

Israel is Deporting Jerusalem Christians

Hundreds of Jerusalem Christians are losing residency rights in their City due to policies of the Israeli Ministry of Interior. The policy that aims to reduce the number of non-Jews in the City takes its toll on families and individuals who hold residency permits at foreign countries. No matter how long they travel abroad, no matter if they were born in Jerusalem before or after Israel occupied East Jerusalem, they are considered visitors in their own city.

Palestinian Christians who make today not more than 9,000 will lose 15% of their population as a result of this policy. While Jews from all over the world and even converts to Judaism are allowed to immigrate to Israel under the Israeli "Law of Return", the indigenous Jerusalemites are considered temporary residents. Originally, Seven years of being out of Jerusalem was the deadline for losing one's right to live in his own city. Now, only a proof of residency in another country is enough for Israel to consider Jerusalem as not "the center of life" for this person or family and thus deny them the right of living in their home town once they travel abroad.

In addition to this particular policy, the Israeli authorities are still implementing other regulations aiming at further decreasing the numbers of Palestinian, Christians and Moslems, in Jerusalem . From freezing the law of family reunion to impossible requirements for building in the city, to the Separation Wall that separated hundreds from the center of Jerusalem . Palestinian Christians of the city will soon lose half of their population.

The local Churches in Jerusalem are gravely concerned, and join the call of their communities to put an end to Israel's policies and refuse any kind of exclusivity over the City. At this stage Israel cannot be entrusted in the fate of this Holy City and its people. The International and Christian Communities need to act fast to defuse Israeli policies at the highest level.

We want peace and justice in the Holy Land , where followers of all faiths will live in dignity and their rights will be preserved. And we believe that the international community can help us make it happen.

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Jerusalem

My residency – no more

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Dear Friends and Family,

I am writing to share a little about what is happening in my life lately. As most of you know, I have been in Jerusalem since March 18 with Ramzi who at the time had barely turned 5 months. We left Habib and made the sacrifice to be apart for the coming 4 months for the sake of preserving my Jerusalem ID, to keep my residency status. I know this might sound strange, but as a Palestinian who has lived her whole life in Jerusalem, and despite the fact that my family has lived in Jerusalem and Palestine for centuries, according to the Israeli law, Palestinians living in Jerusalem are only residents but not necessarily permanent residents, and therefore are at risk all the time of losing their residency rights.

For the past 3 years, I have been married to Habib, a Palestinian by blood but and American by citizenship, because Habib's Jerusalem residency was revoked in 2004- although Habib was born in Jerusalem, and has lived there until his adult life. Anyways, now it was my turn to renew my entry visa to "Israel" (yes, I needed a visa in my own country)- I met with a lawyer who asked for a substantial amount to help me renew my entry visa, which would preserve my residency until the next time I have to renew (a maximum of 3 years), but this time the Israelis refused to renew it and instead told me that since I made the decision to marry an "American", who can't reside in Jerusalem, I have made a decision to seek residency in a foreign country and am therefore "choosing" to abandon my residency rights in Jerusalem. (Palestinians are not allowed to have dual residency or citizenship, a law that is not applicable to Israelis who are able to hold dual or multiple citizenships.) To make a long story short, I lost my residency rights in my own country!!!! I can only go back to visit as a tourist, and have to acquire a tourist visa from the Israeli embassy!! The ironic thing is that all my family still live there!! But I can never join them, I don't have a choice in the matter. We, the people of the land are being thrown out!!!

On my way back from the lawyer's office, I was stopped by Israeli soldiers who asked to see my papers- they spoke Russian- I thought to myself, these immigrants know nothing of this land they are serving and protecting- they don't even know the language- They come from Russia, Europe, Africa, the US, and other places and choose to reside in my country- and they can!!!!

Not only that but they can limit my movement in my country, and even kick me out of it! When I complained to my lawyer about this injustice he simply answered, "Mona, this is occupation!!!!"

