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In the Shadows of Injustice

**Documenting discrimination
and rights' abuses of Gazan
workers within Israel**

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Introduction: A Milestone in Advocacy for Gazan Workers in Israel

This introduction is crafted amid the fog of the war. Operation Swords of Iron marks one of the bleakest times in history for Gazan workers employed in Israel – and for Gazans more widely. Workers (approximately 10,000-12,000) who were in Israel at the time of October 7th, found themselves statusless after their permits were suddenly revoked. Around 4,000 of them were detained. Those who were able to enter the West Bank did so on the spur of the moment, out of necessity, without money or clothes. They exist in a precarious state of limbo, unable to return to their families in Gaza, or even to know if they are safe.

The idea for this study was initiated by NRC and [Kav LaOved](#) (KLO), as a call for clarity and, principally, to document the employment conditions of Gazan workers in Israel. The NRC, as a partner of KLO, expressed interest in the production of a report that would detail the employment structure, permit system, legal status and income instability of these workers, as a crucial milestone for future advocacy and interventions.

The study commenced in late July 2023 with a literature review and the remote collection of information from Gazan workers via interviews and discussions. However, three months into the study, the events of October 7th changed a great many things for us. Confronted with this new reality, we grappled with how to discuss the rapidly developing situation amidst statements from Israeli government officials indicating that workers from Gaza would no longer be allowed to work in Israel. We have since added a chapter devoted to the consequences of October 7th for Gazan workers.

Our report contains four chapters. Chapter One is an historical overview, organised chronologically around key events. Chapter Two explores the bureaucratic and legal obstacles faced by Gazan workers. Chapter Three details daily experiences, abuses and first-hand testimonies of laborers in Israel. Chapter Four tells the story of Gazan workers on the day of October 7th and in the immediate aftermath.

The report has limited scope to delve into the political or ideological contexts that have led Gazans to seek low-paid, unstable employment in Israel, though we do attempt to offer some insight into these where relevant. Instead, our focus is centred on the workers themselves and their experiences, not only as laborers, but also as people deserving of equality and justice. Their welfare and well-being, and that of their families is what matters to us most. It is for them we write, their perspective we see, and for them we advocate.

Chapter One: An Historical Overview

1948 and the Making of Modern Gaza

Before 1948, 80,000 people lived in what we now call the Gaza Strip. Historically, Gazans were socially and economically entwined with the people of Southern Palestine and Egypt. Indeed, their economic, social and familial relationships commonly stretched even further, as the Gaza Strip was situated on the trade route between Africa and the Middle East. The town of Gaza was the third largest Palestinian port, serving the grain-growing Hebron-Be'er Sheva area, and Rafah, which was the last stop on the Palestinian railroad to Egypt. Khan Yunis and Rafah were market towns in which local agricultural produce and livestock were traded.

However, this area, rich with economic and geopolitical possibilities, was prevented from reaching its potential. In the 1948 'Nakba', 750,000 Palestinians were forced out of their homes under the most violent conditions¹; and, after the establishment of the State of Israel, these refugees were denied the right to return to their native towns and villages. 180,000 of these refugees came to the Gaza Strip which, in 1949, fell under Egyptian military occupation. The borders of the Gaza Strip were first delimited by the 1949 Egyptian-Israeli armistice. It is a very small area, measuring 41km in length, and between 6 to 12km in width.

This huge influx of refugees overwhelmed Gaza's rural, nonindustrial economy, and many of the new arrivals struggled to find work. The indigenous Gazan economy virtually collapsed. The port lost most of its work. Some men and women found employment in the local orange groves. The wealthier Gazans left for other countries in the Arab World or for the West Bank (then occupied by Jordan). At this point in history, at least 50% of Palestinians in Gaza were unemployed.

Israel formally occupied the Gaza Strip in 1956 during the Suez crisis, making the economic situation there even worse. Things got slightly better when the Gaza Strip was returned to Egyptian occupation in 1957, and small, but steady sums of money started to enter. There was also a change in Egyptian policy at this time with Cairo reinvigorating the dormant Gaza port by declaring it a "free trade zone" which allowed it to import foreign goods banned in Egypt. This, and the inclusion of the Gaza Strip's citrus producers in trade agreements with East European countries, gave a vital boost to the stagnant economy. The number of merchants expanded rapidly, and citrus producers found a vastly improved market for their produce. The military administration began to distribute small parcels of "state land" for new private citrus groves in the mid-1960s.

¹ Pappé, Ilan. (2006) *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. One World Publications.

Post-1967: Consolidating the Occupation

After the 1967 Six Day War, the Gaza Strip was again occupied by Israel and Gazans began entering Israel for work soon afterwards. Trends in the labor market of Gazan workers in Israel were, from then on, ostensibly governed by Israeli geopolitical interests.

The first formal resolution to recognize the new relationship was made by the Israeli Ministerial Committee for Security Affairs on October 8th, 1970 (Resolution B/1). This resolution stipulated that workers from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) would receive the same labor rights and conditions as Israeli workers.² The resolution did not formalize all aspects of employment. From the 1970s until the late 80s, despite Israel's attempts to regulate Palestinian labor in its sectors, 50-70% were employed illegally. There were few mechanisms of accountability or regulation to protect their rights, and the decisions regarding their employment arose from Israeli security and economic interests.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Israeli economy relied on tens of thousands of Palestinian workers, predominantly male and unskilled, entering its territory from Gaza and the West Bank. Approximately a third of all employed Palestinians worked in Israel at this time. The earnings of these Palestinians accounted for about a quarter of the gross national product (GNP) in Gaza and the West Bank. Israeli NGO Gisha [notes](#) that in 1973 the number of Palestinians employed in Israel and the Israeli settlements rose to about 61,500 compared to 5,000 in 1968³. The Institute for National Security (INSS) notes that, before the Second Intifada, employment in Israel constituted an important source of income for The Gaza Strip's residents and, at its peak in 1986, 46% of the Gazan workforce was employed in Israel⁴. This relationship anchored Palestinian dependence upon Israel for employment, and Palestinian labor became an easily exploitable commodity.

A survey of the conditions of Palestinian workers from Gaza employed in Israel in the 1980s notes that Palestinian workers from the OPT in Israel were excluded from membership in Israel's main labor union, the Histadrut. Gazans lacked even the limited trade union representation available in the West Bank. Moreover, the General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza, established under the Egyptian administration in 1964, was banned at the beginning of 1967, leaving many Gazan workers utterly exposed to the good will of their Israeli employers.

The General Federation's six unions were allowed nominally to resurface in 1980, but it was a symbolic gesture: the General Federation was not allowed to recruit new members (300 pre-1967 members still alive and residing in Gaza

² Israel State Archives. *Resolution B/1*. <https://catalog.archives.gov.il>

³ Gisha. *At All Costs*. <https://gisha.org/en/at-all-costs/>

⁴ The Institute for National Security Studies. <https://www.inss.org.il>

were re-registered), hold elections, celebrate May Day, or hire staff. The Generation Federation was ordered to alter its original symbol - a Palestinian flag between two ears of corn- and the Israelis appointed its new head. These details are important because they illustrate a system where, whilst Palestinian institutions might be given tokenistic authority, all meaningful control and decision making lay unilaterally in the hands of Israel.

The lack of Palestinian autonomy and trade union membership left Palestinian workers exposed to exploitative labor conditions. In February 1983, an International Labor Organization delegation to the OPT told the General Federation's executive members that the conditions of many Palestinian workers in Israel were contrary to the formal legal rights to which they are entitled. Joan Mandell's research exposes this contradiction:

"This week I saw where and how they [migrant workers from Gaza] spend their nights in Tel- Aviv and I couldn't believe my eyes. Right in our midst, often in north Tel Aviv, one spots a ramshackle hut between two exclusive buildings, or a dingy corner in a cellar, or part of a storeroom where four, eight or even ten workers from the territories regularly sleep. In a horrid shack on the Sheraton Beach in Tel Aviv I found two large halls crammed with at least 40 workers. It was filled with old metal beds, rotting mattresses and sometimes two men had to make do with a single bed. There are always a few bits of food in the kitchen, which is located under each worker's bed. One day this week I saw them at noontime; the old men just sat and stared; the younger ones whiled away their time before going off for another day of backbreaking work. Often you will see them in the kitchens of restaurants, trying to get some sleep on a tabletop.

