

Israeli policy divides Palestinian families Immigration crackdown in West Bank

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By Matthew Kalman, Globe Correspondent | September 23, 2006

EL-BIREH, West Bank -- Nariman Yazbak and her 2-year-old daughter, Salma, left their home in the West Bank town of El Bireh last April for a routine visit to relatives in Jordan.

Six months later, she is still trying to return. Yazbak's husband, Rami, a human resources specialist at Bir Zeit University near Ramallah, has petitioned the Palestinian Authority, the Israeli government, the Israeli Army, and even written to Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni for help. He has filled out all the forms and presented all the necessary documentation, but no one will process the paperwork.

The Yazbaks are among the thousands of Palestinians caught in what human rights activists call a bureaucratic nightmare that has divided families, prevented visitors of Palestinian origin from visiting relatives in the West Bank, and is inducing many long-term West Bank residents to leave their homes.

Israel, which controls all the international borders leading to the West Bank, says it is not trying to break up Palestinian families. It says it is merely implementing existing immigration law and preventing foreign nationals from living in the country illegally.

But Palestinians, many of whom were born abroad and do not have Palestinian identity cards, say the Israelis suddenly clamped down after the January election of the Hamas government, when Israel broke off all ministry-level contacts with the Palestinian Authority after years of allowing them to live in the West Bank on three-month tourist visas.

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem says in a report issued in July that the result of the policy is "the forced break-up of the family unit."

The report, "Perpetual Limbo: Israel's freeze on unification of Palestinian families in the occupied territories," suggests that the Israeli crackdown is part of a broader policy to limit the growth of the Palestinian population "by preventing the entry of spouses and children of residents, and by stimulating emigration from the area."

The Yazbaks say the result is that they will probably be forced to move abroad.

Rami Yazbak is a Palestinian, born in the West Bank, who returned in early 2000 with his Spanish-born Palestinian wife, Nariman, to their ancestral homeland.

"It was a dream to live in Palestine and to have my family, wife, and kid here," he said.

No one knows how immigrants like Nariman Yazbak can be granted Palestinian permanent residence, which under the Oslo peace accords requires the agreement of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Since the second intifadah erupted in 2000, there have been no contacts between the relevant ministries. So, like thousands of others in a similar position, for the past six years she has been leaving the country every three months and returning with a new three-month tourist visa issued at the border by the Israelis.

Until now.

In April, as Nariman and Salma returned as usual via the Israeli-controlled Allenby Bridge linking Jordan to the West Bank, they were stopped by immigration officials and turned back. Their passports were stamped "Entry Denied." Rami Yazbak has contacted every Israeli and Palestinian official he can find, but so far without success.

"I need my family," he said. "I'm giving it one last chance. We might appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court, but I'm afraid they will reject it. Otherwise we will have to go to Spain and start again from zero."

For Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship, the troubles began at the start of the second intifadah in 2000, when Israel stopped allowing Jordanian-Palestinians to re enter the West Bank if they were effectively residing there.

Wahel Hushia, 35, from the West Bank village of Katana, married a Palestinian woman from Jordan in 1999. In 2001, his wife went to visit her parents in Jordan with their baby daughter, and the Israelis never allowed them back. Hushia

visits them every few months, whenever he can afford the fare, and their West Bank-born daughter, now 6, comes to stay with his family for a few weeks per year.

“We cannot have any more children, because if they are born in Jordan, the Israelis will never let them in,” Hushia said. “I last saw them four months ago.”

The Palestinian Ministry for Civil Affairs reports that it has received more than 120,000 requests for family reunification since September 2000, which the Israelis refuse to process. In a few cases, after intervention by B'Tselem and other human rights groups, Israel has granted a few individual requests on a piecemeal basis, as “exceptional cases.”

East Jerusalem lawyers Ibrahim Khoury and Ehab Abu Gosh said there are dozens of similar cases before the Israeli courts.

Khoury cited the case of one family in Beit Hanina, an area of Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem, whose members left for the United States in 1967 but maintain extensive property holdings and visit each year to see relatives. He said the father of the family, a US citizen, was recently detained on arrival at Ben-Gurion airport and held in the cells there for three weeks before an Israeli judge ordered him released pending a final decision on his status.

The US Consulate-General in Jerusalem, which handles relations with the Palestinian territories, said it was receiving several new complaints every week from Palestinian-Americans who were being denied entry after living in the West Bank for years.

Sam Bahour, a prominent West Bank businessman, has lived in El-Bireh since 1995. He applied to Israel for residency in the West Bank before the Palestinian Authority even existed but never received a reply. For the past 11 years, he said, he has traveled to and from the West Bank via the Israeli-controlled borders with Jordan on a three-month tourist visa. But the last time he went to the Israeli authorities they refused to extend it for more than one month.

He was given until Oct. 1 to leave the West Bank, and the Israeli soldier who stuck the visa in his passport scribbled “final permit” across it in English, Arabic, and Hebrew.

“I hope to find the decision-makers within the Israeli system and resolve the issue,” said Bahour. “If not, I will be separated from my family. My work has already been affected. I have been unable to take on any new projects in the past 45 days.”

“I won't violate the visa and stay here illegally,” he said. “I won't give the Israelis that gift.”

Sabine Hadad, spokeswoman for the Israeli Interior Ministry, denied there was any policy change.

“There has been a clarification of the instructions,” Hadad said. “. . . When a foreigner, from the USA or any other country, comes to the border and they know they are coming to visit the territories, they need a visitors' permit for the territories, from the army.” ■