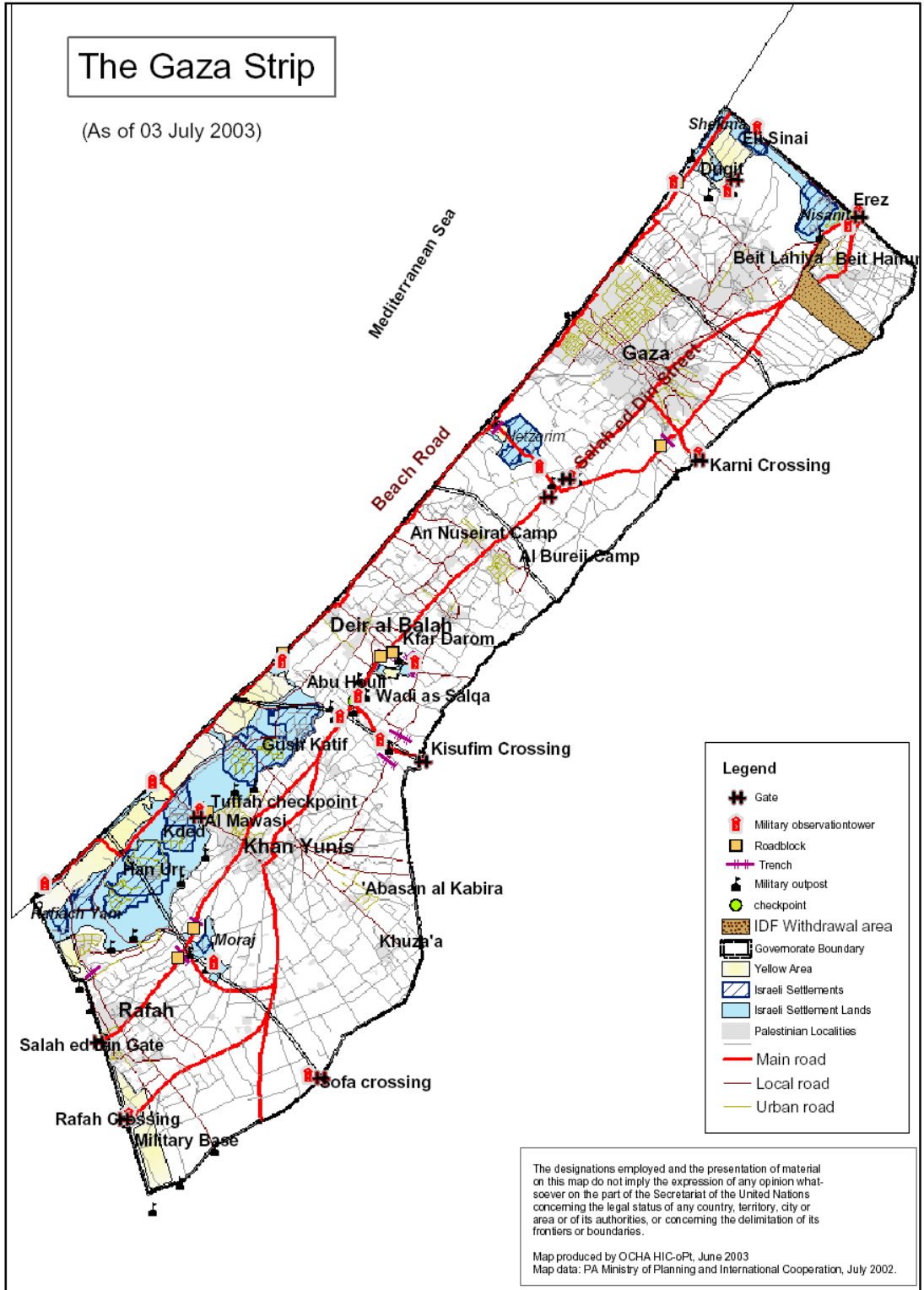


INTERNAL ACCESS WITHIN THE GAZA STRIP

1 July 2003



From the early hours of 30 June, Israel forces announced their withdrawal from large areas of the Gaza Strip (**see attached Map**). Press reports focused on the fact that for the first time since October 2000, Gaza residents were able to move freely from Erez in the north, to the Rafah border with Egypt in the south.

A visit took place on 01 July which was designed to examine the situation on the ground and at specific locations which have long been associated with partial or complete closure, or where access has been a major issue. The findings reveal that:

- Withdrawal has taken place in certain areas but not to the extent that has been portrayed in the media;
- Blockades still persist, which make it impossible to travel along the entire length of Salah El Din as was the case until October 2000;
- Movement of Palestinians between the central and southern areas of Gaza in the vicinity of Abu Houli checkpoint is now unrestricted and fluid;
- Continuing construction of IDF observation posts;
- An IDF presence remains throughout most areas of Gaza, from south of Gaza City to the Rafah border, specifically where settlements are located.

Beit Hanoun

Israeli forces entered Beit Hanoun on 15 May in response to the firing of mortars at the nearby Israeli town of Sederot, and retained their presence around the town until 30 June. OCHA visited Beit Hanoun on 16 June and reported the presence of tanks and heavy armoured vehicles around Salah El Din street and particularly in the area adjacent to the Erez industrial zone. It was clear that Israeli forces have totally withdrawn from Beit Hanoun. It was also apparent that Palestinian security forces had erected two tents on higher ground further east to the industrial zone close to the Israeli border, while security forces were evident throughout Beit Hanoun itself.

