

Gaza



Gaza's population of approximately 2 million resides in a politically tense, 25-mile long, 6-mile wide strip of land that has passed from Egyptian to Israeli to Palestinian administrative control over the past 70 years.

The long-running Israeli-Palestinian dispute exacerbates development efforts, causing delays

in the delivery of supplies and restrictions on the mobility of humanitarian workers, along with significant impacts on the health and well-being of Palestinians living in Gaza. A confluence of stressors—over 50 years of occupation, a 10-year blockade, inter-Palestinian divides, the COVID-19 pandemic, the renewal of armed conflict and a surge in casualties from the “Great March of Return” demonstrations—has overwhelmed already fragile infrastructures and resulted in 1.5 million people requiring humanitarian assistance while facing severe restrictions on access to healthcare and protection services.

International Medical Corps has provided humanitarian assistance in Gaza since 2008, implementing emergency preparedness and coordination projects, and providing primary and secondary healthcare and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). With a robust long-term presence in the region, International Medical Corps continuously monitors Gaza's security situation and remains prepared to respond to emergencies.



EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND COORDINATION

With its well-earned reputation as a fast and reliable first responder, International Medical Corps is a leader in emergency preparedness and response. In 2016, International Medical Corps joined a consortium of partners for the *Gaza 2020: Health Matters* project, funded by USAID, and led the emergency preparedness and response component. Building on our Gaza mission's previous work in this sector, International Medical Corps prepositioned medical supplies at partner facilities across Gaza for emergency use, and trained partner staff to enhance their operational capacities. Through *Health Matters*, International Medical Corps also provided local partners with equipment and medical supplies. Together with consortium partner Mercy Corps, we developed software systems for partners to electronically track and manage their medical supplies and patient data. *Health Matters* provided treatment, training and health education to more than 33,000 Gaza residents, from the elderly to children under 5 and their caregivers.



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY HEALTHCARE

International Medical Corps manages primary healthcare services implemented by Caritas, providing essential primary healthcare (PHC) services to marginalized communities along Gaza's border in access-restricted areas. International Medical Corps' health programming in Gaza also has expanded, and we now work with three NGO hospitals to strengthen the quality of and access to services for conflict-affected and other vulnerable populations. Through these partnerships, we support secondary healthcare services provided by these organizations, including ophthalmology, orthopedics and minimally invasive surgery.

Through *Health Matters*, we helped renovate operating rooms and other medical infrastructure to improve the hospitals' surgical services. In 2017, Israeli authorities denied permits for 54% of the Gaza citizens who applied to travel abroad for medical treatment. Through *Health Matters*, International Medical Corps helped surgeons from Gaza travel to Jerusalem for medical fellowships where they learned skills that they brought back to Gaza, making lifesaving medical techniques available locally. We also facilitated medical missions to Gaza and provided training for local surgeons to learn updated surgical techniques.

Despite movement restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our mobile medical teams (MMTs) obtained the necessary permits, and continue to reach vulnerable communities. We adapted MMT operations to conduct home visits—instead of operating in a central location—to avoid crowding and maintain social distancing. In addition, International Medical Corps is providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and related supplies to seven local partners to ensure the safety of health staff, and is implementing screening protocols to support infection prevention and control methods. MMTs visit 10 remote areas in Gaza and conduct an average of 20 visits per month—two visits per community per month. During their day-long visits, our medical staff provides around 70 PHC consultations.



MHPSS

The COVID-19 pandemic has added an undue burden to the mental health and well-being of people living in Gaza who were already experiencing prolonged stressful living conditions. The continuity of MHPSS services during COVID-19 is essential, and International Medical Corps is playing a significant role in making these services available to marginalized communities that may not otherwise have access to them. Our MMT staff, who are trained in MHPSS-related topics, are able to identify people in need of support and refer them to our counselors, who then meet with them in individual sessions. International Medical Corps has reached more than 2,000 people through multiple MHPSS awareness sessions under different projects.

COVID-19 also has changed the economic landscape in Gaza, with many people losing their jobs. Family dynamics have changed—children are staying at home—and the burden on mothers has increased. Women who attend awareness sessions are also offered individual counseling services in their communities.

In 2009, International Medical Corps established MHPSS programs for vulnerable Palestinians, including capacity-building for service providers and the integration of mental health into primary healthcare services. Thanks to an ECHO-funded project from 2010 to 2013, International Medical Corps worked directly with the primary healthcare system to improve mental health services and sensitize the community while improving existing support networks for vulnerable groups. Under the project, we directly provided mental health services and training sessions for local health professionals in mental health care and case management.

In November 2010, International Medical Corps and its local partner opened the first mental health rehabilitation center in Gaza—the Occupational Therapy and Rehabilitation (OTR) Center—and developed the first comprehensive guide to mental health rehabilitation. At the OTR Center, people with mental health conditions received an initial assessment and, with the

support of MHPSS staff, developed an individualized care plan aimed at increasing daily functioning, emotional well-being and quality of life, and at strengthening family and community support networks. Our MHPSS work in Gaza includes extensive training and on-the-job supervision for medical professionals.

In the aftermath of the 2014 conflict, International Medical Corps started implementing emergency response activities in 26 access-restricted areas. Activities included age-appropriate, structured psychosocial (PSS) activities for children, support sessions for caregivers, and training staff and volunteers on delivering psychological first aid (PFA), basic PSS services and child protection.

As a result of our recent partnership with three NGO hospitals, 10 additional communities now have access to essential primary healthcare services and integrated MHPSS services.





COVID-19

COVID-19 is currently Gaza's biggest challenge, with 186,126 confirmed cases and 1,627 deaths reported by mid-November 2021. The increase in cases has further burdened Gaza's fragile healthcare system, causing the MoH to shift most of its resources to respond to the pandemic, leaving a gap in primary and secondary healthcare services. As a result, NGOs in Gaza are providing nearly all essential healthcare services.

Moreover, COVID-related restrictions have worsened the socio-economic conditions of citizens living in Gaza, with poverty rates increasing from 53% in 2019 to 64% after the spread of COVID-19, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). Four-fifths of families in Gaza are considered food insecure and rely on humanitarian assistance to survive, according to the OCHA Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020. Though the number of COVID-19 cases recently has dropped and the lockdown has been lifted, the long-term effects of the pandemic on Gazans are far from being over.



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A pre-eminent first responder since 1984, International Medical Corps delivers emergency medical and related services to those affected by conflict, disaster and disease, no matter where they are, no matter what the conditions. We also train people in their communities, providing them with the skills they need to recover, chart their own path to self-reliance and become effective first responders themselves.

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