One cafe owner boasted to me this week that he didn't leave his workers to fend for themselves. In another place, I saw an old cupboard used as a mattress for two. Their workday usually fits a standard pattern. Those who go home every day must wake up before the break of dawn to get to work. Hundreds gather at the Gaza depot at 4 am in order to get to work on time. Since there is always the danger of being delayed by a roadblock for an hour or even an hour and a half, they must be ready to leave at a little after four. The luckier ones are on their way to their places of employment; the others will have to wait around at the black labor markets in Jaffa, the flea market, or Bnei Brak, until a Jewish well-wisher offers them a day of work. If not, they will return home at nightfall, IS 1000 poorer."⁵

[The Decade after Oslo: The Separation Strategy](#)

The 1993 Oslo Accords were heralded internationally as the beginning of an autonomous Palestinian state. As the last of the Israeli soldiers pulled out of the

⁵ Mandell, Joan (1985) 'Gaza: Israel's Soweto', *Middle East Information and Research Project*, No. 136/137

military bases in Rafah and Nusairat, the people of Gaza raised the Palestinian flag across the Gaza Strip. However, Oslo was a mirage: an opportunity for Israel to relinquish all responsibility as an occupying power under international law, whilst maintaining control over the territory. It simply repackaged the occupation, rather than bringing an end to it⁶. Israel retained control over Gaza's external borders (both land and sea), its imports and exports, as well as the population registry, through which ID cards, passports, visas and permits are issued. The Oslo process meant Israel distanced itself from Gaza and its responsibilities therein: separation rather than independence.

The failures of Oslo to grant the Palestinians their long-desired freedoms, led, in part, to the Second Intifada. When the Second Intifada broke out in late 2000, Israel significantly reduced the number of permits for Palestinian laborers and, in 2004, passed the "Amended Disengagement Plan" [resolution](#) (Hebrew), which states, among other things, that "the State of Israel aims to reduce the number of Palestinian workers entering the State of Israel to the point of eradication."⁷ In March 2006, Israel closed the Erez Crossing into Gaza for the Purim holiday and blocked the entry of Gazan workers into its territory thereafter.

In 2005, under the government of Ariel Sharon, Israel withdrew its military forces from the Gaza Strip unilaterally and evacuated all settlements there – the climax of Israel's separation policy. NSS notes that strategically, Israel stopped allowing Gazans to work in Israel following the disengagement in order to create an economic and political separation between itself and the Gaza Strip, a policy that strongly diverged from its policy towards the West Bank, where settlement expansion created a path for de facto annexation. The policy of separating the Strip from other Palestinian communities ("[the Separation Policy](#)")⁸ undermined the possibility for Palestinian sovereignty in any form and continues to this day.

This separation policy goes beyond bureaucracy and permits: it is also ideological and strategic. With the abandonment of costly settlements and the implementation of the "separation policy", Israel hopes to eventually dispense with Gaza's workers entirely. As we see in the next section, Israel looks to replace Gazans with a foreign migrant workforce. It is a liberating ambition for Israel. Already, today, we see how the increasing separation enables Israel to act militarily in Gaza without constraint or economic consequences.

Israel's desires to reduce reliance on Gaza's labor force to the "point of eradication" is ominous. In the light of current events (namely the destruction of

⁶ Shlaim, Avi (2010) *Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations*. Verso Books.

⁷ Prime Minister's Office. *Amended Disengagement Plan*
https://www.gov.il/he/departments/policies/2004_des1996

⁸ Gisha, *What is the "Separation Policy"?*
<https://www.gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/Bidul/bidul-infosheet-ENG.pdf>

Gaza by the IDF), the ICJ's preliminary ruling on a plausible case for genocide, and the United Nation's statement that the threshold for genocide has been passed⁹, the events of this decade (1994-2005) were portentous: historian Patrick Wolfe notes that it is possible to predict and prevent genocide by looking at changing patterns in the relationship between the colonial state and its employment of indigenous workers. In reference to Professor Colin Tatz's work, he gives this chilling example: whilst the Turkish behaviour in Armenia, or Australian behaviour towards the Aborigines constitute genocide, he writes, the apartheid regime in South Africa does not for the reason that African labour was indispensable to apartheid South Africa. It was, therefore, counterproductive to destroy it. However, Wolfe presciently continues, "Israel's progressive dispensing with its reliance on Palestinian labour would seem to present an ominous case in point."¹⁰ The final chapter in the "separation policy" was to come in 2007, when Hamas won the elections, and a full blockade was imposed on the Gaza Strip.

The Electoral Victory of Hamas and the Strangulation of Gaza

After Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections, steps were taken to further isolate Gaza. By mid-2007, Israel had declared Gaza a "hostile territory". Tareq Baconi describes this as a "milestone that in many ways marked the culmination of the initiative set in motion by Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement."¹¹ The separation was complete. Borders were tightened. Exit permits reduced. As one Israeli border agent put it, Gaza was to become a place of "no development, no prosperity, only humanitarian dependency."¹² Behind closed doors, Israeli politicians reiterated their policy of keeping Gaza "on the brink of collapse."¹³ In 2012, Israel released its 'Red Line Document' which calculated to the calorie how much food each man, woman, child and baby needs to survive, and to allow aid trucks in accordingly¹⁴. Israel's policy was to sustain life in its barest

⁹ United Nations: Question of Palestine (March 2024), *Anatomy of a Genocide*
<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/anatomy-of-a-genocide-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-palestinian-territory-occupied-since-1967-to-human-rights-council-advance-unedited-version-a-hrc-55/#:~:text=This%20report%20finds%20that%20there,deliberately%20inflicting%20on%20the%20gro up>

¹⁰ Wolfe, Patrick, (2006), 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,' *Journal of Genocide Research, Volume 8, Issue 4*.

¹¹ Baconi, Tareq, (2022) *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, Stanford University Press, p140

¹² Baconi, Tareq, (2022) *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, Stanford University Press, p140

¹³ Baconi, Tareq, (2022) *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, Stanford University Press, p152

¹⁴ Ministry of Defence, (2012), *Ministry of Defence vs. Gisha: "Food Consumption in the Gaza Strip – Red Lines."* <https://www.gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/redlines/red-lines-presentation-eng.pdf>

form: any ideas of economic growth or development went out of the window. Despite Hamas' attempts to circumvent the blockade by attempting to develop the low-tech, agricultural and small-scale manufacturing industry, Gaza nonetheless became increasingly reliant on humanitarian aid (subject to Israeli checks) for survival.

Israel imposed an absolute prohibition on the marketing in the West Bank and Israel of any goods originating in the Gaza Strip; previously 85 percent of exports were marketed in these areas. All movement of persons across the border into Israel was restricted to "exceptional and humanitarian cases" only and exports to Israel and the West Bank all but dried up.

Severing the Gazan economy from the Israeli and West Bank economy had a hugely detrimental effect. The private sector, which had constituted the backbone of the Gaza Strip's employment market for decades (accounting for more than 50% of employment in the Strip) was devastated, with two thirds of companies closed by 2010 (as compared to 2006). According to a survey conducted by the industrialists' union of Gaza in March 2011, the export ban had paralyzed the industrial sector, with some 83% of factories in the Gaza Strip shut down or operating at half their capacity, or less.

It is estimated that 120,000 people lost their jobs in the private sector as a result of the blockade, including 34,000 in the industrial sector and 40,000 in the agricultural sector. These job losses directly affected up to 700,000 dependent family members. The Gaza Strip's historic fabric of self-sufficiency was effectively destroyed by this total separation from the Israeli economy. Living standards plunged to well below that of 1994's levels.

As experts in the field have established, a small economy such as that of the Gaza Strip, which lacks natural resources and has next to no purchasing power, has no hope of achieving stable and sustainable economic development without significant export. The only markets that are accessible for products made in Gaza are Israel and the West Bank. Therefore, the prohibition on the sale of goods to these markets blocks development opportunities for the manufacturing sector and strengthens the tunnel economy.

A report published by the Saban Centre in July 2011 determined that "cutting trade and investment – meant to punish Hamas – has also hurt the small Gazan middle class and others who would otherwise have the resources to stand up to groups like Hamas."

Meanwhile, Israel has replaced Palestinian workers with what it terms 'foreign workers' drawn largely from Asia and Eastern Europe. Migrant workers who arrive in Israel are required to leave after several years in circular migration plans. Israel has more foreign workers proportionate to its population than any country in the world except Switzerland.

In 2014, after Operation Protective Edge, Israel once again saw an interest in allowing 'merchants' to start exiting the Strip after more than eight years of a sweeping ban. INSS notes that this was seen in order to restrain Hamas and maintain security calm. Israel [declared](#) that Gaza's reconstruction and economic recovery served Israel's interest¹⁵ and, on the recommendation of security officials, an arbitrary quota of "trader permits" was allocated to Gaza residents, which was eventually expanded to 5,000. This measure was ostensibly intended to enable traders and businesspeople from Gaza to travel to Israel and the West Bank to conduct business and jumpstart Gaza's economy, but it fell far short of meeting Gaza's actual needs.

