know what is hard and difficult when your children are crying out, crying from hunger, and you don’t have anything to feed them. The markets here are empty, and you don’t find anything to buy. Even if you find anything, it’s only rice and way too expensive. We still ask ourselves what we did as civilians… to deserve to live in hunger. If we do not die from bombing, we will die from hunger.

I was pregnant when the war began, and I gave birth on the third day [of the war]. We fled under missile strikes, with debris and shattered glass flying everywhere. We arrived at the hospital, but it was soon bombed as well. We had to walk to Jabalia camp where we stayed for a week. When the week ended, we were forced to leave again… We were a complete mess when we arrived there, including more than 7,000 children, were displaced in the Gaza Strip in 1967, Israel has pursued the forced removal of Palestinians from areas under its control.

The right of refugees to return to the territory from which they were displaced is enshrined in numerous instruments and provisions of international law. These include the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and customary IHL. It is a right set out in multiple resolutions of the UN Security Council, and explicitly recognized in the case of Palestinian refugees in UN General Assembly resolution 194 (1948), which upholds the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the homes from which they were displaced during 1948. Yet over the past 75 years, Israel has systematically failed to fulfil or recognize this right, preventing millions of Palestinian refugees from returning to their homes and lands.

Continued displacement policies and practices in the West Bank and Gaza

Israel’s forced displacement of Palestinians did not end with the Nakba. Through a range of policies and practices, particularly those enacted following its seizure of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip in 1967, Israel has pursued the forced removal of Palestinians from areas under its control.

Historically, such practices have focused on the West Bank. OCHA reported that from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2023, more than 13,500 Palestinians, including more than 7,000 children, were displaced in the West Bank as a result of Israel’s unlawful destruction of Palestinian homes and other property as well as its illegal settlement policy, accompanied by a rise in settler violence. This violence is enabled by an environment of almost complete legal impunity. Since 2005, more than 93% of all investigations opened by Israeli police into allegations of settler violence were closed without an indictment, with just 3% leading to a conviction.

In the 16 years blockade since the closure of Gaza in 2007, Gaza residents have experienced multiple instances of displacement, often corresponding to escalations in Israeli military attacks. During the
Following the attacks of 7 October 2023 by Palestinian armed groups, in which some 1,200 Israeli and foreign nationals were killed and 250 taken captive, Israel's decision to respond has reignited conflict with added violence.

In the context of war, IHL places specific obligations on an occupying power regarding the treatment of the civilian population under its control. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 explicitly prohibits an occupying power from deporting or forcibly transferring members of the occupied civilian population, regardless of motive. This provision is a cornerstone of the laws of occupation; it is designed to prevent demographic changes being made by the occupying power to the occupied territory, regardless of any “justification” it may provide for such changes. It underscores the principle that the rights and dignity of the civilian population must be protected, reflecting an occupying power’s broader obligations to ensure the welfare and security of those under its administration.
Evacuations and international humanitarian law

IHL prohibits an occupying power from carrying out either individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations, of members of the civilian population living under occupation. The sole exception to this prohibition is outlined in Article 49(2) of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which permits the occupying power to carry out total or partial evacuations of a specific area solely to safeguard the security of the civilian population, or when deemed necessary for reasons of military imperatives. This relates to scenarios where the civilian population risks serious harm, for example from intense bombing, or where its presence would prevent the execution of lawful military operations in conformity with IHL.

However, for evacuations to be lawful, they must be temporary, with displaced persons being allowed to return to their homes as soon as hostilities end. In addition, the occupying power is obligated to provide, as far as possible, displaced persons with access to shelter, hygiene facilities, healthcare, safety and nutrition, and to ensure that family members are not separated.

Occupation: a situation when, during an international armed conflict, a territory, in full or in part, comes under the effective provisional control of a foreign power without consent.

Forcible transfer: forced displacement by an occupying power, without grounds permitted by international law, of members of an occupied civilian population within the borders of a territory.

Deportation: forced displacement by an occupying power, without grounds permitted but international law, of members of an occupied civilian population beyond the borders of a territory.

Evacuations: temporary removal of a civilian population during armed conflict to protect that population from the effects of military operations, or when removal is essential to permit legitimate military operations. To the extent possible, affected persons must receive adequate human aid during displacement.

Israel’s mass forced displacement of Palestinians within Gaza

At the beginning of its bombardment and following ground invasion in October 2023, Israel issued a series of evacuation orders covering the entirety of the northern Gaza Strip. These orders forced the evacuation of some 1.1 million Palestinians, within a mere 24-hour timeframe, to areas where little or no humanitarian aid was available. To compound the resulting crisis, designated “safe” routes from northern Gaza to areas south of Wadi Gaza, such as Salah al-Din Road and the coastal highway, were targeted by airstrikes and reportedly subject to attack from ground forces and other hazards that jeopardized safe passage.

