

"FOR THE RECORD"

"Israel's Exclusion of Palestinian Americans from Palestine: Challenges and Opportunities"

Presentation by Kathy Bergen

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At a 27 March 2007 Palestine Center briefing, Kathy Bergen gave a presentation about the MYRTOE (My Right to Enter/Re-Enter) Campaign, summarized the issues of entry/re-entry into Palestine and spoke of ways people in the U.S. can become involved in helping to change the Israeli policy that turns Palestinians and internationals away at the points of entry to Palestine.

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Introduction

I want to thank the Palestine Center for giving me the opportunity to speak about the work of the MYRTOE (My Right to Enter/Re-enter) Campaign and the issues around which it was established. I will first tell you about the work of MYRTOE, summarize the issues of entry/re-entry and, as part of the discussion, speak of ways people in the U.S. can become involved in helping to change the Israeli policy that turns Palestinians and internationals away at the points of entry to Palestine—the bridges from Jordan and the airport in Tel Aviv. The issues surrounding this campaign are complex and have not received much attention outside of Palestine yet are critical to the developments in Palestine. If the current trends continue, Palestine will soon be a "land without a people."

I'm now living in Ramallah, in the Friends Meeting House, and working as the Program Coordinator of the Friends International Center in Ramallah, a ministry of the Ramallah Friends Meeting. I have started a monthly newsletter, and we now have a new website as well.

How did I come to be involved in the MYRTOE Campaign? I lived in Jerusalem from the time of the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 until after the Gulf War in 1991. During that entire time, I had to leave the country every three months in order to renew my tourist visa. All internationals working in Israel-Palestine had to go through this process because work permits were not readily given by the Israeli authorities to volunteers living and working in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Overstaying one's tourist visa could result in deportation or refusal of re-entry. A year ago when I was asked to go to Ramallah and become the Program Coordinator of the Friends International Center in Ramallah, I knew that I would have to again leave the country every three months in order to renew my tourist visa. However, what I did not realize until after I arrived in Ramallah was the extent to which Palestinians—especially Palestinians with American passports and internationals—were being refused entry to the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Background

Shortly after I arrived in Ramallah, I met people who had started the MYRTOE Campaign because of visa problems they themselves were having. Some of the people I met included Anita Abdallah, a Swiss national working at Birzeit [University]; Sam Bahhour, a Palestinian born in Youngstown, Ohio and a prominent businessperson in Ramallah/El-Bireh; Adel Samara, a professor at Birzeit. They invited me to join the campaign.

Israel has recently intensified its policies of restriction of entry or re-entry to the Occupied Palestinian Territory with respect to residents of and visitors to the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Gaza Strip and West Bank) who do not hold a Palestinian ID issued by the Israeli Ministry of Interior. A Palestinian ID is a personal identification document issued by Israel for Palestinian residents of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and their children.

Israel has been systematically denying entry or return to the Occupied Palestinian Territory via the Ben Gurion Airport, Sheikh Hussein Bridge and Eilat, as well as the border to the West Bank, the Allenby Bridge. Most of those affected are Palestinian nationals, entire families or individuals, spouses, children, parents and other close relatives of Palestinian ID holders. As a result, families are torn apart, jobs or businesses lost and personal property becomes inaccessible.

However, the policy applies to persons with and without Palestinian or Arab origins, with and without family relations, including professionals and academics who are in the Occupied Palestinian Territory for teaching, research, the arts, visiting or volunteer services. In most of these cases, which must be in the thousands, the persons have never overstayed their visitors' visas or breached any visiting regulations. It must be noted that Israel has reserved for itself the exclusive power of civil registration and issuing IDs for Palestinians, visitors' visas and work permits for non-ID holders to the Occupied Palestinian Territory. By these means, it is conducting a swift and effective "silent transfer" of the Palestinian population while the latter is living at the mercy of the Israeli occupation authorities.

In addition to the people already locked out, there are many more in the Occupied Palestinian Territory at risk of deportation or re-entry denial once they exit the country's international borders to essentially comply with Israeli visa regulations.

Objectives of MYRTOE

The Objectives of MYRTOE are to:

- Collect information and document cases of entry and re-entry denials;
- Call on the national and international community to protest and take action against this Israeli practice of family separation and denying entry to foreign experts and supporters;
- Launch an international legal and political campaign to prevent, stop and reverse these Israeli policies and practices;
- Urge consulates and embassies of affected citizens to formally protest, protect and take action against these Israeli practices;
- Publicize the issue and disseminate information through national and international media channels.

During the spring and summer of 2006, thousands of Palestinians with dual citizenship and hundreds of internationals were refused entry into Palestine at one of the ports of entry—the bridges from Jordan and Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. For anyone to enter Palestine, he/she must enter through a port controlled by Israel. During the summer of 2006, I joined the campaign, and along with others, began working on advocacy in the U.S. and Canada on behalf of the MYRTOE Campaign.