2022 and Beyond: The Politics of Permits

In March 2022, the Israeli government [decided](#) to allow the employment of Gazans in Israel once again, and to allocate 20,000 work permits for this purpose: 12,000 for the construction sector and 8,000 for agriculture. (These sectors already had quotas of permits for Palestinians from the West Bank, as well as for 'foreign' migrant workers.) Jobs in construction and agriculture are called 'triple D jobs' – Dirty, Dangerous and Demeaning - and are not wanted by many Israeli workers. Palestinians from the West Bank were treated more favorably and, also, had the option of working in other sectors, mainly industry. In practice, most workers who entered Israel from the Gaza Strip did not hold these formal 'employment permits', but rather 'transitional' or 'economic needs' permits, which were granted up to the 20,000 total quota (see below).

Permits issued in 2022 by the Israeli authorities totalled 27,000 – the highest number since the disengagement – which allowed for an important injection of wages into the Gazan economy. However, it was not enough to support the 2.21 million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, who are subject to some of the highest unemployment rates in the world¹⁶. Moreover, only about 3% of the permits Gazans received were proper work permits covered by regulations relating to wage protection and social benefits.

On July 15th, 2022, Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories ([COGAT](#)) announced that, starting on August 1st, 2022, 'financial needs' permits would not be renewed once they expired, and that, in order to continue working in Israel, workers must find employers to 'sponsor' them and submit a permit request on their behalf to Israel's Population and Immigration

¹⁵ Gisha, *Quotes By Israeli Security and Political Figures About the Connection Between Reconstruction and Economic Development in Gaza and Israel's Interests*, https://gisha.org/UserFiles/File/publications/Gaza_reconstruction_quotes.pdf

¹⁶International Labour Organisation, *Over 60 per cent of employment has been lost in Gaza since start of current conflict*, https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_901137/lang-en/index.htm#:~:text=Gazans%20have%20long%20grappled%20with,the%20second%20quarter%20of%202023.

Authority. In practice, this was not enforced. Since having an inexhaustible supply of cheap labor served Israel's interests, it continued to allow the undocumented work of most workers under the 'financial needs' permits. The undocumented and unregulated nature of their employment exposed Gazan workers to exploitation, low wages and poor working conditions. And the high unemployment and poverty levels in Gaza meant that workers were unlikely to raise concerns or cases against their employers, for fear of losing an income. In its Situation Report, the ILO stressed that there was little protection provided by trade unions and other workers' organizations.¹⁷ The process of seeking employment in Israel was undertaken from start to finish in a climate of fear, as losing a permit (and/ or being subject to random movement restrictions) was an ever-present threat. Consequently, demanding their rights became a secondary concern. Even when a permit was attained, the worker was subject to an unregulated labor market with little protection for their rights.

The ILO notes that women and young people did not exit to Israel for work.¹⁸ Two thirds were unemployed.

The volatility of permit regulations and high unemployment rates contribute to the mental health crisis in the Gaza Strip, with 58% of the adult population exhibiting symptoms consistent with depression, according to a 2022 report¹⁹.

The macro-economic effects of the rise in employment of Gazan workers in Israel, accordingly, were not straightforward nor linear. INSS notes that, at 99.2%, GDP in the West Bank was almost back to 2019 levels, whereas, at 96.2%, the return to pre-pandemic levels was slower in Gaza. (In comparison, after dipping in 2020, GDP in Israel in 2021 had surpassed the pre-pandemic levels of 2019 by 6.6%). The ILO notes that per capita GDP grew by 1.2% in 2022 (0.9% in the West Bank and 2.7% in Gaza) but continued to remain below the pre-pandemic levels of 2019. While per capita GDP in the West Bank was 52.5% higher in 2022 than in 2006, in Gaza the corresponding level was 63.0% of that in 2006, the year prior to the start of the blockade.

Nonetheless, INSS concludes that it was doubtful that Gazan employment in Israel at the above mentioned scale could lead to significant economic growth in the Gaza Strip, given that local manufacturing capacity had declined dramatically since Hamas rose to power. Likewise, it was doubtful whether the employment rate of Gazans in Israel could increase beyond those numbers.

¹⁷International Labour Office, *The Situation of Workers of the Occupied Arab Territories*, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_242965.pdf

¹⁸ the average age of Gazans employed in Israel was 44 (Figures: 2021)

¹⁹ World Bank Group, (2022), *'Mental Health in the West Bank and Gaza'*, World Bank Group, International Security and Development Center, Zentrum Uberleben, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. 22 November 2022

The parallel labor markets in Israel eroded the labor market in the OPT, creating more dependency on the Israeli economy. The ILO notes that the wages of Palestinian workers in Israel and the settlements were 2.7 times higher than in the OPT at that time, being 2.2 times higher than in the West Bank and 4.4 times higher than in the Gaza Strip. By sector, average daily wages were highest in construction, where they were 2.4 times higher than in agriculture, the sector with the lowest average daily wages. Considering this discrepancy in wages, the competition offered by the Israeli labor market greatly destabilizes the economies both in Gaza and the West Bank. These statistics also highlight an important gap in the living standards between Palestinians in the West Bank and those in the Gaza Strip. These economic trends continue to drive a rift between the two Palestinian territories and exacerbate the isolation of Gaza.

Israel's public approach to encourage moderate economic improvement in the Gaza Strip was intertwined in a macro-economic model where allowing Gazans to work in Israel would finally and inevitably bring economic improvement back to the Gaza Strip as more Gazans would have disposable income to spend in the local economy. Privately, it was part of a broader strategy of "buying quiet" in the Gaza Strip, and specifically, appeasing Hamas²⁰. Keeping Gaza on the brink of a crisis, with high levels of poverty, only exacerbated the historical and political anger towards the State of Israel. The model is patently ineffective: the events of October 7th speak for themselves, in this regard.

²⁰ Mazzetti, Mark; Bergman, Ronen, (2023), "*Buying Quiet: Inside the Israeli Plan That Propped Up Hamas*", The New York Times, December 10th

CHAPTER TWO: THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

An Overview of Labor Rights

To contextualize the following discussion on the labor rights of Gazans employed in Israel, we must understand that the realm of labor is theoretically subject to oversight from both governmental and non-governmental entities, operating at both local and international levels. The ILO, established in 1919, serves as a specialized agency of the United Nations, providing a platform where governments, employers, and workers are all represented.

Since its establishment, the ILO has been dedicated to improving labor conditions: “whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled, an improvement of those conditions is urgently required.”²¹ The founding document of the ILO uniquely involves governments, international labor organizations, employers, and employees from all member states. Its processes are designed to solidify international norms and incorporate them into national legislation, thus establishing legal obligations for the members states.

The decision to allow the employment of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, and from the West Bank, in Israel was not a consequence of either international or Israeli legal obligations. Whilst international human rights and humanitarian law does impose obligations on an occupying country, these obligations do not inherently include the duty to permit protected individuals in the occupied territory to work in the occupying country.

However, it can be argued that providing an opportunity for the residents of the Gaza Strip to work in Israel may contribute to improving the living conditions in the Gaza Strip, which is a legal obligation. In short, we very much see Israel’s employment of Gazan workers – if their rights as workers are respected and fulfilled – as part of Israel’s duty to safeguard public order, provide access to necessities, and ensure those who live in the occupied territories have the means to survive and thrive.

In Israel, Israeli labor law extends to every person working within its territory, including Palestinian workers from the Gaza Strip. Similar to any other worker in Israel, Palestinian workers are entitled to various rights, such as hourly pay, regulated work and rest hours, overtime pay, days of rest, pensions, severance pay in case of redundancy, advanced notice and a hearing procedure prior to redundancy, vacation days, time off during holidays, and sick days.

²¹ International Labor Organisation, ‘Constitution: Preamble,’ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:62:0::NO:62:P62_LIST_ENTRIE_ID:2453907:NO

Additionally, employers must insure these workers with the Israeli National Insurance Institute which provides compensation, particularly in the case of work related accidents. Employers are further required to ensure safe working conditions and adherence to occupational health standards. In practice, like other workers in Israel, there is often a discrepancy between the right and its fulfilment. Many of these rights depend on employers, who are private organisations or individuals, and are not directly under state control.