As Israel’s ground invasion advanced southward, Israeli forces issued further mass evacuation orders displacing families multiple times, for example in Khan Younis in December 2023 and January 2024.

The transformation of Khan Younis from a proclaimed ‘safe zone’ by Israel into a battle ground lays bare the intensifying humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Moreover, the erratic and inconsistent evacuation instructions, compounded by a lack of access to electricity and the internet, plunged residents into confusion and vulnerability. Consequently, around 1.5 million people are now crowded into Rafah Governorate, Gaza’s southernmost governorate at the border with Egypt. Before the war, this was home to around 280,000 people, today, six times as many people are squeezed into the area.

As the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Norwegian Refugee Council have highlighted, Israel’s evacuation orders failed to provide the basic necessities; it is difficult to get fresh drinking water. My son goes on several trips to fill only one gallon [of water]. It is a long way to get water, and it is also tiring. Sometimes my kids fall asleep without water because we couldn’t get any.

Suhaila, a mother who has been displaced
safe routes of travel, safe final destinations where people's basic humanitarian needs can be met or guarantees of return once hostilities have ceased. As such, they cannot constitute lawful evictions under IHL. The resulting displacement is thus likely to constitute forcible transfer; this is a grave breach of IHL, if Palestinians from Gaza are displaced to a location outside of the OPT due to the impossible living conditions imposed by Israel, such displacement could be considered deportation/forced displacement across an international border.58

In December 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Paula Gaviria Betancur, warned59 that Palestinians in Gaza were at risk of 'ethnic cleansing', stating that 'Israel is seeking to permanently alter the composition of Gaza’s population with ever-expanding evacuation orders and widespread and systematic attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure'60 in the whole besieged enclave. Current and previous UN Special Rapporteurs to the OPT have taken similar positions.61

The women of Palestine are enduring some of the direst conditions ever witnessed. Here in Gaza, we live in a state of conflict that affects every facet of our existence. Many are displaced from their homes, living in tents without the basic necessities for survival. They lack access to food, hospitals, security or safety. We, at the Palestinian Development Women Studies Association (PDWSA), strive to provide the appropriate response to women’s needs. However, the ongoing war has made us victims too. With the constant displacement and limited telecommunications, our humanitarian response is significantly hindered.

Sahar, Palestinian Development Women Studies Association (PDWSA), a partner of ActionAid in Gaza

Israeli government plans to deport Palestinians across international borders

Since the onset of the current Israeli offensive on Gaza, reports have emerged of plans by Israeli governmental bodies and officials to ‘relocate’, or expel, Palestinian residents of Gaza to areas outside the OPT.

One of the most prominent ‘concepts’ proposed, in a leaked paper drafted by Israel’s Intelligence Ministry,62 is an initiative entailing the protracted or permanent mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza to the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. According to a separate paper63 authored by an Israeli think tank headed by a former Israeli national security advisor, the 7 October attacks represent ‘a unique and rare opportunity to evacuate the whole Gaza Strip in coordination with the Egyptian government’. In October 2023, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly lobbied European counterparts to pressure Egypt64 into accepting Palestinians displaced from Gaza.

Senior Israeli officials are also reportedly discussing the mass displacement of Palestinians in Gaza to other third countries.65 In January 2024, three months after Israel’s military assault on Gaza, it was reported66 that Israeli officials have privately reached out to several African countries to explore the possibility of these states accepting permanent resettlement of large numbers of Palestinians from Gaza. Prime Minister Netanyahu is reported to have requested a ‘thinning out’67 of the Gaza population and claimed that ‘our problem is [finding] countries that are willing to absorb Gazans, and we are working on it’.67 Within the same month, Israel’s Communications Minister, Shlomo Kerhi, stated, ‘we certainly need to encourage emigration’ from Gaza. When pressed on how Israel would achieve this, he replied that ‘the war does what it does’.68

These reported plans have been revealed against the backdrop of settler groups’ open advocacy and promotion of the re-establishment of Israeli settlements inside Gaza following the end of the present hostilities. Though seemingly not official Israeli policy, such initiatives have received explicit support from Israeli ministers69 who are also advocating for resettling Palestinians from Gaza.70

In response to these emerging reports, on 11 January 2024, while proceedings were simultaneously taking place at the International Court of Justice relating to alleged violations by Israel of the Genocide Convention, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that ‘Israel has no intention of permanently occupying Gaza or displacing its civilian population.’71 This statement, however, must be weighed against the plans apparently being explored by his administration, as well as Israeli military conduct in Gaza. On 9 February 2024, it was publicly announced that Netanyahu ordered72 Israeli forces and the security establishment to submit a plan to the Cabinet for ‘evacuating the population’ from Rafah.

