

My Expulsion from Israel

By Richard Falk

December 20, 2008 "[The Guardian](#)" -- - On December 14, [I arrived at Ben Gurion airport](#) in Tel Aviv, Israel to carry out my UN role as special rapporteur on the Palestinian territories.

I was leading a mission that had intended to visit the West Bank and Gaza to prepare a report on Israel's compliance with human rights standards and international humanitarian law. Meetings had been scheduled on an hourly basis during the six days, starting with Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, the following day.

I knew that there might be problems at the airport. Israel had strongly opposed my appointment a few months earlier and its foreign ministry had issued a statement that it would bar my entry if I came to Israel in my capacity as a UN representative.

At the same time, I would not have made the long journey from California, where I live, had I not been reasonably optimistic about my chances of getting in. Israel was informed that I would lead the mission and given a copy of my itinerary, and issued visas to the two people assisting me: a staff security person and an assistant, both of whom work at the office of the high commissioner of human rights in Geneva.

To avoid an incident at the airport, Israel could have either refused to grant visas or communicated to the UN that I would not be allowed to enter, but neither step was taken. It seemed that Israel wanted to teach me, and more significantly, the UN a lesson: there will be no cooperation with those who make strong criticisms of Israel's occupation policy.

After being denied entry, I was put in a holding room with about 20 others experiencing entry problems. At this point, I was treated not as a UN representative, but as some sort of security threat, subjected to an inch-by-inch body search and the most meticulous luggage inspection I have ever witnessed.

I was separated from my two UN companions who were allowed to enter Israel and taken to the airport detention facility a mile or so away. I was required to put all my bags and cell phone in a room and taken to a locked tiny room that smelled of urine and filth. It contained five other detainees and was an

unwelcome invitation to claustrophobia. I spent the next 15 hours so confined, which amounted to a cram course on the miseries of prison life, including dirty sheets, inedible food and lights that were too bright or darkness controlled from the guard office.

Of course, my disappointment and harsh confinement were trivial matters, not by themselves worthy of notice, given the sorts of serious hardships that millions around the world daily endure. Their importance is largely symbolic. I am an individual who had done nothing wrong beyond express strong disapproval of policies of a sovereign state. More importantly, the obvious intention was to humble me as a UN representative and thereby send a message of defiance to the [United Nations](#).

Israel had all along accused me of bias and of making inflammatory charges relating to the occupation of Palestinian territories. I deny that I am biased, but rather insist that I have tried to be truthful in assessing the facts and relevant law. It is the character of the occupation that gives rise to sharp criticism of Israel's approach, especially its harsh blockade of Gaza, resulting in the collective punishment of the 1.5 million inhabitants. By attacking the observer rather than what is observed, Israel plays a clever mind game. It directs attention away from the realities of the occupation, practising effectively a politics of distraction.

The blockade of Gaza serves no legitimate Israeli function. It is supposedly imposed in retaliation for some Hamas and Islamic Jihad rockets that have been fired across the border at the Israeli town of Sderot. The wrongfulness of firing such rockets is unquestionable, yet this in no way justifies indiscriminate Israeli retaliation against the entire civilian population of Gaza.

The purpose of my reports is to document on behalf of the UN the urgency of the situation in Gaza and elsewhere in occupied Palestine. Such work is particularly important now as there are signs of a renewed escalation of violence and even of a threatened Israeli reoccupation.

Before such a catastrophe happens, it is important to make the situation as transparent as possible, and that is what I had hoped to do in carrying out my mission. Although denied entry, my effort will continue to use all available means to document the realities of the Israeli occupation as truthfully as possible. •

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