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### Israeli visa policy leaves Palestinians in limbo

(Reuters)

20 September 2006

RAMALLAH, West Bank - Palestinian economics professor and writer Adel Samara has not seen his American wife since May, when Israel refused her entry.

Like thousands of other expatriates of Palestinian origin, Samara's wife Enayeh has been entering the occupied West Bank for years on a tourist visa because of the difficulty getting permanent residency cards or other permits issued by Israel.

But in recent months, since the Hamas Islamist movement took power in March, Israel has tightened up on the use of tourist visas, which had been renewable every three months by leaving the West Bank and returning again.

In some cases, Israeli authorities have been writing 'last permit', giving shorter stays or refusing entry altogether, Palestinians affected by the policy said.

'My kids miss her dreadfully,' said Adel Samara, 62.

'This is the first time in history I have heard of an occupation that divorces people.'

Samara said Israeli authorities had prevented him from leaving the West Bank since 2003. He has not been told why.

Palestinians said thousands of expatriates who had applied without success for permanent residency or other permits could be affected by the tighter tourist visa rules.

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Many are like Palestinian American businessman Sam Bahour, who moved to Ramallah after the 1993 Oslo peace accords.

An immigration official wrote 'last permit' on Bahour's US passport. He has until Oct. 1 to leave.

Bahour, 41, has been seeking a residency card since 1994.

'If (the Israelis) were looking for modernisation, they would be looking for people such as myself,' said Bahour, standing in a \$10-million shopping mall he developed with other investors in Ramallah.

While Bahour's Palestinian wife has a green card to enter the United States and his daughters have American citizenship, other families were being split up, he said.

Sabine Hadad, a spokeswoman for the Israel Population Administration, said many Palestinians with American or European Union passports were abusing their 'tourist status'.

'If they have a work permit there would be no problem. They need to ask for the appropriate permit from the Israeli army, which controls entry to the Palestinian territories,' she said.

Hadad said the policy was tightened after requests from, among others, the army. A 'last entry' only applied to tourist visas, not other documents such as work permits, she said.

Requests denied

Palestinians say such permits are hard to obtain.

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem said Israel had frozen 120,000 Palestinian family reunification requests since a Palestinian uprising erupted in 2000.

Israel tightened the tourist visa loophole after Hamas took over the government after winning elections, it added.

'Israel is banning people who can contribute to building a well-developed society,' said B'Tselem spokeswoman Sarit Michaeli.

Israel has cut ties to the Palestinian government over Hamas's refusal to recognise the Jewish state.

Joyce Ajlouny, director of the Friends School in Ramallah, which is owned by the US Quakers, said she feared for six American teachers, some of Palestinian origin, who have to renew their tourist visas shortly.

Parents might have to step in and teach, she said.

'We feel the likelihood of them being denied entry is quite high and we could be left in limbo, not knowing what to do with educating these kids,' said Ajlouny.

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