Not at all the legal answer I was looking for - there is no human law that can protect me, or preserve my rights. Needless to say, I have lost my right to return; to my country.....to the only country I ever belonged to, the only place I ever called home. As an adult who has been living under occupation for the past 33 years, I was upset but I can't say that I was surprised by what happened to me. However, what surprised me was what is happening with my 7 month old, Ramzi. Ramzi was born in the US and therefore got an American passport. Although he is the son of two full blooded Palestinians who call Jerusalem and Palestine home, he was denied residency rights in Jerusalem and was given a tourist visa. I asked the lady at the airport when we first arrived if she could give Ramzi (then 5 months old) a 4 month Visa, rather than the traditional 3 month visa, I showed her my residency card (at the time I still was considered a resident), and showed her our return plane tickets. She said no, and said that I should apply for an extension for Ramzi at the ministry of interior. To avoid conflict and to make my life easier I asked the lawyer to apply for an extension for Ramzi..... to my surprise Ramzi was denied. The Israeli government

refused to grant a 7 month old baby an extension on his visa, not even with the help of our lawyer and all his connections!!! So, now I have to face the choice of leaving with Ramzi early and change our vacation plans, or stay with Ramzi here as planned until July 25th, and have my 7 month old be illegally overstaying his welcome in the land of his ancestors. The ironic thing is that this poor little baby can't even say mama or baba, yet he is posing a security threat to Israel that they denied him a one month extension on his visa!!

So now, my little family of three is added to the millions of Palestinians who lost their right to reside in their country and have been kicked out of their homes. We now are residents of Las Vegas, but I will always refer to Palestine as my home. Since the 1948 Diaspora of our people, the Palestinians in the world have been waiting for a just solution, that would give them the right to return to their homeland, and now 60 years later the list gets longer everyday with people just like the 3 of us who were driven out of our country. I will never give up the hope that one day I would have the choice to live in Palestine, and I will make sure that Ramzi also knows that he has a right to return!

Mona

Denied the Right to go Home

by Zeina Ashrawi Hutchison

(Hanan Ashrawi's daughter, telling her story)

21 June 2008

I am Palestinian - born and raised - and my Palestinian roots go back centuries. No one can change that even if they tell me that Jerusalem , my birth place, is not Palestine , even if they tell me that Palestine doesn't exist, even if they take away all my papers and deny me entry to my own home, even if they humiliate me and take away my rights.
I AM PALESTINIAN.

Name: Zeina Emile Sam'an Ashrawi; Date of Birth: July 30, 1981; Ethnicity: Arab. This is what was written on my Jerusalem ID card. An ID card to a Palestinian is much more than just a piece of paper; it is my only legal documented relationship to Palestine . Born in Jerusalem , I was given a Jerusalem ID card (the blue ID), an Israeli Travel Document and a Jordanian Passport stamped Palestinian (I have no legal rights in Jordan). I do not have an Israeli Passport, a Palestinian Passport or an American Passport.

Here is my story:

I came to the United States as a 17 year old to finish high school in

Pennsylvania and went on to college and graduate school and subsequently got married and we are currently living in Northern Virginia. I have gone home every year at least once to see my parents, my family and my friends and to renew my Travel Document as I was only able to extend its validity once a year from Washington DC . My father and I would stand in line at the Israeli Ministry of Interior in Jerusalem , along with many other Palestinians, from 4:30 in the morning to try our luck at making it through the revolving metal doors of the Ministry before noon – when the Ministry closed its doors - to try and renew the Travel Document. We did that year after year. As a people living under an occupation, being faced with constant humiliation by an occupier was the norm but we did what we had to do to insure our identity was not stolen from us.

In August of 2007 I went to the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC to try and extend my travel document and get the usual "Returning Resident" VISA that the Israelis issue to Palestinians holding an Israeli Travel Document. After watching a few Americans and others being told that their visas would be ready in a couple of weeks my turn came. I walked up to the bulletproof glass window shielding the lady working behind it and under a massive picture of the Dome of the Rock and the Walls of Jerusalem that hangs on the wall in the Israeli consulate, I handed her my papers through a little slot at the bottom of the window.

"Shalom" she said with a smile. "Hi" I responded, apprehensive and scared. As soon as she saw my Travel Document her demeanor immediately changed. The smile was no longer there and there was very little small talk between us, as usual. After sifting through the paperwork I gave her she said: "where is your American Passport?" I explained to her that I did not have one and that my only Travel Document is the one she has in her hands. She was quiet for a few seconds and then said: "you don't have an American Passport?" suspicious that I was hiding information from her. "No!" I said. She was quiet for a little longer and then said: "Well, I am not sure we'll be able to extend your Travel Document." I felt the blood rushing to my head as this is my only means to get home! I asked her what she meant by that and she went on to tell me that since I had been living in the US and because I had a Green Card they would not extend my Travel Document.

After taking a deep breath to try and control my temper I explained to her that a Green Card is not a Passport and I cannot use it to travel outside the US. My voice was shaky and I was getting more and more upset (and a mini shouting match ensued) so I asked her to explain to me what I needed to do. She told me to leave my paperwork and we would see what happens.

