

Palestinian-Americans Say Israel Denies Them Visas

By Jim Teeple

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A Palestinian and his wife, an American of Palestinian origin, argue with Israeli soldiers shortly after their wedding ceremony, as part of a protest against Israeli barrier near Ramallah, July 2006

Some of the leading members of the business community in the Palestinian territories are citizens of other countries. Now, they say, Israel is denying them visas to live and work near their businesses and families. Israel's government denies targeting the business leaders, but many of those affected say they will have to leave their homes and businesses in the next few weeks because their visas have not been renewed.

Music echoes through the empty corridors of the Plaza Mall in the West Bank city of Ramallah. These days, few Palestinians have money to spend at the upscale mall.

Palestinians are in the middle of an unprecedented economic crisis, following the Hamas victory in Palestinian elections in January.

Because Hamas refuses to recognize Israel, international donors have cut off aid, and Israel has stopped turning over customs and tax revenue it collects on behalf of the Palestinian government.

Now things could get worse. A number of Palestinian business leaders - many of them U.S. citizens - say they will have to leave their homes in Ramallah, and take their money with them. They say Israel is refusing to renew their tourist visas, which they need to enter the West Bank.

Sam Bahour, a U.S. citizen, originally from Toledo, Ohio, built the Plaza Mall 10 years ago. He says he will have to leave his home and family by October 1, because Israeli officials say his visa will not be renewed.



Sam Bahour

"It is devastating. The devastation does not start with the stamp of denied entry at the border. The devastation starts now," he said. "From a family level, I have six-year-old and 12-year-old daughters. Both of them are aware that Dad might not be around shortly. So, the family environment becomes complicated. That takes a toll, especially on my 12-year-old. On the business front, it has also had negative ramifications, because I am not able to engage in long-term projects, because I know there is a possibility I may not be here."

There are many Palestinian business people like Sam Bahour, who hold U.S. or other foreign passports, but who live and work in the Palestinian territories on three-month tourist visas granted by Israel's Ministry of the Interior.

About six months ago, several noticed their visas were either not being renewed, or they were being given shortened visas, in some cases valid for only a two-week stay. Now, many like Bahour have had the last permit stamped in their passports.

U.S. Consulate officials in Jerusalem say about 50 U.S. citizens have notified the Consulate they have been prevented from entering the West Bank over the past few months. Among those either denied entry, or being given shortened visas, are the heads of the local Coca-Cola and consumer products company Proctor and Gamble operations in the Palestinian territories.

Bahour says he and his colleagues believe they are being directly targeted by Israel as part of a broader policy of retaliation against Palestinians since Hamas took control of the government. The group is considered a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States and the European Union.

But Bahour says Israel is sending the wrong message by forcing some of the leading business people in the Palestinian territories to leave.

"We thought, up until now, that the Israelis wanted us to succeed by creating an alternative society here," he said. "But, their policy indicates they would rather be left with a society of 10-year-old Palestinians, who jump on the back of tanks, when they are 10."

Israeli Interior Ministry spokeswoman Sabina Haddad says tourist visas are only good for visiting Israel, not for living and working in the Palestinian territories.

"They are working here, lots of them. We asked them, if they are working here, and not in Israel, but in the Palestinian Authority, we asked them to get a work permit," she said. "It does not matter, if you are from Russia or America. If you want to come to work in Israel, you need a work permit. So, if you are coming to work inside the territories, you need a work permit, too."

Palestinians say such permits are virtually impossible to get, because they are issued by the Israeli Defense Forces. A force spokesman contacted by VOA, who asked not to be identified, said such permits are only necessary for areas classified as closed military zones - not for an area like Ramallah.

Naser Abdelkarim is a professor of finance at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah. He warns that, if leading Palestinian business people are forced to leave and take their capital with them, the Palestinian private sector could be crippled.

"Two-thirds of the Palestinian labor force is employed in the private sector. Now, with this restriction, I am afraid that private investment will not flow at the level we hoped for," he said. "That will stop the Palestinian economy from any growth in the future."

Those affected by the change in their visa status are some of the best and brightest in the Palestinian territories. In recent weeks, they and their supporters in Israel have launched a vigorous campaign to change what they say is a deliberate Israeli policy to deny them the right to live in the Palestinian territories.

Israeli officials say they are sympathetic to the plight of individuals, but the issue will have to be resolved in the broader context of relations with the Palestinian Authority. They say that will not happen until Hamas, which controls the authority, agrees to meet Israeli and international demands to recognize the Jewish state, renounce violence and recognize previous agreements between Israel and the Palestinians.

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