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MIDDLE EAST

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Reuters

The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Shaikh Ikrima Sabri (left), the top Palestinian cleric, greets Atallah Hanna, spokesman of the Greek Orthodox Church in Jerusalem.

Israel 'ousts foreign passport holders'

By Khalil Al Assali, Correspondent

Ramallah: Many Palestinian businessmen, bank directors and board chairmen of big companies who have foreign and US passports and reside in Palestinian territories were surprised by the decision of Israeli authorities not to extend their visas.

If a renewal is obtained, it will be for one time only, and they will have to depart Palestinian soil after its expiry, said the affected people.

The decision caused confusion among all members of the Palestinian society, including businessmen.

Many bank managers are unable to obtain the visa and are stuck in Jordan. One bank manager has been waiting for his visa for around two years.

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Zahi Khoury, chairman of a soft drinks company, only has a few weeks for his visa to expire. "Israel is working on removing all moderate elements in the Palestinian society and creating difficulties for investments," Khoury told a newspaper. "People are obliged to pack up and leave."

The same goes for Sam Bahour, the founder of a consulting company and the first mall in Palestine. He is currently leading the movement of thousands of Palestinians with US passports.

"I will have to leave my city by the end of this month, because the Israeli authorities have refused to extend my visit [visa]," Bahour told *Gulf News* from his office in Ramallah.

"I have an American passport, and I was informed that they will not extend my visa again. This decision will create a crisis for me personally, and my family will be splintered. My children hold Palestinian passports, and I don't. I returned from the United States 14 years ago, to invest and help in creating a civil society. There are people in the Israeli government who do not want co-existence," he said.

"The aim of this decision is to smash the last bond holding the Palestinian society together. I believe this is part of the general Israeli policy to put pressure on the Hamas government. After the Israeli government imposed its economic sanctions, it moved to the Palestinian banking sector.

"Now [they are targeting] every Palestinian with a foreign passport, to oust them from the country," he said.

Dr Nasr Abdul Kareem, professor of economy in Beir Zait University, said: "The Israeli decision has grave long-term strategic effects. Israel wants to complete its siege on the Palestinian people."

The Israeli government denied the

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existence of such a policy, saying it was an attempt to re-organise the method of entry to Palestinian territories and keep terrorists at bay.

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