Every worker whose rights have been violated is entitled to file a lawsuit against their employer in the Israeli labor court. However, practical challenges may deter workers from pursuing this avenue, such as fear of potential layoffs if they take legal action, or difficulties in securing representation. Workers from Gaza may encounter additional obstacles, including the need to obtain permission to enter Israel in order to testify in court as part of the lawsuit, and the requirement to deposit a guarantee to cover the employer's expenses in case the lawsuit is rejected.

Israel's Ministry of Labor is supposed to supervise employers and is authorized to use sanctions against those who infringe their employees' rights. Yet, it should be noted that the Ministry of Labor, which covers the entire Israeli economy, is grossly understaffed in departments overseeing enforcement supervision, and, in any case, their sanctions are weak and ineffective.

In the case of a non-Israeli worker employed by an employer with a permit to hire, the Population and Immigration Authority is tasked with supervising their relationship. It has the authority to revoke permits if the employer violates the rights of their workers. However, in practice, this oversight is rarely exercised, even in instances of severe rights violations. Our exploration in this study shows that this safeguard has been almost entirely worthless for workers from Gaza, the majority of whom were not, in any case, employed by authorized employers.

The Israeli government's decision to permit the employment of workers from Gaza mirrored the system that had been in place for years in the West Bank. Workers entering Israel to work needed an 'employment permit'. This permit was issued upon the request of the Israeli employer who intended to hire the worker, and not upon the request of the worker who sought employment i.e. the Israeli employer holds all the cards in this very asymmetric contract. Since the permit was granted at the employer's request, the worker could only legally work for that specific employer. Perhaps in a nod to the power imbalance, and a recognition of the ease with which contractual relationship might be used to exploit the worker, the employer is compelled not only to report the employment in the first instance, but also to provide the state with information regarding the hours and days the worker works, as well as details about wages, the utilization of vacation days, sick days, and other relevant aspects of employment.

The reporting process also involved payments for the worker, including contributions for pension, national insurance, and medical insurance in

Palestinian hospitals, whilst providing documented evidence of wages. Although this regulatory framework was designed, in part, to safeguard the rights of workers, KLO's extensive experience with Palestinian workers from the West Bank revealed its limitations. Often, employer reports were dishonest, covering up for low wages and, in some cases, exploitation. The worker's dependency on securing an employer to obtain a permit, especially in a competitive job market, created a situation in which workers were reluctant to resign, refuse illegal demands from employers, voice complaints, or initiate legal action.

Another outcome identified and documented by KLO is that, although employment permits were supposedly free, substantial amounts of money were being paid to mediators such as brokers, agents or dealers, in order to obtain them. KLO estimated that approximately one third of Palestinian workers in the West Bank paid a mediator for assistance in obtaining a permit. Many employers who engaged with these mediators were not genuinely interested in employing the worker. Instead, they effectively sold the permit to the worker, providing fictitious reports to the State about their employment. The broker and the "employer" not only profited from the payments, but also from compensation claims the employer made for expenses incurred, such as pension contributions or making (false) reports to the Population and Immigration Authority. In many cases, the Palestinian worker ended up being employed in an undocumented manner by another employer or subcontractor.

This mode of employment was largely undocumented, leading to exploitative conditions, payment below the minimum wage, absence of social benefit contributions, and exposure to unsafe working conditions. Furthermore, these workers lacked recognition from the Institute of National Insurance in the event of a work-related accident, leaving them vulnerable and without the necessary support and protection. The prevalence of such undocumented work underscores the systemic challenges faced by these workers and raises the urgent need for comprehensive reform in labor practices.

[Navigating the Permit Maze](#)

By now, Gazans wanting to work in Israel have two types of permits; a work permit (employment permit), which establishes a formal connection between the worker and an employer, and the a 'financial needs permit,' over which there is less supervision and regulation. The following sections elaborate on the distinctions between these two permits and their resulting implications for labor rights.

Financial Needs Permits:

In late 2021, Israeli authorities added 'financial needs' permits to the criteria for exit from the Gaza Strip. In March 2022, the Israeli government passed

[resolution 1328](#) (Hebrew) to expand the 'financial needs permit' quota to 20,050: 12,000 permits for the construction sector, 8,000 for agriculture and an additional 50 permits for individuals working at the crossings between Gaza and Israel.

'Financial needs permits' are approved by Israel after receiving lists of workers from the Palestinian Labor Office. Unlike workers' permits, there is no precondition to have an existing employer. Whilst there was some initial discussions on discontinuing these, in practice, Israel extended them in most situations excepting when a specific worker was issued a 'security block.' In such cases, another person could apply for and receive the permit.

Formally, employers are not allowed to employ workers with these permits. The Population and Immigration Authority, responsible for penalizing employers who illegally hire non-Israeli workers without a permit, does not recognize the 'financial needs permit' as allowing the holder to be employed. Despite the formal restrictions, workers with these permits do find employment in various fields, particularly in construction, agriculture, and industry.

Until recently, a significant portion, if not all, of the workers who were employed in Israel under these 'financial needs permits' had previously worked in Israel while holding 'trader's permits'. These 'trader's permits' were obtained by presenting receipts for business transactions of a specified amount, but they were not genuine and workers themselves often paid for them.

KLO does not have information on whether additional payments were made once these permits were renamed as 'financial needs permits'. In surveys conducted by KLO, the overwhelming majority of workers stated that they had not paid for the 'financial needs permits'. Some, however, did confirm they had parted with money to obtain them.

Given the unregulated and illegal nature of this employment, employers obviously do not report on the workers' hours or wages. While workers are supposed to receive pay checks from their employers, their illegal employment status often means that employers do not issue them. This lack of formal documentation further complicates the already challenging situation for these workers who, nevertheless, are fully entitled to receive a minimum wage and regulated working hours, rest breaks and vacation days - rights that are granted even to undocumented workers. However, as they are employed without the supervision of the employers' department in the Population and Immigration Authority, a crucial aspect remains missing from the legal framework.

Without regulation or legal oversight, employers are unable to deposit funds into a pension fund even if they wish to do so. Workers using the 'financial needs permit' often switch employers without renewing or amending the permit. Israeli National Insurance goes through the Population and Immigration Authority, which holds data from the employers' reports. However, employers

who hire workers with 'financial needs permits' do not report to the Population and Immigration Authority, and are, therefore, not covered. In instances where workers have proof of employment, the National Insurance Institute recognizes them as victims of work accidents if such incidents occur, and pays them accordingly. Without a health stamp (because the employment was not reported to the Population and Immigration Authority in the first place), the worker has to purchase health insurance in the Gaza Strip. Whilst Israeli hospitals are obligated to provide care to uninsured patients in cases of medical emergencies, these patients often found themselves indebted to the hospital for the services received.

Regularized Working Permits:

Regularized 'working permits' can only be requested by an Israeli employer who has a permit to employ Palestinian workers issued by the Population and Immigration Authority. The permit can not be issued until an employer is found. When the employment is discontinued, the permit ceases to be valid accordingly. The employer must report to the Authority on the wages and conditions of their employee (though they do not always do so truthfully, as mentioned above). The worker is not permitted to work for any other employer. Workers from the Gaza Strip on this permit are allowed to work in construction and agriculture only, subject to quotas (12,000 in construction and 8,000 in agriculture).

The employer is required to save evidence of paying wages and pensions according to the reported number of hours worked. The employer might be called for a hearing if an employee is only working very few hours, over a protracted period of time (presumably to challenge whether this employment permit is required). Wages are generated by the Population and Immigration Authority according to the employers' reports and the Authority passes over quasi payslips to employers who are supposed to give them to their workers. In many cases, they do not hand over the payslips.

In principle, workers who have workers' permits in the construction sector can move between employers. In the construction sector a worker whose employment has ceased will have their place reserved in the field quota for 60 days in which he can find a new employer who has a permit without him being taken off the quota register and losing his spot to another worker. In practice, experience in the West Bank has shown that there is great difficulty for new workers or younger workers to find alternative employers in such a short amount of time. In the agricultural sector, there is no such regulation, and a worker who loses his job or resigns immediately loses his place on the quota register, even though in principle he is entitled to find a new employer.

Any Palestinian from the OPT who works in Israel for at least 7 days and 4 hours, is insured as a result of the health stamp their employer pays, and is entitled to, amongst other things, maternity pay. In practice workers can have

problems accessing their rights, and their status is often precarious, as we will explore in the next section.

CHAPTER THREE: PRECARIOUS LABOR CONDITIONS

For about 55 years, from the 1970s until October 7th, 2023, Gazan workers have endured challenges in various industries and sectors where the prevalence and persistence of labor conditions reflects the systemic inequalities and structural imbalance inherent within the Israeli labor system.

