

Complicated and stifling

Israel's restrictions are making life increasingly untenable for non-Palestinian academics, says Raja Shehadeh

When I went recently to bid farewell to my friends of 35 years, Roger Heacock and Laura Wick, it felt like the end of an era.

Both are American citizens who have spent the bulk of their careers teaching at Birzeit University near Ramallah in the Palestinian territories. My farewell gift to them was a memorial stone picked from the hills and painted on by my Scottish artist friend, Peter White. The idea was that one day they will come back and return the stone to where it came from.

Roger is a distinguished professor of European history and one of the founders of Birzeit's Institute of International Studies. He is among the 32 out of the total of 64 foreign faculty and staff members employed by Palestinian universities who have been affected by Israeli denial or restriction of their permission to work in the occupied territories over the past two academic years, according to a Palestinian Education Ministry survey.

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Throughout the 1980s, Israel used its power over Palestinian universities to close them for extended periods. It has been unable to do this since the transfer of control over education to the Palestinian Authority under the 1995 Oslo Accords, but it continues to practise control through the authority it retains to issue work permits and visas – not only to academics but also to schoolteachers from overseas.

This creates uncertainty over whether foreign nationals will be able to complete the academic year, disrupting the scholarly and other activities they are responsible for.

The negative impact this has in areas such as curriculum design, assessment and teaching methods is stifling the growth of Palestinian universities and schools and preventing them from preparing the population for much-hoped-for developments in agriculture, high tech, medicine and other fields of advanced knowledge.

It is difficult for those not confronted with the Israeli work permit system to understand how it works. The

application is first presented to the Palestinian Authority. But even if this is approved, it is of no significance because the real work permit is supposed to be issued by the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), part of the Civil Administration that was established in 1981 during the full Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Yet even that permit, if it is granted, is not enough unless the Israeli Interior Ministry subsequently issues a visa. That visa is typically valid only for travel in Judea and Samaria, the Israeli name for the West Bank. The numerous checkpoints separating Israel from the West Bank therefore ensure that visa holders are unable to pass into Israel. Despite this, when they refuse visa extensions, the Israeli authorities do so on the grounds not that the faculty member in question constitutes a security threat or has violated any law but that they cannot grant visas that allow foreigners to reside in Israel for more than a total of five years.

Palestinian students have few options to study abroad, so if they are to acquire a quality education with an international outlook it is vital that local universities be able to tap into international expertise. Yet residency cards have been denied even to some Palestinian-born faculty who have sought to pass on to local students the invaluable knowledge and skills they derived from an education in the US or Europe.

The whole anxious and time-consuming process of renewing visas is replete with a sort of perverse legalism that the Israeli sociologist Yael Berda has called “governing through emergency”. Those caught up in it have to endure a suspension of their plans for the future as the two Israeli authorities keep them dangling with promises and unexplained delays in what amounts to a truly Kafkaesque process.

When I went to say goodbye to him and Laura, Roger told me: “It is degrading to continue with this uncertainty. After enduring it for so long, we’re just too tired to keep on going.”

Unless Israel's restrictions are relaxed, it seems unlikely that the stone I gave them will ever be returned to the Palestinian hills.

Raja Shehadeh is a Palestinian lawyer, novelist and political activist. His latest book, *Where the Line is Drawn*, is published by Profile.