

# Israel Blocking NGO efforts with tourist visas

by Amira Hass

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The Interior Ministry has stopped granting work permits to foreign nationals working in most international nongovernmental organizations operating in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, Haaretz has learned.

In an apparent overhaul of regulations that have been in place since 1967, the ministry is now granting the NGO employees tourist visas only, which bar them from working.

Organizations affected by the apparent policy change include Oxfam, Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders, Terre des Hommes, Handicap International and the Religious Society of Friends (a Quaker organization).

Until recently, the workers would register with the international relations department at the Social Affairs Ministry, which would recommend the Interior Ministry to issue them B1 work permits. Although the foreign nationals are still required to approach the Social Affairs Ministry to receive recommendations to obtain a tourist visa, the Interior Ministry is aiming to make the Ministry of Defense responsible for those international NGOs and also requiring them to register with the coordinator of government activities in the territories (COGAT), which is subordinate to the Ministry of Defense.

Foreign nationals working for NGOs had understood they would receive a stamp or handwritten note alongside their tourist visa, permitting them to work "in the Palestinian Authority." Israel is refusing work visas to most foreign nationals who state that they wish to work within the Palestinian territories, such as foreign lecturers for Palestinian universities and businessmen.

Israel does not recognize Palestinian Authority rule in East Jerusalem or in Area C, which comprises some 60 percent of the West Bank. The NGO workers say they've come to believe that the new policy is intended to force them to close their Jerusalem offices and relocate to West Bank cities. This move would prevent them from working among the Palestinian population of East Jerusalem, defined by the international community as occupied territory.

The organizations fear the new policy will impede their ability to work in Area C, whether because Israel doesn't see it as part of the Palestinian Authority or because they will eventually be subjected to the restrictions of movement imposed on the Palestinians. Such restrictions include the prohibition to enter East Jerusalem and Gaza via Israel, except with specific and rarely obtained permits; and prohibition to enter areas west of the separation fence, except for village residents who hold special residency permits and Israeli citizens.

One NGO worker told Haaretz that the policy was reminiscent of the travel constraints imposed by Burmese authorities on humanitarian organizations, albeit presented in a subtler manner.

NGO workers told Haaretz that they had been informed by the COGAT official that a policy change was forthcoming, as early as July 2009. When a number of them approached the Interior Ministry in August to renew their visas, they found that their applications had been submitted to a "special committee." They were not told who constituted this committee, and had to make do with a "receipt" confirming that they had submitted the request. The workers said the tourist visas they received differed from each other in duration and travel limitations, and surmised from this that the policy has not been entirely fleshed out.

### **Latest in a series of steps**

A number of NGO workers who spoke with Haaretz voiced deep apprehensions about having to submit to the authority of the Defense Ministry. The groups are committed to the Red Cross code of ethics, and therefore see being subjugated to the ministry directly in charge of the occupation as problematic and contradictory to the very essence of their work.

Between 140 and 150 NGOs operate among the Palestinian population. Haaretz could not obtain the exact number of foreign nationals they employ.

The new limitations do not apply to the 12 organizations that have been active in the West Bank prior to 1967. Those groups, which include the Red Cross and several Christian organizations, were registered with the Jordanian authorities.

The new move by the Interior Ministry is the latest in a series of steps taken in the last few years to constrain the movement of foreign nationals in the West Bank and Gaza, including Palestinians with family and property in the occupied territories. Most of those who have been effected are nationals of countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations, especially Western states. Israel does not apply any similar constraints on citizens of the same countries traveling within Israel and West Bank settlements.

The Interior Ministry said in a statement that the only relevant authority empowered to approve the stay of foreign citizens in the Palestinian Authority is the coordinator of government activities in the territories. "The Interior Ministry is entrusted with granting visas and work permits within the State of Israel. Those staying within both the boundaries of Israel and the Palestinian Authority are required to secure their permits accordingly," the ministry said.

"Recently, a question was raised on the issue of visas granted to those staying in the Palestinian Authority and in Israel, as it transpired that they spend most of their time in the PA despite having been provided with Israeli work permits," the statement continued.

"The matter is under intense discussions, with the active participation of the relevant military authorities, with a view to finding the right and appropriate solution as soon as possible."

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