Unemployment Statistics

In its Annual Report of 2022, the [Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics](#) (PCBS) showed a large disparity in the labor force participation rate between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip: 47.5% in the West Bank, compared to 41.0% in the Gaza Strip.²² The total number entering the labor market in 2022 reached about 95,000, of which 37,000 were from the West Bank and 58,000 from the Gaza Strip. The [ILO in its 2022 report](#) showed that 29,000 were working in the settlements.²³

On February 15th, 2023, the PCBS reported that the unemployment rate among young adults aged 19-29 in the OPT with a diploma or higher qualification reached 48.3%. In the same demographic in the Gaza Strip, the unemployment rate was even higher at 73.9%. In another press release published on 30th April 2023, the [PCBS](#) referred to the general workforce in the OPT showing that in the first quarter of 2023, the number of Palestinian workers had reached about 1.2 million: 655,000 employed in the West Bank, 285,000 in the Gaza Strip, and 193,000 in Israel.²⁴

In May 2023, [Al Mezan Center for Human Rights](#) published a study in Arabic, 'Rights Gone with the Wind', indicating that the unemployment rate in Gaza reached 45.3%, with 39.1% among males, compared to 67.4% among females. The highest unemployment rate among youth was for the age group 15-24 years for both genders. It reached 62.6%, with 57.2% among males, compared to 87.0% among females in the same age group, presumably accounting for the fact that many were still in education.²⁵

The same study showed that the highest unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip up until May 2023 was in Deir al-Balah Governorate with 54.8% unemployment; followed by Khan Yunis Governorate, with 49.4%; then Rafah Governorate with 46.3%. The lowest unemployment rate was in North Gaza Governorate, 38.4%. The study offers comparisons with the West Bank where the highest unemployment rate was in Hebron Governorate at 16.9%, followed by Jenin

²² Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, <https://www.bnews.ps/ar/node/20789>

²³ International Labor Organisation, (2022), <https://www.bnews.ps/ar/node/20789>

²⁴ Khaberni, 'ألف-عاطل-عن-العمل-في-فلسطين', <https://www.khaberni.com/news/367--في-العمل-في-فلسطين-584988>

²⁵ Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights, 'Rights Gone with the Wind'

Governorate at 16.8%, then Bethlehem Governorate at 15.0%, and the lowest unemployment rate was in Jerusalem Governorate at 3.2%.

Obstacles Beyond Obtaining a Permit

Gazan workers had to grapple with a deteriorating economy, exacerbated by Israeli closures and frequent Israeli airstrikes on industrial and commercial facilities. Consequently, the economic sectors in the Gaza Strip were unable to meet the demands of its labor force. Moreover, the absence of sanctions imposed by Israeli authorities against employers who exploit Gazan workers suggests that Israel show any real desire to uphold Palestinian labor rights. Indeed, control over labor is wielded as a political instrument, and Palestinians must contend with a mercurial permit policy. However, despite these challenges, Gazan workers persist in obtaining permits and crossing into Israel for employment, as the best of several bad options.

A worker reported to Al Mezan: "...In the depths of Gaza, where hope often feels like a distant memory, I live as a married father of five. The economic hardships in our corner of the world pushed me to seek work beyond our borders. In the year 2020, amidst the shadows of struggle, I began my quest for an "economic needs" entry permit, aiming to work within the Green Line, where opportunities seemed like a lifeline.

My journey was fraught with challenges. I attempted to obtain a merchant permit, a key that could unlock the door to a better life for my family, but my efforts were in vain. Then, in 2021 The Palestinian Ministry of Labor introduced an electronic link for registering "Economic Needs" permits. I registered immediately, a small flame of hope flickering in my heart.

Months passed, filled with anticipation and anxiety. Then, on April 5, 2022, the news arrived - I had obtained the permit. The confirmation came through the Israeli "coordinator's" page. Enthusiastic and excited, I went to the Labor Office of the Ministry of Labor in Deir al-Balah. There, I underwent an interview, filled out forms with my personal details, and provided a contact number for emergencies. Finally, the permit was in my hands.

This permit, however small it might seem, was more than just a document; it was a lifeline, a promise of sustenance for my children and the resilience of my family. Every day, as I cross the checkpoints, I carry not just the weight of my family's needs, but the silent stories of thousands like me, whose lives are defined by the relentless pursuit of a better tomorrow."

The Commute

The journey to reach their workplaces represents yet another arduous aspect of their daily lives. Gazan workers endure considerable hardships and obstacles along the way, many of which Israel intentionally puts in place as part of the daily humiliation and power-play.

Workers from the Gaza Strip endure a gruelling routine, leaving their homes in the early hours to reach the Beit Hanoun (Erez) checkpoint. Their journey is prolonged due to the lack of measures by the occupation authorities to efficiently manage the thousands of people passing through, leading to severe congestion and lengthy waits at the checkpoints, with little shelter and few facilities.

A worker interviewed by [Al- Anadol News Agency](#) in December 2022 shared:

“On our way to work in Israel, we pass through three checkpoints. The first belongs to Hamas, the second belongs to the Palestinian Authority, and the third is Israeli, where we face a very thorough inspection, and sometimes some workers are subjected to investigation and interrogation about some questions from the Israeli security services.” He explains that this investigation puts “the worker in a state of tension and psychological pressure, due to the nature of the questions asked and the circumstances of the investigation.”

Many workers face interrogations and degrading treatment. The unpredictability of the route is part of the systematic disempowerment of Palestinians: it makes it impossible to know how long their commute will take, and impossible to plan for it.

[K.A](#) shared his experience:

“Every day, I join the throng of workers at the Beit Hanoun checkpoint to enter Israel for work. We gather on the Palestinian side, crowding into the waiting small hall of the government security point in Gaza. This hall, with a capacity for 700 people, becomes our temporary resting place as we wait for our turn to pass through Erez. The gathering usually starts at night or the early hours of dawn and continues for many long hours. Managing the flow of people and attaining ticket reservations for transit takes over two hours.

By around 03:30, the calling of workers begins. We’re allowed to move through to a small hall by the General Authority for Civil Affairs. Here, in the hall of the

Palestinian National Authority, our ID cards are collected. We then line up in a long, narrow corridor approximately 600 meters long and 4 meters wide, leading to the iron gates known as the rings. These gates serve as checkpoints, allowing us to enter in groups of about 20 for inspection.

At the inspection stage, we're required to place our belongings in plastic boxes on an automatic conveyor belt for security checks. Then, we pass through electronic gates and enter a waiting room. Here, we use our magnetic ID cards on a special device to gain access to the bus and parking lot. After being permitted to cross, we walk about 50 meters to reach the transportation area, from where we can finally proceed to our workplaces.”

The daily journey to and from Gaza for work presents a challenging reality, both in terms of physical exhaustion and financial strain. When Palestinian workers exit the crossings, after having waited for many hours in the designated small, overcrowded waiting area at Erez, they are left vulnerable to exploitation by private taxi drivers who capitalize on their desperation to reach various cities and towns in Israel in time to start their working day, by charging exorbitant fares. It raises questions as to why Israel, given its interest in employing these laborers for its economy, has not ensured proper and safe transportation from the checkpoint to cities within Israel. A more equitable approach would have been for Israel to address this financial burden on the workers by implementing accessible public transportation options, such as buses, upon their exit from Erez. This proactive measure would alleviate economic strain and contribute to a more fair and supportive environment. Workers would be more efficient at work, too, as they would no longer arrive at work physically and emotionally exhausted. It begs the question, to what extent does Israel wish to create a fair, safe environment for Palestinian workers?

[Avoiding the Commute](#)

What might ordinarily be an easy day's commute, suddenly becomes an ordeal, often forcing workers from the Gaza Strip to spend the night at their workplaces which are not equipped to house them, as they lack basic amenities. Some even resort to renting substandard accommodation at extortionate rates, with prices reaching up to 100 shekels per night, further exacerbating their financial precariousness and impacting their mental and physical health.

The logistical complexities of daily commuting between the Gaza Strip and Israel has led to a considerable number of workers finding it necessary to stay overnight in Israel to save time and, in some cases, money. Some workers even opt to share rented apartments in some cities in the West Bank where rents are cheaper.

Another notable challenge is that regulations at the Erez crossing prohibit workers from carrying personal equipment into or out of Israel, with the exception of one small bag. This limitation often leaves workers with only the clothes on their backs. They were also not allowed to bring goods for their families to and from Israel.

