MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES

The Burden of Occupation



Eroding Hope and Mental Health in the West Bank



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since October 2023, the situation in Palestine – including health, dignity and living conditions – has dramatically deteriorated. Across the West Bank, from the northern cities of Jenin and Tulkarem to southern Hebron Governorate, this period has been marked by accelerated and unprecedented **military operations, annexation practices, expansion of settlements** and **settler violence, tightened movement restrictions,** and **economic collapse**. At the time of the drafting of this report, there are more than 900 checkpoints and other barriers that restrict movement and access to services, while settlement expansion and legalization of outposts entrench **irreversible territorial and demographic changes**, annexation and **ethnic cleansing**. **Israeli settler terror**, backed by the State and Israeli military, poses an existential risk to Palestinians.

Médecins Sans Frontières' (MSF) mental health programme began in 1996 and has since become one of its longest-running and most sustained medical and humanitarian interventions in the region. Through its mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities across the West Bank, MSF has witnessed the profound impact of prolonged adversity and instability on people's daily lives. Mental health is not only a clinical specialty; it is also **a lens through which to understand the human impact of life under occupation** in the West Bank. Most importantly, mental health **reveals collective impact through individual experience**. Over time, cumulative stressors, together with shifting social roles, can strain households and shape wellbeing for generations. Mental health care **has a preventive function as well**, helping individuals, families, and communities develop and strengthen adaptive coping mechanisms, maintain social connections and reduce the risk of further psychological deterioration. Even during conflict and occupation, mental health must be promoted and protected as an integral component of the right to health.

At a critical moment for MSF's presence in Palestine, this report brings together **in-depth interviews with healthcare workers and patients** and **medical data collected between October 2022 and April 2026** to document the suffering, coping mechanisms, and unmet needs of Palestinians in the West Bank. Drawing on years of programme experience across different locations and communities, it identifies systemic factors, examines patterns of psychological distress, and frames patients' experiences within the broader reality of life under occupation.

MSF findings indicate that:

1. Firstly, mental health issues in the West Bank are **best understood not as a series of isolated clinical problems, but as the result of cumulative exposure** to patterns of violence, restriction, displacement, uncertainty, separation and loss, driving depression-related symptoms and anxiety.

2. Secondly, **distress** is not only individual; it **reverberates through families and communities**. The distress, hopelessness, and exhaustion documented in this report stem from systemic conditions that extend far beyond individual agency. For some patients, coping is rooted in solidarity and collective support. Yet the conditions of life in the West Bank are weakening the very social network bringing them comfort, eroding community and fragmenting the social fabric.

3. Finally, **mental health needs are rising while access to care is shrinking**. Following the loss of its registration status with the Israeli authorities in January 2026, MSF has been prevented from entering international staff and supplies into Palestine, and Israeli military coordination offices suspended communication with MSF. Without security guarantees, MSF was forced to sharply reduce activities. Additionally, escalating violence and movement restrictions across the West Bank have created additional barriers to healthcare access. Ambulance movements are disrupted, patients face difficulties reaching health facilities, and emergency responses are frequently delayed. Intimidation, settler violence and military operations also hinder the work of humanitarian organisations and limit their ability to safely access communities outside major urban centres.

This surge in mental health needs and violence is not an isolated event, but part of a long history of systemic oppression by Israel. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory to be unlawful, citing its prolonged occupation, settlement expansion, annexation practices and discriminatory measures, and called for an end to the occupation and settlement activity. The Court further found that Israeli legislation and measures imposed on Palestinians breach the international prohibition of racial segregation and apartheid.

Therefore, it is critical to stop exposure to violence and coercive conditions; to protect access to healthcare and continuity of care; and to sustain community-based mental health support.



MSF is urgently calling for:

- **Israel** to end policies and practices driving forced displacement, insecurity, fear and psychological harm, including settlement expansion, demolitions, land confiscation, forced evictions, mass arbitrary detention, movement restrictions and coercive living conditions.
- **Israel** to urgently facilitate access to NGOs and international organisations based on humanitarian principles and ensure a safe operational environment, and enable participation in security coordination mechanisms. Israel must enable humanitarian space, safe movement, and unimpeded access to affected communities.
- **Israel** to ensure compliance with international law, including with its obligations as an occupying power, while working towards ending its presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.
- **Humanitarian donors** to support the scaling of MHPSS activities to reach underserved populations, including through flexible funding mechanisms.
- **Health actors** to integrate mental health services into primary healthcare, mobile clinics, community outreach, emergency responses, and other humanitarian interventions and expand access to underserved populations.
- **Third states** to take concrete measures and use all political, diplomatic, economic and legal leverage to ensure Israel's compliance with international law, including with its obligations as an occupying power, and work towards ending the occupation to ensure respect for international law and the rights of Palestinian people.
- **Third states** to honour their obligations under international law not to sponsor, defend or support racial discrimination by any person or organisation.

©Maen Hammad