A couple of weeks later I received a phone call from the lady telling me that she was able to extend my Travel Document but I would no longer be getting the "Returning Resident" VISA. Instead, I was given a 3 month tourist VISA. Initially I was happy to hear that the Travel Document was extended but then I realized that she said "tourist VISA". Why am I getting a tourist VISA to go home? Not wanting to argue with her about the 3 month VISA at the time so as not to jeopardize the extension of my Travel Document, I simply put that bit of information on the back burner and went

on to explain to her that I wasn't going home in the next 3 months. She instructed me to come back and apply for another VISA when I did intend on going. She didn't add much and just told me that it was ready for pick-up. So I went to the Embassy and got my Travel Document and the tourist VISA that was stamped in it.

My husband, my son and I were planning on going home to Palestine this summer. So a month before we were set to leave (July 8, 2008) I went to the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC, papers in hand, to ask for a VISA to go home. I, again, stood in line and watched others get VISAs to go to my home. When my turn came I walked up to the window; "Shalom" she said with a smile on her face, "Hi" I replied. I slipped the paperwork in the little slot under the bulletproof glass and waited for the usual reaction. I told her that I needed a returning resident VISA to go home. She took the paperwork and I gave her a check for the amount she requested and left the Embassy without incident.

A few days ago I got a phone call from Dina at the Israeli Embassy telling me that she needed the expiration date of my Jordanian Passport and my Green Card. I had given them all the paperwork they needed time and time again and I thought it was a good way on their part to waste time so that I didn't get my VISA in time. Regardless, I called over and over again only to get their voice mail. I left a message with the information they needed but kept called every 10 minutes hoping to speak to someone to make sure that they received the information in an effort to expedite the tedious process. I finally got a hold of someone. I told her that I wanted to make sure they received the information I left on their voice mail and that I wanted to make sure that my paperwork was in order. She said, after consulting with someone in the background (I assume it was Dina), that I needed to fax copies of both my Jordanian Passport and my Green Card and that giving them the information over the phone wasn't acceptable. So I immediately made copies and faxed them to Dina. A few hours later my cell phone rang. "Zeina?" she said. "Yes" I replied, knowing exactly who it was and immediately asked her if she received the fax I sent. She said: "ehhh, I was not looking at your file when you called earlier but your Visa was denied and your ID and Travel Document are no longer valid." "Excuse me?" I said in disbelief. "Sorry, I cannot give you a visa and your ID and Travel Document are no longer valid. This decision came from Israel not from me."

I cannot describe the feeling I got in the pit of my stomach. "Why?" I asked and Dina went on to tell me that it was because I had a Green Card. I tried to reason with Dina and to explain to her that they could not do that as this is my only means of travel home and that I wanted to see my parents, but to no avail. Dina held her ground and told me that I wouldn't be given the VISA and then said: "Let the Americans give you a Travel Document".

I have always been a strong person and not one to show weakness but at that moment I lost all control and started crying while Dina was on the other end of the line holding my only legal documents linking me to my home. I began to plead with her to try and get the VISA and not revoke my documents; "put yourself in my shoes, what would you do? You want to go see your family and

someone is telling you that you can't! What would you do? Forget that you're Israeli and that I'm Palestinian and think about this for a minute!" "Sorry" she said, " I know but I can't do anything, the decision came from Israel ". I tried to explain to her over and over again that I could not travel without my Travel Document and that they could not do that - knowing that they could, and they had!

This has been happening to many Palestinians who have a Jerusalem ID card. The Israeli government has been practicing and perfecting the art of ethnic cleansing since 1948 right under the nose of the world and no one has the power or the guts to do anything about it. Where else in the world does one have to beg to go to one's own home? Where else in the world does one have to give up their identity for the sole reason of living somewhere else for a period of time? Imagine if an American living in Spain for a few years wanted to go home only to be told by the American government that their American Passport was revoked and that they wouldn't be able to come back!

If I were a Jew living anywhere around the world and had no ties to the area and had never set foot there, I would have the right to go any time I wanted and get an Israeli Passport. In fact, the Israelis encourage that. I however, am not Jewish but I was born and raised there, my parents, family and friends still live there and I cannot go back! I am neither a criminal nor a threat to one of the most powerful countries in the world, yet I am alienated and expelled from my own home.

As it stands right now, I will be unable to go home - I am one of many.