Rafah has become the destination for displaced people who hope to escape the bombardment. Now, if you walk in Rafah’s streets, you feel like it’s a pressure cooker. Everything is overcrowded, and the city’s capacities and facilities need to meet the needs of the people. There are very limited food supplies, inadequate health and sanitation services, and a shortage of hospital and healthcare facilities... Shelters are also extremely crowded, and rainfall has worsened the situation. Many people who fled from their homes didn’t bring enough clothes or blankets because they thought it would only be a couple of days before they could return home. However, days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months. Many makeshift tents cannot withstand the wind and rain, leaving them and their children sick. It is very saddening to see children get sick only because they couldn’t find warm clothes or a warm shelter to stay in.

Ghada Alhaddad, Oxfam Media and Communications Officer, Gaza

We are still suffering inside the Gaza Strip, especially in Rafah which currently accommodates 1,500,000 people in a small area of land which should only accommodate 250,000. The needs of women and children are great. There is a need for psychological support for women due to the [anxiety] and fear they experience as a result of the successive bombing of all areas of Gaza. Women and children are most affected by the suffering experienced during displacement and while living in shelter centres or inside tents. Most pregnant women who [have] attended group therapy [say] they fear going into labour and not being able to find a doctor. They fear that they may need a caesarean section without aesthetic. The anxiety overwhelms them.

Buthaina Subeh, director of Wefaq Association, a partner of ActionAid in Gaza

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The international community must act now

For decades, the Israeli government has systematically worked to expel Palestinians from the areas it controls. This strategy, evident in the West Bank through coercive measures and the restriction of access to resources, is now being intensified in Gaza at a horrific scale, resulting in a large-scale humanitarian crisis. Use of starvation tactics and the restriction of access to basic necessities and services in Gaza underscores Israel’s intent to control, coerce and, ultimately, displace the Palestinian population.

Forcible transfer and deportation are serious violations of international law and atrocity crimes. Third states have a legal obligation to stop existing transfers and prevent such acts taking place in future. This obligation must also be viewed in light of the finding by the International Court of Justice in January 2024 that it is plausible that Israel’s acts in Gaza could amount to genocide.

The international community’s public response to Israel’s reported deportation plans has been unequivocal. US President Joe Biden stressed the importance of ‘ensuring that Palestinians in Gaza are not displaced to Egypt or any other nation’, with other members of the US administration describing Palestinian resettlement to the Sinai Peninsula as a ‘nonstarter’. In a statement issued on 3 January 2024, the US ‘rejected’ recent statements from Israeli Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir advocating for the resettlement of Palestinians outside of Gaza, calling such comments ‘inflammatory and irresponsible’. The same statement emphasized that ‘Gaza is Palestinian land and will remain Palestinian land’. Similar positions have been adopted by Russia, China, the EU Commission, Germany, France, the UK, the Netherlands, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

World leaders’ public rejection of any deportation of Palestinians from Gaza is an important step. It must be followed with further measures – particularly to address forcible transfer, which is likely to have already occurred inside both Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The US, for instance, has not demonstrated any inclination to shift from a policy of unconditional military support for Israel, even when its apparent ‘red lines’ are crossed.

Furthermore, such displacement cannot be viewed in isolation from Israel’s broader unlawful conduct in the OPT, manifested in an expansionist intent and the annexation of territory. To this end, a recent ‘discussion paper’ circulated among Israeli Cabinet members, providing an outline for the ‘day after’ in Gaza, has been criticized as seeking to establish a fait accompli situation, including the annexation of territory in Gaza under security pretences, and the rejection of Palestinian self-determination.

The actions and inaction of powerful nations have aided Israel in its unlawful practices and policies. Silence on serious violations of international law, undermining of diplomatic and legal initiatives to hold Israel to account and, at times, the provision of material support such as arms transfers, have created an environment in which Israel acts with increasing impunity. The result is a deepening crisis and continued forced displacement of Palestinians, stretching across generations.

In IHL, nations bear legal and moral obligations to protect civilians, prevent atrocity crimes and uphold international law. Failing to act condemns future generations of Palestinians to ongoing dispossession and exile, eroding any remaining hopes for a just and viable solution that is rooted in international law.