Netzarim Junction

Netzarim junction has been closed to Palestinian traffic since March 2002. The closure of this junction meant that all traffic from Gaza City and the north had no direct route through the centre of Gaza along Salah El Din, instead having to make a detour via the Beach road south of Gaza City.

The two gateways that previously blocked the road are now open. A new Israeli Observation Post (OP) on a raised mound of land has appeared in the last few days to the east of the Junction, while a number of IDF jeeps and one armoured vehicle were seen next to the OP. On the approach to the junction, the road was physically blocked by 2 of the jeeps while the armoured vehicle moved next to the road in order to provide "safe passage" to two buses leaving Netzarim settlement to the west of the junction. A visible Israeli military presence remains in this area while Palestinian security forces were seen at a distance of around 100 metres, both north and south of the Junction.

Deir El Balah-Kfar Darom

Salah Al Din road still remains blocked directly north of Deir El Balah in the approach to Kfar Darom settlement. This road has been blocked since October 2000, so necessitating a detour through the centre of Deir El Balah and then south, until Salah El Din is re-joined at Abu Houli. The diversion involves a journey of around 6 km while the stretch of closed road is not even half this distance.

For many Palestinians, the re-opening of this stretch of road will be the litmus test to the willingness of the Israelis to allow total and unrestricted movement from north to south of the Gaza Strip.

Abu Houli

The Abu Houli checkpoint has been one of the most problematic locations in terms of access over the last 2 years. Located next to the Gush Katif settlement bloc, and the only road linking central Gaza to the south it has been subject to continual arbitrary closure. From 16 April it was closed for 9 days thus denying all movement of persons and commodities between the large southern population centres of Khan Younis and Rafah and the rest of Gaza.

There had been reports that the 2 observation posts lying to the north and south of this stretch of road had been dismantled, allowing for unrestricted movement of traffic. While traffic was moving without any form of obstruction from the traffic lights that previously stood in front of the IDF positions, the posts were still there, having merely been relocated less than 50 metres from their original sites. In the case of the northern observation post, it has been moved off the corner of the stretch of road and set about 30 metres north of where it originally stood, while the southern post has been moved across the road from east to west and is now about 50 metres away at the start of the road leading into the Gush Katif settlement bloc.

Al Mawasi

While it was considered highly unlikely that there would have been any easing of the restrictions in and out of Al Mawasi, a visit was nevertheless made to the entrance of the enclave at Tuffa Gate. On arrival, a large number of people had gathered and had been waiting there for over 3 hours after the IDF had closed the checkpoint. Two jeeps and a bulldozer were seen behind the Israeli checkpoint while a new Observation Post is in the process of being constructed in close proximity to where Palestinians wait to try and enter Al Mawasi.

HUMANITARIAN INDICATORS

The partial withdrawal of Israeli forces from the northern section of the Gaza Strip has been accompanied by a clear easing of restrictions on the movement of Palestinian workers and commodities. Since 8 June, following an attack by Palestinian groups at

Erez industrial zone which left 4 IDF dead, no Palestinian workers were allowed to enter Israel while Sufa commercial crossing was also sealed off. This situation has changed in the last few days as the following table indicates, in direct comparison to the days immediately prior to the withdrawal :

	Workers to Israel	Workers to Erez	Karni Crossing	Sufa Crossing	Rafah Passenger
27 June	Closure	1975	Partial	Closed	Open Partial
28 June	Closure	857	Closed	Closed	Open Partial
29 June	Closure	3674	Open	Closed	Open Partial
<i>30 June</i>	<i>3982</i>	<i>3715</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Closed</i>	<i>Open Partial</i>
<i>01 July</i>	<i>3800</i>	<i>3502</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Open</i>
<i>02 July</i>	<i>9820</i>	<i>3667</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Open</i>	<i>Open</i>

In addition to easing the closures at Erez, Sufa and Rafah, the Israelis announced on 30 June that the ban on travel for Palestinians under the age of 35 years through Rafah would be rescinded. This has led to massive congestion at Rafah for most of this week as people have sought to take advantage of this change in the rules. Similarly, the expectation is that the numbers of Palestinian workers entering Israel will continue to rise in the days ahead.

Conclusions

The international media overwhelmingly focused on the Israeli withdrawal from Beit Hanoun during its coverage on 30 June. This was high profile footage with tanks rolling out of the town, back in the direction of Israel and it does appear that no Israeli military presence now exists in the north eastern area of Gaza. It has to be pointed out however that the Israelis only entered Beit Hanoun on 15 May, and while considerable damage has been incurred their presence was limited, localised and had little direct impact on the rest of Gaza's 1.1 million population.

Elsewhere in Gaza, it is evident that Israeli forces remain in those same positions that they held up until 29 June. There has been no complete withdrawal of the IDF from Gaza, with the noted exception of Beit Hanoun, contrary to the impression given in the media. While the travel time between northern and southern Gaza is undoubtedly quicker and while traffic in most areas can now move 24 hours a day, access is still denied along Salah El Din to the north of Kfar Darom settlement. Similarly, a relocation of Observation Posts tens of metres from their original positions along with the construction of additional Posts does not equate with a supposed withdrawal.

The IDF may justify a continuing presence on providing security to the settlers, and may allow Palestinian security forces to move in close proximity to their positions however, this does not alter the fact that an Israeli military presence remains in Gaza in positions scarcely dissimilar to those on 29 June.