It has been very difficult to document the denied entry cases. Many Palestinians and internationals do not want to come forward [and] have their names be known because they are afraid that if their names [are] known, they will be punished by the Israeli authorities the next time they try [to] come in and that they'll be put on a black-list. However, in spite of this, MYRTOE continues to document cases of refused entry/re-entry and asks your cooperation in this effort. The U.S. consulate now has a form on their website that can be downloaded and filled in by anyone refused entry.

What has the MYRTOE Campaign accomplished to date?

Even though the issue of visas is not resolved, the MYRTOE Campaign has made some gains this past year:

- Caught the attention of Condoleezza Rice and pushed her to take the visa issue to Israel and to Washington to pressure Israel to change its policy
- Gained recognition from the diplomatic missions in Ramallah and some embassies in Tel Aviv as the address for dealing with visa issues
- Forced the Israeli authorities to articulate the current procedures on paper (which is what the unwritten practice had been prior to March 2006) in the form of the Mishlev letter

-Encouraged an Israeli group of activists to take on the issue

Sometimes those of us working for change—whether social or political change—have to look at the small increments of change that are achieved so we can go on.

The letter sent by [Israeli Major] General [Yosef] Mishlev to [chief negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization] Dr. Saeb Erekat was also sent to some consulates and embassies. The letter articulated on paper, for the first time, what the Israeli procedures had been prior to March of 2006. One can see this as a gain because the procedures that were written in the letter took us back to the pre-election time. It did not indicate any change in Israeli policy. The fact that the procedures are written down, however, makes it a bit more transparent. The Mishlev letter, when implemented, will require everyone to first get a three month tourist visa at one of the ports of entry and then a permit to enter the West Bank. This will make travel to the West Bank costly and time-consuming.

Another thing that the campaign has done is to attract world-wide media attention to the issue early on in the Campaign.

A group of Israeli activists have become involved with this issue. The group of Israelis is called the Israeli Committee for Residency Rights (ICRR). It has managed to bring this issue to the attention of Israeli media, Knesset members and embassies in Tel Aviv. We are asking [the] diplomatic community to work on this issue and not to work only for their own nationals. We want a change of Israeli policy for all who want to enter Palestine.

What is the current situation?

Since the release of the Mishlev letter in January 2007, many living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory have received extensions to their overstayed visas or a visa even though they had a denied entry stamp in their passport. However, many are still being denied entry at the bridges and at Ben Gurion airport.

The process continues to be inconsistent and lacks transparency. There is no policy in place, but each person coming in is at the mercy of the immigration agent. Citizens with U.S., EU, Canadian, Latin American, East Asian and Middle Eastern passports are still being denied entry. Individuals wishing to enter are using various means to come in. The Israeli authorities are not allowing many professions into the country and forcing others to leave, which is harmful in terms of Palestinians building their own society.

The newest development is that internationals going to Gaza are treated as having left Israel and having their previous visa annulled and given shorter visas as they cross the Erez checkpoint into Israel. It appears like Israel is treating the Gaza crossing as an international border in some ways but is not allowing internationals to go to Gaza for their three month visa renewals.

About three weeks ago, another letter was sent out by General Mishlev. This time it was sent out to all the embassies, and the embassies passed it onto their own nationals living in the West Bank. It is similar to the first Mishlev letter, which came out in January, with very few changes. It lists the categories of people who can come in and who can apply for a three month permit as well as those who can extend that three month permit by going to the Ministry of Interior. The fact is that the Mishlev letter allows people to extend their three month visa up to 27 months only, which does not solve the problem for the 120,000 families living apart or living "illegally" in the West Bank because they do not have family reunification, which Israel stopped giving after the beginning of the second *intifada*.

As I said, since the Mishlev letter was sent, many are still being refused entry and many are being refused visa extensions. One example is a doctor living in Bethlehem. He has a Canadian passport and an overstayed tourist visa. He was the medical director of Saint John's Eye Hospital in Hebron. He cannot go to work anymore. He can't travel. He can't do his job, and the hospital is without a medical director. He was not told why he was refused an extension on his visa. Many Palestinian institutions are affected in very serious ways when professionals are denied entry and not allowed to work in the West Bank. It's a tragedy all around—for individuals, for families, for institutions and for Palestine.

In summary, what is MYRTOE looking for? What is needed is a clearly articulated Israeli policy that follows human rights and international law that will solve the visa issue long-term. For more information about the visa issues, visit the

website www.righttoenter.ps.

Related documents about entry procedures into the West

Bank: http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/images/RelatedDocuments_Bergen.pdf

Kathy Bergen is Program Coordinator at the Friends International Center in Ramallah. For nearly 25 years, her career has focused on achieving peace with justice for Palestine/Israel through work for the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations working for peace through non-violence. Before taking up the position with the Center, Bergen was for 12 years National Coordinator of the Middle East Program of the Peacebuilding Unit in the national office of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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The Palestine Center brings together people and resources within the American and Palestinian communities to educate about Palestine and the Palestinian people's ongoing quest for sovereignty on their land, civil and political rights and an end to Israeli occupation. The need for an organization such as The Palestine Center can be found in the effects of the economic, cultural and political oppression Palestinians have endured and which continues on a daily basis in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the surrounding refugee camps and for Palestinians world-wide as they struggle to retain their homeland.