

# US Turns Blind Eye to Israel's New Separation Policy

Israel welcomes American Jewish "settlers", bars Palestinian-Americans

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Jerusalem — In an echo of restrictions already firmly in place in Gaza, Israel has begun barring movement between Israel and the West Bank for those holding a foreign passport, including humanitarian aid workers and thousands of Palestinian residents.

The new policy is designed to force foreign citizens, mainly from North America and Europe, to choose between visiting Israel — including East Jerusalem, which Israel has annexed illegally — and the West Bank.

The new regulation is in breach of Israel's commitments under the Oslo accords to western governments that their citizens would be given continued access to the occupied territories. Israel has not suggested there are any security justifications for the new restriction.

Palestinian activists point out that the rule is being enforced selectively by Israel, which is barring foreign citizens of Palestinian origin from access to Israel and East Jerusalem while actively encouraging European and American Jews to settle in the West Bank.

US diplomats, who are aware of the policy, have raised no objections.

Additionally, human rights groups complain that the rule change will further separate East Jerusalem, the planned capital of a Palestinian state, from the West Bank. It is also expected to increase the pressures on families where one member holds a foreign passport to leave the region and to disrupt the assistance aid organisations are able to give Palestinians.

According to observers, the regulation was introduced quietly three months ago at the Allenby Bridge terminal on the border with Jordan, the only international crossing point for Palestinians in the West Bank. Israeli officials, who control the border, now issue foreign visitors with a visa for the "Palestinian Authority only", preventing them from entering Israel and East Jerusalem.

Interior ministry officials say a similar policy is being adopted at Ben Gurion, Israel's international airport near Tel Aviv, to bar holders of foreign passports who arrive via this route from reaching the West Bank. Foreign citizens, especially those with Palestinian ancestry, are being turned away and told to seek entry via the Allenby Bridge.

Gaza has long been off-limits to any Palestinian who is not resident there and has been effectively closed to Israelis and most foreigners since early 2006, when Israel began its blockade.

"This is a deepening and refinement of the policy of separation that began with Israel

establishing checkpoints in the West Bank and building the wall,” said Sam Bahour, a Palestinian-American living in Ramallah who heads a Right to Enter campaign highlighting Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement.

“Foreign governments like the US ought to be up in arms because this rule violates their own citizens’ rights under diplomatic agreements. So far they have remained silent.”

The US consulate in Jerusalem is aware of the increasing restrictions on foreign passport-holders, according to its website, but claims to be powerless to help.

The Right to Enter campaign notes that 60 per cent of all people turned back at the borders by Israeli officials are American citizens.

The consulate website notes both the denial of entry for many Palestinian-Americans at Ben Gurion airport, forcing them instead to use the Allenby Bridge crossing into the West Bank, and the issuing at the crossing of the “Palestinian Authority only” stamp, which excludes them from East Jerusalem and Israel.

“The Consulate can do nothing to assist in getting this visa status changed; only Israeli liaison offices in the West Bank can assist — but they rarely will,” points out the website. “Travelers should be alert, and pay attention to which stamp they receive upon entry.”

Mr Bahour, 44, said the immediate victims of the new policy would be thousands of Palestinians from abroad who, like himself, returned to the West Bank during the more optimistic Oslo period.

Well-educated and often with established careers, they have been vital both to the regeneration of the local Palestinian economy by investing in and setting up businesses and to the nurturing of a fledgling civil society by running welfare organisations and teaching at universities.

Although many have married local spouses and raised their children in the West Bank, Israel has usually denied them residency permits, forcing them to renew tourist visas every three months by temporarily leaving the region, often for years on end.

Mr Bahour said the latest rule change should be understood as one measure in a web of restrictions strangling normal Palestinian life that have been imposed by Israel, which controls the population registers for both Israelis and Palestinians.

In addition to the wall and checkpoints, he said, Israel regularly deported “foreigners”, both humanitarian workers and those of Palestinian origin, arriving in the region; it denied family unification to prevent Palestinian couples living together; it often revoked the residency of Palestinians who study abroad for extended periods; and it confiscated Jerusalem IDs from Palestinians to push them into the West Bank.

He added that the US consulate appeared to have accepted Israel’s right to treat American citizens differently based solely on their ethnic origin.

“While Palestinian-Americans are being denied entry to the region or excluded from Israel and East Jerusalem, Israel is actively encouraging American Jews to come and settle in the West Bank.”

In early 2006 Mr Bahour, who is married with two daughters, was affected by another rule change when Israel refused to renew tourist visas to Palestinians with foreign passports, forcing them to separate from their families in the West Bank.

After an international outcry, Israel revoked the policy but insisted that Palestinians such as Mr Bahour apply for permits from the Israeli military authorities to remain in the West Bank.

“This latest rule, like the earlier one, fits into Israel’s general goal of ethnic cleansing,” he said. “Israel makes life ever more difficult to encourage any Palestinians who can, such as those with foreign passports, to leave.”

Mr Bahour said the new restrictions would further sever the West Bank from Jerusalem, the centre of Palestinian commercial and cultural life.

Overnight, he said, his Ramallah business consultancy had lost a quarter of its clients — all from nearby East Jerusalem — because he was now barred from leaving the West Bank.

He lost his limited privileges last month when he finally received a Palestinian ID. He said he had been forced to take the ID, which supersedes his American passport in the eyes of the Israeli authorities, to avoid the danger of being deported.

“The ID was bittersweet for me. It means I can’t be separated from my family here, but it also means my American passport is not recognised and I am now subject to the closures and arrests faced by ordinary Palestinians.”

Sari Bashi, a lawyer with Gisha, an Israeli organisation that challenges restrictions on Palestinian movement, said the new policy was placing a severe obstacle in the way of humanitarian organisations, as well as foreigners working in Palestinian welfare organisations and academic institutions.

“Many of the aid organisations working in the West Bank have offices and staff in East Jerusalem and even in Israel, and it’s difficult to see how they are going to cope with this new restriction.”

She said staff of major international organisations such as the United Nations refugee agency, UNRWA, and its humanitarian division, OCHA, had been denied entry at Ben Gurion airport after declaring that they were working in the West Bank.

“When Israel prevents access to an area, it raises the question of what is happening there,” she said. “What are we being prevented from seeing?”

Human rights groups are also concerned by the wording of the new restriction, confining foreign citizens to the “Palestinian Authority”. The PA rules over only about 40 per cent of the West Bank. The groups fear that in the future Israel may seek to prevent foreigners from moving between the PA-controlled enclaves of the West Bank and the 60 per cent under Israel control.

Guy Imbar, a spokesman for Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, said the phrase referred to the entire West Bank.

But Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions warned: “Given Israel’s track record, it is right to be suspicious that the restriction may be reinterpreted at a later

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