Testimony shared on [Gisha.org](https://www.gisha.org)

“...Israel allows workers to leave Gaza only with the clothes they wear, a pack of cigarettes, headphones, and a mobile phone as it is prohibited to take out other supplies such as a bag, charger, food, or personal equipment.

Many of us wear several layers of clothing so we can have them available later.”

A testimony shared with KLO field coordinator

“Faced with high transportation costs and a lack of accommodation provided by employers, I, along with four fellow Gazan workers, made the decision to rent a shared space to alleviate some of the burden. This space, comprising a room, a kitchen, and a bathroom, has become our nightly refuge.

Our living conditions, however, are far from comfortable. Furnished only with floor mats and equipped with the most basic of kitchen utensils, it's less than basic setting. Despite that, the cost of maintaining this modest arrangement is significant. We pay 3,000 shekels for the bare essentials, and the monthly rent is 3,500 shekels, which we divide among the five of us.

On a personal level, my monthly expenses — including rent, transportation, food, and other necessities — add up to approximately 700 shekels. This is a substantial amount, given my modest income.”

Under the Strain: Abusive Work Conditions

The KLO department for Palestinian Workers has been actively addressing the needs of Gazan workers by responding to their telephone inquiries, providing essential information and consultations about their labor rights, and documenting their testimonials. That first-hand information has been invaluable to KLO's ongoing advocacy for the rights of Gazan workers, and in bringing public attention to their plight via social media platforms and the publication of

informational literature, all of which highlights the importance of documentation/evidence gathering.

Information Palestinian workers shared with the KLO's Palestinian team underscores the prevalent practice among Gazan workers of entering into an employment engagement with contractors based on verbal agreements alone. Unfortunately, that informal arrangement harbours significant risks, as workers often lack evidence of crucial details which, in turn, expose them to potential non-payment for annual or sick leave, absence of holiday bonuses, absence of insurance or pension contributions, and without safeguards against potential fraud.

Disturbingly, many recounted experiences of blackmail, coercion, and threats of termination when attempting to assert their rights or voice grievances. In some distressing cases, workers were coerced into signing documents waiving their rights, whilst others faced threats or false charges if they insisted on fair treatment. The KLO team was well acquainted with these practices, which vividly illustrate the systemic discrimination faced by Gazan workers in their pursuit of a livelihood.

Gazan workers face negative discrimination in both the nature and quality of the work assigned to them, often being relegated to tasks Israeli workers refuse to perform or accept compensation for. The work conditions are harsh and unprotected, with prevalent discrimination from Israeli employers.

Testimony: “The work is not easy; we work under the sun for long hours. I work 15 hours a day cleaning the swimming beaches, so two shifts in a row. During each work shift there are two short breaks only. I earn approximately 350 shekels a day, even if I work on holiday.”

In terms of physical conditions, these workers endure demanding environments where occupational accidents are frequent, leading to serious injuries and even fatalities. Regrettably, they find themselves in these perilous situations without any form of protection or support.

Testimony: “...I once fell from the third floor onto a scaffold. I rested for three hours, but the pain was increasing. I returned to Gaza and they told me in the hospital that my leg had been broken. It was kept in a cast for a month. The employer did not contact me during this period, did not pay for my sick days, and did not even ask me how I was doing.”

There are many stories that provide such clear reflection of the harsh realities faced by many Gazan workers: a form of modern-day labor exploitation or under-compensated work.

On 22/12/22, Mohamad Khaled, a worker from Gaza shared his experience with Al-Anadol News Agency in Arabic:

“... While employed on a construction site, namely, gypsum installation in Israel, I endured a severe back injury. In my time of need, I pleaded with the workshop owner for medical treatment and transportation to the hospital. However, my requests were coldly denied. The reason was: I lacked health insurance due to not having a worker's permit. My only documentation was an ‘economic needs’ permit.

In a display of indifference to my suffering, the employer handed me a mere 300 shekels, insisting I return to the Gaza Strip for treatment. Overwhelmed by pain and distress, I chose not to return home but instead sought help at Al-Shifa Hospital. There, I received the necessary medical care, and once my health improved, I attempted to return to my job.

However, the workshop owner barred me from resuming work, citing the same reason - the absence of a worker’s permit. This rejection forced me into a relentless search for employment elsewhere, a daunting challenge under my precarious circumstances.”

On 26th February 2023, [Arab 48 News](#), referred to the general problem of lack of safety for Palestinian workers in Israeli workplaces. According to their research, in January and February 2023, the first two months of the year, 14 Palestinian workers had already died from work accidents in Israel.²⁶

The exact number of deaths of Gazan workers due to work accidents is not consistently recorded, so only a fraction of deaths make it into public knowledge. QudsNet published news of the death of Gazan worker, Amin Wardeh, who worked in a factory and died of unknown causes on 23rd April 2023. Another death was reported by Arab 48 News on 28th July 2023: Abelrahman Othman, a worker from Beit Lahia, was found dead after falling from a high construction site. [Sama News](#) reported on the death of Jamal Shehadeh on 5 August 2023 who also worked at a construction site and fell from a height²⁷.

²⁶ Arab 48 News, 14 من شهرين أقل من خلال أقبل من شهرين
<https://www.arab48.com/-/حوادث-العمل-خلال-2023/02/26/14-عاملا-لقوا-مصارعهم-في-حوادث-العمل-خلال-أقل-من-شهرين>

²⁷ <https://samanews.ps/ar/post/562746/وفاة-عامل-من-غزة-أثناء-عمله-في-الداخل-المحتل>

As for the year 2022, the head of the General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions in the Gaza Strip, Sami Al-Amsi, reported to the Felesteen News that according to their statistics, [5 Gazan workers died at worksites in Israel in 2022](#). These were Jamal Maarouf who died on 3rd March 2022, Mahmoud Sami on 8th May 2022, Ahmad Ayad on 5th July 2022, Abdul-Azis Daghma on 29th August 2022 and Khaled Ajleh on 27th December 2022. We name them here to counter the silence we are often faced with when it concerns Palestinian deaths.

[KLO study: "Road Map to Health", in 2022](#) shed light on the need for immediate intervention to improve safety regulations and reduce health risks. The report said that, "It's troubling to learn that institutions like the Safety Directorate have the necessary information and means to prevent such accidents but are not taking sufficient action to address these issues"²⁸. The lack of transparency and accountability of institutions responsible for worker safety is a significant part of the problem. It is crucial that these organizations not only release the information they have but also use it to implement effective safety measures and hold employers accountable for their role in these tragedies.

The same study pointed out that the Safety Directorate has information on the number of work accidents and it could publish this information immediately after an accident occurs, but chooses not to. It also has data about the causes of the accident and the reasons that led to it. It has the ability to collect evidence, and analyze this information in order to come up with solutions and mechanisms to prevent similar accidents from occurring in the future, thus preserving the lives of workers. But instead, it hides this information, and so far, has not published any report warning of dangers regarding work on construction sites. The silence speaks volumes about the dispensability of Palestinian lives, and the general lack of public interest in the issue in Israel.

A testimony shared with KLO field coordinator

"I secured employment through my brother, who was already working in construction. He helped me get a daily wage job, paying about 350 shekels, with payment made weekly or monthly by the contractor. Our work arrangement was informal, based on a verbal agreement with the contractor, and lacked any written contract. I want to say here that workers from the West Bank earn higher wages than we do, ranging from 450 to 500 shekels per day, and may receive additional benefits. However, like us, many of them lack official employment contracts and health insurance for illnesses or injuries.

²⁸ KLO, (2022), *Road Map to Health*, <https://www.kavlaoved.org.il/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/12/Kav-LaOved-ENG-Report-בריאות-בניין-דוח-מפת-דרכים-בריאות-בניין-WEB3.pdf>

The daily wages for workers from the Gaza Strip are considerably lower, and we often face exploitation by both Israeli employers and Palestinian contractors. My brother experienced this harsh reality first-hand when he suffered a hand injury at work. Due to the absence of health insurance, the operator/employer did not admit him to an Israeli hospital. Instead, he was taken by a private civilian car and received treatment in a clinic in Umm al-Fahm.”

A Gazan writer and analyst shared his insights with [Al-Anadol](#) news stating that: “If a worker is exposed to the risk of death, dismissal, or any form of rights violation, who will compensate him or his family for that? There is nothing clear about employment rules and no one monitors how employers treat the workers.” He added: “these workers are employed in dark, hard work, which involves extreme danger to life and requires a set of means and tools of protection that are not provided. [...] The remunerative salary that the Gazan worker receives from his work in an unsafe environment with many risks is paid with his own blood.”

