

The Arab Education Forum and the Istikshaf Coalition

Mobility and Freedom of Movement Conference

March 15-17, 2014

Amman – Jordan

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Access and Movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

By

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Introduction:

The concept of ‘mobility’ immediately evokes the lack of it for Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation. Restrictions on the freedom of access and movement in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt, as designated by the UN, ie Gaza and the West Bank including Jerusalem), take so many forms and ways.

This paper will expose these practices and their impact on learning, teaching, cultural exchanges, and the wish to travel and interact with family and people within and outside the oPt. It will also tell what Palestinians and their friends are doing about these restrictions, through the Right to Enter Campaign and other Palestinian organizations and initiatives.

The Right to Enter (RTE) is a grassroots campaign defending the rights of access, movement and residency in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory, as well as other human rights issues, including family unification, stateless Palestinians, right to education, stranded Gazans, and so on.

The Issues:

The Israeli military, border police, ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, and the security services in Israel impose severe restrictions on access and movement into and within the oPt on many categories of people: foreign passport holders, whether of Palestinian origin or not, being family members, university professors and educators, visiting intellectuals and performing artists, students and researchers. Many visiting Arab artists and experts, among others, have been denied entry without explanation.

At the borders, if they are allowed into the oPt, visitors could be questioned for long hours at entry points, the airport or the Allenby crossing from Jordan, given varying

periods of stay, limited extensions, stamps on their passports limiting their movement to specified areas, or not allowed to work. Foreign passports were stamped with “PA Only”, meaning Palestinian Authority areas and not allowed into Jerusalem or the rest of geographic Palestine, and then this stamp was replaced with a “Judea and Samaria” stamp. “Judea and Samaria” is a vague and non-defined entity internationally or even locally (in ‘Biblical’ mythology, it included Jerusalem.)

As for Gaza, the situation is even more serious with a whole population being practically under siege in the ‘largest open prison in the world’. Their contacts and interaction with the Arab world and the world at large is mostly confined to the Internet, whenever electrical power is available. The movement of people and goods is severely restricted at the two border crossings, through Israel and Egypt, and the sea is confined to 3 kilometers from the coast. That does not meet the minimum human rights norms. There are also thousands of Gazans stranded in the West Bank, who studied or work or founded families there, living under threat of deportation because they don’t have Israeli approved location residency papers.

Israeli procedures are arbitrary, unclear and non transparent, varying from one case to the other. Israeli officials force visitors to wait for long times, at land borders or Tel Aviv airport, before deciding whether to let them in or not. In case of denial, no reasons are given, and no procedure for complaints or questioning exists. At the Tel Aviv airport, persons denied entry would be interned in a detention prison for a day or more, then sent back on a flight to where they came from. If admitted, the visitor could face a labyrinth of bureaucratic measures to apply for a “work visa” inside Palestinian territory or extend the stay, as needed.

Family Unification: With its policies, the Israeli military occupation has also torn asunder countless Palestinian families by preventing family members from visiting their relatives and homeland, or refusing them family unification, although it was one of the agreed upon points in the accords between the Israeli government and the PLO. At the time of writing, more than 60,000 Palestinians are applicants awaiting family unification registered on the system of the Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs. The Israeli Authorities have absolute control over the Palestinian population register, including the registration of births, deaths, marriage, divorce and so on, and they are the sole authority in issuing ‘Palestinian IDs’, which are in fact extended residency permits and not nationality documents or citizenship.

Such measures and procedures imposed by the Israeli Occupation Authorities, in control of the entire occupied Palestinian population, run contrary to International Law, International Humanitarian Law, the 4th Geneva Conventions governing occupation, not to mention decent treatment. The ever ready excuse given by Israeli Authorities in reply to any query or criticism is always the magic word ‘Bitachon’, or security.

Right to Education: Of particular note is the treatment by the Israeli Occupation Army of faculty, staff and students of Palestinian educational institutions, and notably of institutions of higher education. Students are not free to choose where to study, given

acceptable criteria, because of restrictions on movement. Gaza students are no longer allowed to study in West Bank universities and vice versa. Lecturers with foreign passports are particularly singled out with restrictions on entry, extension of stay, having their families with them, leaving temporarily to attend conferences or other activities abroad and returning. Institutions of higher education find it hard to recruit academics with foreign passports because of such policies, and this does not allow for planning and commitment to their programs and courses, and denies them the benefit of essential outside academic expertise and interaction.

Arab nationals wishing to visit the Palestinian territory find it very difficult to obtain visas and permits. The Palestinian Authority was supposed to be able to issue permits, with Israeli approval of course, to visitors from Arab countries even to PA areas only. However, there is an additional issue facing Arabs who wish to visit Palestine. It is the issue of 'boycott' and 'normalization'.

Arab visitors and BDS:

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and its twin movement the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), subscribed to by a large number of Palestinian civil society organizations, calls for the boycott of Israeli institutions which do not oppose the Israeli occupation, ethnic cleansing and apartheid. A discussion is ongoing among Palestinians about how it should be applied by Arab governments, and how Arab academics and others wishing to visit occupied Palestine should go about it. The PLO and Palestinian Authority calls on Arabs to visit the occupied Palestinian territory, including Jerusalem, as that would help steadfastness of the Palestinians in facing the Zionist onslaught. BDS insists that Arab visitors should not try to get a visa through Israeli embassies, but through a permit initiated by the PA to visit the PA areas only, though it is still approved and controlled by the Israeli occupation authority.

What are we doing about it?

The Right to Enter Campaign is one grassroots movement, among other active civil society organizations in the oPt, that has taken up defending the right of people to visit the oPt, link up with families, and help foreign passport holders come to engage in local education, business and the arts. RTE works on many levels in addressing these issues.

The RTE Campaign documents cases of denial of entry and other abuses against foreign passport holders and Palestinians; it produces reports and position papers on various topical issues; it contacts diplomatic missions to bring to them cases of denial of their own nationals; it writes to foreign governments to put them before their responsibilities as 'third states' that have to uphold international law and human rights; it promotes and commissions research into these issues; it advocates in the media and holds public meetings to explain and challenge Israeli practices and measures; it meets with Palestinian officials to get information and prepare talking points for politicians.

Many human rights organizations, whether Palestinian, Arab, regional, or international, are working in networks and along particular issues to struggle for the rights of Palestinians and others to access and move across borders and within the oPt, promote the rights to family unification, and for the right to education, and development.

Although these issues are part of the larger problem of foreign occupation and oppression of an occupied population, it needs also to be addressed by Arab civil society in the region. There are direct and indirect ways and actions to support the quest for free movement for Palestinians in and out of the oPt. Such actions include: promoting visits by Arab intellectuals, artists, educators, students and others to the oPt, invitation of Palestinians to cultural and educational activities in the Arab countries, facilitating travel by Palestinians, especially from Gaza, to the Arab world and beyond.

You can also help spread the word and support the work being done, through subscription to the mailing lists, social media, and donation.

For more information, contact:

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