To end the forced displacement and prevent the possible deportation of Palestinians, the international community must:

1. Through all available means, actively pursue a full, immediate and unconditional ceasefire and the withdrawal of all Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip. Call for Israel’s compliance with its obligations under international law, including the prohibition of forcible transfer and deportation, reparations for damages caused by violations, and implementation of the provisional measures indicated by the International Court of Justice.

2. Firmly oppose and actively prevent any actions or policies by the Israeli government that could legitimize or lead to the ongoing or extended forced displacement of Palestinian residents of the OPT, including any ‘evacuation plans’ within or beyond Gaza’s borders, or reduction of the physical territory of the OPT, including Gaza. This includes insisting on guarantees against the repetition of unlawful acts such as forcible transfers, deportations, forced evictions, the demolition of homes and productive assets, and any Israeli authorities’ practices, policies or legislation that contribute to the acquisition of Palestinian territory and negate the Palestinian right to self-determination.

3. Take all possible steps to ensure that all displaced Palestinians within Gaza are permitted to safely return to their usual place of residence as soon as hostilities in those areas cease.

4. Take all possible steps to ensure that all displaced Palestinians within the West Bank are permitted to safely return to their usual place of residence.

5. Ensure that all essential aid, including water, food, medicine and fuel be allowed into Gaza immediately, and ensure immediate, safe humanitarian access across Gaza so that humanitarian assistance can be safely distributed in sufficient quantity to meet the needs of the civilian population, including the specific needs of women, children, elderly people and people with disabilities. This entails:

a. Demanding the immediate opening of all Gaza crossings for unhampered humanitarian aid, and that aid levels are significantly elevated to meet actual demand.

b. Emphasizing the restoration of vital services, including water and electricity, and advocating for a principled humanitarian approach governed by a UN-led oversight that replaces Israel’s control to guarantee unbiased, well-coordinated and autonomous aid delivery and prevent undue influence from any conflicting party.

c. Highlighting the critical need for global leaders and donors to move from dialogue to action, ensuring the safety of humanitarian workers and prioritizing urgent, effective relief efforts for the people of Gaza, particularly vulnerable groups, amidst the relentless bombardment, occupation and blockade, and the resulting shortfall in aid.
Demand that Israel complies with international law, including by realizing the Palestinian right to self-determination, ending the military occupation of the OPT and the 16-year closure and blockade of Gaza, and ensuring the free and unrestricted movement of people and goods across the entire OPT. Advocate for making bilateral and multilateral relations with the Israeli government contingent on demonstrable progress towards ending the military occupation and lifting the blockade while fully respecting the obligations of international law.

Ensure the full participation of Palestinian women’s and young people’s organizations in humanitarian funding decision-making processes, and that humanitarian funding allocated includes full provision for a rapid, gender-responsive and inclusive Gaza reconstruction and recovery process. This should meet needs for protection, shelter, WASH, health, livelihoods and education needs, so that Palestinians returning to their usual place of residence can live in safety and dignity. The international community must connect reconstruction efforts to a time-bound plan to end the blockade, including benchmarks and accountability mechanisms.

Provide full support for prompt, thorough and effective investigations by qualified and independent bodies, including judicial and non-judicial accountability mechanisms, of all alleged violations of international law in the context of the OPT. This may include financial or logistical support for such bodies and for NGOs promoting accountability.

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ActionAid has been working in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) since 1993 through ActionAid Spain / Alianza por la Solidaridad, since 2007 through ActionAid Australia and since 2012 as ActionAid International supporting Palestinian people living without access to basic services and the most fundamental human rights and freedoms. ActionAid works in Gaza hand in hand with our Palestinian partners, which include Al Awda Hospital and women’s organisation Wefaq Association and Palestinian Development Women Studies Association (PDWSA). Through our partnerships with local organisations, we provide essential support and protection to the most marginalised segments of the population, with a particular emphasis on women and children facing the harsh realities of violence and rights violations.

Al Mezan Center for Human Rights (Al Mezan) is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental human rights organization based in the occupied Gaza Strip. Since its establishment in 1999, Al Mezan has been dedicated to protecting and promoting the respect of human rights, especially economic, social and cultural rights, supporting victims of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, and enhancing democracy, community and citizen participation, and respect for the rule of law in Gaza as part of the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT).

Oxfam has been working in the OPT and Israel since the 1950s and established a country office in the 1980s. We work in the most vulnerable communities in Gaza, East Jerusalem, and Area C, the 61 percent of the West Bank where the government of Israel maintains full military and civil control. In total, we work with more than 60 Palestinian and Israeli partner organizations.