A Gazan man shared details about the death of his brother, [published in Al-Mezan report in Arabic](#):

“...The sombre news of my brother Abdul Aziz's passing reached our family around 11:30 am on Monday, August 29, 2022. Abdul Aziz was working at a garbage dump in the Tel Aviv area of Israel when tragedy struck.

He was fatally injured in an accident involving a bulldozer while he was employed by a cleaning company within the landfill. Abdul Aziz had secured this job in June 2022, under the classification of ‘Economic Needs.’

Before this fateful incident, Abdul Aziz had been employed at the cleaning company for just 40 days. He was a dedicated family man, married and a father to five children. Prior to obtaining his job, he had been unemployed and dependent on financial assistance from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Heartbreakingly, following the accident, his family received neither aid nor compensation for their irreplaceable loss. His untimely death not only robbed his family of a beloved member but also left them in a precarious financial situation, with no support to navigate this profound tragedy.”

[Wage Injustice](#)

A phone survey on the employment conditions of 1,000 Gazans working in Israel from October [2021](#) to April 2022, conducted by the [Palestinian Center for Public Opinion](#) in May-June 2022, showed that they had experienced a sharp

increase in income as a result of moving to work in Israel. According to the survey, the average wage rose more than six-fold, to some NIS 6,350 per month. The wage differential between the Gaza Strip and Israel made it easy for various persons to illegally charge for permits: around one third of those surveyed paid an average of NIS 2,830, and some of them paid in subsequent months as well.

The same survey found that 61% of Gazan workers in Israel were employed in construction, and that the average wage in this sector (NIS 6,780 per month) was high compared to other sectors. The average wage in agriculture, which employed one eighth of these workers, was the lowest (NIS 5,070). One quarter of the workers were employed in industry, services, and commerce, with an average wage of NIS 5,850-6,300. A short documentary, 'A Day in the Life of a Worker from Gaza in Israel,' published by [Gisha](#) indicated that workers' wages were determined by employers based on the workers' previous experience and specialization in a particular field of work²⁹.

In conversations with workers who approached KLO for legal consultation, it seemed that the timing of salary payments was typically based on an informal, verbal agreement established between the worker and employer at the start of their employment. This arrangement varied amongst workers: some received their wages daily, whilst others were paid weekly or monthly. During conversations, many workers shared their awareness of other workers who reportedly had not been paid for work. This issue was a source of concern, yet many refrained from speaking out due to fears of jeopardizing their permits. Additionally, workers who shared information with KLO said that they did not receive a salary slip or any formal documentation verifying their receipt of wages or their employment.

A Testimony

"I know that my Israeli employer took advantage of me. The working day sometimes extended until 19:00 without an increase in pay. He also used to deduct 300 shekels from my wages and pledge to complete the amount in the next salary, but he never compensated these amounts."

Based on available data, workers from the Gaza Strip reportedly received a daily wage that was considerably lower than that of workers from the West Bank. Despite the lower pay, workers from the Gaza Strip often accepted these wages due to the vital need to support their families. That situation led to a "race to the bottom" in respect to workers' rights. It reflected a troubling trend where

²⁹ Gisha.org, (2022), *A Day in the Life of a Worker from Gaza in Israel*,

Gazan workers, in desperate need of income, were compelled to accept lower wages and potentially poorer working conditions, a dynamic that contributed to the creation of a labor class that was both inexpensive and exploitable.

The prevailing scenario for Gazan workers with 'economic needs' permits was basically that of undocumented employment. Their undocumented status forced them to receive their salaries in cash, which they subsequently took back to Gaza upon returning home. This mode of remuneration has left them without social rights to which they are inherently entitled.

In practice, accessing these rights involves navigating a theoretical path that often necessitates legal intervention through court appeals. It is essential to underscore that, as previously mentioned, certain workers willingly opt for cash payments in full, disregarding potential deductions, as they prioritize receiving their complete wages over concerns about the withholding of social rights.

These issues raise questions about labor rights and economic equity in Israel. They point to the need for more robust labor protections and greater transparency. This dark underbelly of Israeli society needs to be brought to light.

It is also vital to address the underlying factors contributing to such wage disparities and the need for concerted efforts to promote fair labor practices, economic and political justice for Palestinians.

CHAPTER FOUR: OCTOBER 7th

October 7th: Understanding the Political Context to Prevent Future Atrocities

It is crucial to recognize that October 7th was not the beginning of the Israel/Palestine conflict; rather, it represents a pivotal chapter in a long history of injustice, dispossession, settler colonialism, and occupation endured by the Palestinian people. The events of October 7th were not isolated incidents but rather erupted from within a context of human rights' violations, thousands of unlawful detentions, land confiscation, settlement expansion, the imposition of unjust and discriminatory policies, a crippling blockade and frequent airstrikes over the Gaza Strip, resulting in multi-generational trauma and hopelessness. This has engendered profound suffering and hardship for Palestinians in general and for Gazan workers in particular, undermining their dignity, security, and aspirations for self-determination. October 7th came as a stark reminder of the ongoing oppression faced by over 2 million people who have been living under siege for many nearly 20 years.

None of this is written to justify the events of October 7th, but to contextualize them. It is absolutely critical to understand the link between, trauma,

desperation, anger, poverty, disempowerment, oppression, violence and mental health.

By recognizing October 7th as a symptom rather than the cause of the current conflict, we can begin to address the underlying injustices and inequities that perpetuate the violence.

The violence and systematic denial of Palestinian workers' rights is part of this long, violent story.

Gazan Workers on Oct.7: Trapped, Targeted and Detained

It is estimated that on October 7th, there were roughly 18,500 Gazans who held Israeli work permits. It is not clear how many of these permit holders were in Israel that Saturday. But, as Israel began bombing the Gaza Strip, on October 8th, the Israeli army began expelling Gazan workers from their workplaces in Israeli cities.

Various civil society and human-rights organizations noted that many family members had contacted them to assist in tracing their relatives with whom all contact had been lost since October 7th. Some would have been on route to the West Bank, fleeing Israel out of fear of reprisals. Later on, testimonies from some workers revealed that hundreds of Gazan workers were subjected to threats and physical violence from Israeli civilians, police officers, soldiers and even their employers. Unable to return to their homes in Gaza given the danger of attempting to the heavily militarised border, and notwithstanding Israel's subsequent decision to close the crossings hermetically, numerous workers from Gaza made their way to the West Bank, in the hope of finding shelter with local residents.

The Israeli army and police have since detained Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and placed them in Israeli detention facilities without legal authority and without legal grounds. Some were detained violently in Israel, others at checkpoints on route to the West Bank, and some even in areas of the West Bank controlled by the Palestinian Authority.

On October 10th, Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) revoked all work permits it had previously issued to Gazan workers, and later noted that "they will not be reinstated." This measure instantaneously turned Gaza's workers who had been lawfully present in Israel into "illegal aliens," from Israel's perspective. This sweeping collective villainization put workers in danger from Israelis, spurred on by jingoistic Israeli political messaging. Indeed, multiple reports surfaced after October 7th of buildings and

campuses where Arab Israelis resided coming under threat by angry Israeli mobs³⁰.

On October 11th, Gaza's workers discovered that the Israeli work permits lawfully in their possession had been revoked, and that there was no record of their permits on COGAT's Al-Munasiq app, where Palestinians can check on the status of their permit applications to Israeli authorities. A number of workers who crossed into the West Bank through Israeli-controlled checkpoints reported that they were held at the checkpoints for many hours, their cell phones and cash were taken away, and they were subjected to violent and humiliating "questioning" and harassment by soldiers.

Reaching out for information, these organizations learned that Israel had detained thousands of Gazan workers who were being held in Israeli detention centres. Some were being held in Anatot and Ofer military detention camps in the West Bank. The workers in detention were deprived of their basic rights, including the right to legal representation – which is unfortunately standard practice for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli military prisons. The Israeli authorities also refused to provide basic information about who they had detained. Inquiries from various civil society organizations to the Israeli authorities with the names of Gazan workers who have gone missing remain unanswered. Family members of workers who were in Israel on October 7th have no way of knowing where they are, or how they are. According to [reports](#) (Arabic) in the Palestinian media during that week, the Israeli army continued to carry out raids in the West Bank with the purpose of locating workers from Gaza, who they then detained and took into custody.

