



Campaign for the Right to Enter the oPt

A Grassroots Campaign for the Protection of Foreign Passport Holders Residing in or Visiting the oPt

Holy Land Travel Advisory

Tourists forced to choose: Bethlehem or Nazareth? Jericho or the Sea of Galilee?

28 August 2009 - Israeli authorities are enacting new measures which restrict the ability of visitors to reach holy sites. The new measures mean that the sites of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection may now require separate entry permits.

Israeli border officials have begun using a new entry permit stamp with the words "Palestinian Authority only." In addition, some foreign nationals have been issued "Israel only" permits or have been required to sign a statement which commits them not to enter the Palestinian Authority (PA) controlled areas of the West Bank under penalty of legal action, thus making Bethlehem and Jericho off limits. The US State Department advises that *"Travelers should be alert, and pay attention to which stamp they receive upon entry."*

Palestinian and Israeli tour operators are concerned that the new Israeli measures are likely to significantly reduce the number of tourists (some 3 million in 2008), considering the new risk of being denied access to prime holy sites.

With these new measures, pilgrims who tell Israeli passport control officials that they are heading to Bethlehem in order to reach the Church of the Nativity may receive the new permit, restricting movement to PA-controlled areas and consequently be barred from reaching Nazareth or other sites in Israel. Visitors receiving "Israel Only" permits or signing the statement that they will not enter PA-controlled areas will find Nazareth accessible but Bethlehem and Jericho off limits. Until now, Israeli officials appear to disagree on whether East Jerusalem, including the Old City, is accessible with the "Palestinian Authority only" stamp.

The Israeli Ministry of Tourism, which has been critical of the new measures, issued a circular on 20 August asserting that: *"A tourist stating at the border that his entrance is to areas under the control of the 'Palestinian Authority only' will have his passport stamped with this stipulation. A tourist stating that he wishes to enter Israel and the Palestinian Authority will have his passport stamped as a regular tourist, which is a B2 Visa."*

The Ministry misleadingly claims that "there are no limitations on tourism travel and tourists receive the visa type according to what they state." However, the circular does not cancel the use of a visa restricting access to PA-controlled areas. Nor does it address the introduction of the "Israel only" visa and the statement which commits travelers not to enter PA areas, or risk facing legal action, "including deportation and refusal of entry into Israel for a period of up to ten years" - a robust deterrent for pilgrims who might otherwise have visited Bethlehem and Jericho.

In reality, these new restrictions on movement (no matter how they are packaged) are just one more step in a long line of unlawful measures pursued by Israel -- including construction of the 700 km (400 miles) wall, 600 checkpoints, home demolitions, the sealing off of Gaza and the withdrawal of Jerusalem residency rights from Palestinian Christians and Muslims -- in the process of transforming Palestinian cities into Bantustans.

The Campaign for the Right to Enter maintains that Israel's restrictions on entry comprise another example of its numerous policies and practices that aim to further entrench the unlawful fragmentation and annexation of parts of the oPt, are in violation of international law and undermine the prospects for peace and a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, as noted by the US State Department, the restrictions "unfairly impact Palestinian and Arab American travelers and are not acceptable." The Campaign urges tourists and tour operators to contact their diplomatic representatives and elected officials to protest Israeli movement and access restrictions and to demand that ALL citizens of their country be treated with fairness and dignity and without discrimination by Israeli border officials. The Campaign further urges all foreign nationals wishing to visit the oPt to insist on a 'regular' B2 tourist permit of three months duration when entering the country.