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## A `tourist' in the land he's trying to build

**U.S.-born Palestinian fights for resident status**

**Thousands face deportation under Israeli policy**

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RAMALLAH, West Bank—By just about any measure, Sam Bahour is the sort of person the Middle East needs more of nowadays.

A second-generation Palestinian exile born and raised in Youngtown, Ohio, Bahour has put together an impressive string of entrepreneurial achievements since returning to his ancestral hometown of al-Birah during the hope-filled days of the Oslo peace process.

He was instrumental in the 1997 launch of Paltel, the first private communications company in the Arab world. And even as the Paltel deal was coming together, he went so far as to enter the MBA program at Tel Aviv University, with the express purpose of getting to know "Israelis who do not wear uniforms."

Everyone was devastated when the peace train crashed and burned at Camp David six years ago, giving rise to a new *intifada*. But Bahour pushed on, somehow managing to do the near impossible — planning, building and opening the Plaza Shopping Centre in Ramallah during the height of an Israeli military siege. At a time when Palestinian youths were tempted by violence, Bahour instead did his all to tempt them with jobs.

All of which makes the 40-something Bahour's latest project sadder still. Bahour is leading a campaign to save himself and an estimated 12,000 other foreign-born Palestinians from a new Israeli policy designed to sweep them out of the territories.

In Bahour's case, the problem dates back to 1995, when he first moved to the West Bank to begin a career in country-building. For his Palestinian-born wife and their then-infant child, permission for residency was no problem.

"But for me, it was a different story. I applied to the Israeli authorities who control residency issues in the territories more than 10 years ago and I never received an answer," Bahour told the *Toronto Star* in an interview this week.

"So like thousands of other foreign-passport-holding Palestinians, the only way I could remain here legally was to leave every three months and come back a day or two later, getting a new three-month tourist visa."

Since the surprise election of the hardline Hamas movement this year, Israeli policy on comings and goings in the territories has hardened, effectively closing the loophole for people like Bahour. The last tourist visa he was issued includes the handwritten addendum "final permit" — which means in two weeks he becomes *persona non grata* in a country he regards as his own.

"Either I resolve this before Oct. 1 or I am faced with a terrible decision — do I leave my family and go back to America, or do I violate the visa and become illegal under Israel rules?" said Bahour.

Bahour has two daughters now, Irene, 12, and Nadine, 6, both of whom are entitled to remain in Ramallah with their mother. "After six years of violence, the family unit is just about the last institution that Palestinians can still count on. But for many of us, this policy is tearing even that apart," said Bahour. "Do I contribute to the emptying of Palestine by voluntarily removing my family to the States or do we separate in the hope of finding the answer?"

Bahour takes comfort in the fact that a range of Israeli human-rights activists and friends have joined his Campaign for the Right of Entry/Re-Entry to the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

"The campaign has really shown the Israeli sense of humanity. One Israeli mother is offering to adopt me, another Israeli has offered to marry me. And a Jewish man in the States has offered to start a legal battle to transfer to me his right of return (which under Israeli law extends the privilege of immediate citizenship to Jews everywhere)," he said.

Bahour argues the issue is not merely a matter of human rights, but sheer common sense. The thousands of foreign-passport holders at risk of deportation, he said, tend also to be among the best-educated Palestinians. They come with the skills, capital and pluralistic sensibilities upon which a secure and stable future Palestine can be built.

"Ask yourself, who in their right mind wants to invest in Palestine? We are the last ones who are willing to go through this nightmare to try to build a proper country. If you want pluralism and modernization in Palestine, the foreign-passport holders are the bridge," he said. "But if Israel and the international community want a Somalia next door, this is the way to do it."

Several Israeli officials contacted by the *Star* offered contradictory explanations for the visa policy, alternately naming the interior ministry and the defence ministry as the source of the change. But all agreed the difference

today is not a change of Israeli rules, but rather a matter of enforcing rules that had long been in place but not enacted.

"The bottom line is that there is a huge number of people in the territories — our calculations show the number to be as high as 50,000 — that have no legal status. Many are on tourist visas, but how can someone be a tourist for 10 years?" asked Shlomo Dror, spokesman for the Co-ordinator of Activities in the Territories, a branch of the Israeli defence ministry. "They are in violation of the rules. ... So we started to act according to the law."

One Israeli government source said the timing of the crackdown, coinciding with a raft of sanctions on the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Authority, is "no accident."

Dror, however, said Israel's objections date to 1996, when negotiations on family reunification began in earnest with the new Palestinian government, then in its infancy under Yasser Arafat.

"According to the interim agreements of Oslo, the Palestinian Authority agreed to a quota of about 3,000 people a year who were allowed to come to the territories and receive proper residency rights," Dror said.

But instead of "legitimizing" the thousands of people who were arriving and living on tourist visas, Dror said Palestinian officials preferred to fill the quota with lists of people who were actually living abroad.

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