On October 12th, five civil society organizations, Gisha, Adalah, Physicians for Human Rights Israel, HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual, and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel combined their efforts and sent an [urgent letter](#) to the Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, Attorney General Gali Baharav Miara, and Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) Ghassan Alyan with regards to workers from Gaza who were being held in Israeli detention facilities. The organizations demanded the workers be released and permitted to cross into the West Bank, and for lawyers to be allowed to enter the facilities to assess their conditions. In that letter, they also requested a list of all workers from Gaza held in Israeli custody. The organizations emphasized that revoking the permits constitutes a prohibited act of vengeance against protected persons:

³⁰ Loveday, Morris, (2023), *An angry mob at an Israeli university stirs fears of Jewish-Arab violence* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/30/israel-gaza-jews-palestinians-netanya/>

“This act, deliberately and in bad faith, deprives the workers of the proof they possessed with regard to the reason for their lawful presence in Israel. [...] It jeopardizes the workers’ legal status, and, more seriously still, increases the risk to their lives and bodily integrity. [...] Arrests cannot be made secretly and in contradiction of the law. These arrests were made without legal authority, without cause for arrest and without any orders whatsoever having been issued in the matter. The workers are being held in custody without record, for an unknown period of time, and without guarantees of their most fundamental rights. All the workers who received a work permit were diligently screened by Israel’s security authorities for the purpose of ruling out any possibility that they are involved in [prohibited] organizations or pose a threat to Israel. As far as we are aware, no allegations have been made against the detainees, and they were arrested simply because they are Gazans and for no other reason.”³¹

On October 17th, the Israeli media [reported](#) (Hebrew) that 4,000 Palestinians from the Gaza Strip were being interrogated in Israeli detention camp and that security officials had said there was “no intention of sending them back to Gaza” at this point.

Testimony

The 55-year-old said he [“deeply regrets”](#) working in Israel. He declined to say where he was working for fear of reprisals by the Israeli army. He is one of at least 18,500 Gazans who had permits to work in Israel. The workers were detained for 20 days before they were released. “For the first time, I feel very afraid because I do not know whether I will see my family again or not,” he said. “The Israelis interrogated us day and night about our relationship with the Hamas movement despite us having no connection to any political movement. We only came to work.”

On November 2nd, 2023, with still no response from the Israeli authorities, the organizations persisted. Gisha, together with HaMoked: Center for the Defence of the Individual, the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, Physicians for Human Rights Israel, Adalah and The Association for Civil Rights in Israel filed an urgent [petition](#) (Hebrew) to Israel’s High Court for a habeas corpus injunction regarding the thousands of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip being held by Israel in detention centres without legal basis. In the petition, the organizations requested that the court instruct the Israeli army, prison service and the Israeli police to disclose the names and whereabouts of all Gazans

³¹ Gisha.org, (2023) *Re: Involuntary confinement of workers from the Gaza Strip in Israeli detention facilities*, <https://static.gisha.org/uploads/2023/10/Workers-letters-october-2023-1.pdf>

being held in Israeli detention centres, and to release any persons unlawfully detained to the West Bank until they are able to return to Gaza.

The petitioners also referred to international law, stating that Israel is obligated under the Fourth Geneva Convention to disclose the names of all individuals in custody expeditiously and ensure humane holding conditions. Holding thousands of Gaza's residents incommunicado and stripped of their right to legal representation stands in flagrant contradiction of Israel's obligations under international law.

Many workers found themselves suddenly without employment³². Ahmed (not his real name) who had been working in an Israeli mall, was fired from his job on October 7th. The 29-year-old was granted a work permit a year and a half ago, and would usually spend a week at a time in Israel before returning to his family in the southern Gazan city of Khan Younis. After his dismissal, Ahmed made his way to the occupied West Bank and stayed in Hebron with other workers who, he said, were all distraught about the unfolding horrors in the Gaza Strip. "I was very worried about my young children, my wife and my family," he said. "The intensity of the bombing in Gaza is unlike anything we've ever seen. It's cruel and brutal, and I could barely be in touch with my family." Israeli forces stormed the building Ahmed and the workers were staying in a few days later and took them to Ofer Prison.

Testimony received by the petitioners from a Palestinian man who was held in Anatot indicated that the holding conditions in the detention centres were extremely dire. The man was detained in Israel on October 8th and held for three days in a cage-like structure, exposed to the elements, with no food, water, medication or a mattress, and without access to a toilet. He was later transferred to another encampment, which he described as a "livestock pen," where he was held with hundreds of workers from Gaza. At a certain point, an officer told the detainees that they were being held there in retaliation for the Israeli hostages held in Gaza; and that, as long as the Israeli hostages were in Gaza, there was no prospect of the workers' release.

On November 3rd, over 3,000 Palestinian workers were released from detention and transferred to the Gaza Strip. Israeli authorities have yet to state the total number of workers from Gaza in Israel on October 7th, or the number of workers who were detained or remain detained. Israeli authorities have not disclosed if any workers from the Gaza Strip have been charged with any crime.

³² Gostoli, Ylena, (2023), *From friend to enemy': Palestinians in Israel suspended from jobs over war*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/15/from-friend-to-enemy-palestinians-in-israel-suspended-from-jobs-over-war>

Gazan Workers after Oct. 7th; Jobless, Unpaid, Uncompensated

As of October 7th, KLO extended its outreach activities and field work to provide workers with biweekly support sessions and to disseminate information and knowledge about their rights in times of war. During October and November, the KLO legal team reached out to the West Bank towns of Qalqilya and Tulkarem to meet with workers from the West Bank and from Gaza Strip to assess their needs and provide consultations. Over 150 workers, mainly Gazans attended these informative sessions and were provided with answers to their inquiries. Many workers reported that they had not been paid for the month of September due to the outbreak of war. The legal team provided consultation to workers about their rights during times of war, and initiated contacts with employers demanding that they release unpaid wages. Some employers responded positively, and with some it took further negotiations and formal correspondences with authorities. More than 50 Gazan workers received their unpaid wages for the months of September, and the salaries were paid to them through the project's team. This effort continues to take place today: the legal team reaches out to workers in the West Bank in coordination with some workers' unions and labor offices. In these sessions, the organisations gather and ask questions, facilitate legal, and paralegal advice, and other forms of support.

Palestinian workers do not receive social insurance or unemployment compensation from the Israeli government, as Israeli workers do -- nor is any offered by the Palestinian Authority. The jobless are left to fend for themselves. On 13th November, 2023, KLO jointly with other CSOs, appealed to the Israeli authorities in a letter which highlighted a crucial point: the inability of a vast number of Palestinians to earn a living in Israel as a result of the war could have serious repercussions. Not only would it destabilize the economy in the West Bank, under the Palestinian Authority, given the sudden increase in dependent Gazans; but, it also has the potential to indirectly aggravate the security situation. This complex weave of economic hardship and security concerns demands immediate attention and action. The organizations appealed to the authorities to revise existing procedures that currently bar the partial withdrawal of funds set aside by Palestinian employers from the Amitim Pension Fund where their pension savings are held. The appeal requests interim access to a portion of their pension savings from the fund, urging the authorities to consider and implement practical measures to alleviate the hardships these workers are currently enduring. Two weeks later, KLO received a rejection from Amitim Pension Fund to the releasing of any funds to Gazan workers, although many have bank accounts in the West Bank, and they still hold their work permits. KLO will appeal this decision.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we reflect on the stories shared and the data presented, it becomes clear that Gazan workers deserve better treatment, respect for their rights, and protection from exploitation. Their resilience and determination to support their families in the face of adversity greatly inspire us.

The continuation of labor relations between Israel and Palestine amidst numerous crises in the conflict's tumultuous history underscore an economic interdependence between the two entities. However, the relationship is incredibly asymmetric, with Israel unilaterally able to grant job opportunities, and decide which rights are upheld and when.

In order to create a fairer future for these workers, two things must happen:

First, we must strengthen the avenues through which Palestinian workers in Israel can access their rights, and/or hold abusers of those rights to account. We seek collaboration with legal, paralegal and human rights associations in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories to ensure Palestinian workers are not only aware of their rights, but also are given realistic hopes that their rights will be upheld.

Second, we must understand that the vulnerabilities of Palestinian workers are part of a state apparatus that seeks to marginalise and disempower Palestinians. Whilst progress to address such injustices might be slow – the adversary here being both a powerful state and an ideological conviction that all Palestinians are a threat – it is nonetheless a moral imperative to challenge them. It is important to consider how to deconstruct some of the thinking in Israel that sees discrimination against Palestinians not only as justifiable, but necessary.

It is our hope that this report serves as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue, policy reform, and a better, more just employment sector in Israel.

We will keep advocating until the rights of all Palestinian workers are unequivocally and unconditionally granted.