

Tourists in their own country: Israel refuses to change the registered addresses of Palestinians who once lived in the Gaza Strip, and renders their continued residence in the West Bank subject to receipt of stay visas

For over a decade Israel has been implementing a policy aimed at isolating and completely severing the Gaza Strip from the West Bank. As part of this policy, Israel has been imposing severe restrictions on freedom of movement in and out of the Gaza Strip, tearing apart families, separating husbands from their wives and children from their parents.

The policy has reached new peaks with the publication of a procedure that blocks almost completely the possibility of relocating from Gaza to the West Bank. Under the procedure, which the Israeli military dubs the "settlement procedure", only chronic patients, children who have lost a parent or seniors who require nursing care, may relocate from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank – provided they have no relatives in the Gaza Strip who can care for them. Moreover, the procedure further stipulates that "marriage or parenthood of shared children will not, as sole grounds, be considered exceptional humanitarian circumstances warranting settlement in the [West Bank]". This, while West-Bank residents who wish to live near their relatives in the Gaza Strip may do so easily, provided they agree to sign a pledge never to return to the West Bank – not for visits or following a change in their personal circumstances.

According to official state figures, there are currently between 19,000 and 35,000 Palestinians living in the West Bank who at one time resided in the Gaza Strip. Although Israel has undertaken before the High Court of Justice not to expel these individuals to Gaza, it persistently refuses to permit the update of their addresses in the population register to reflect reality, and treats them as "illegal aliens" in the West Bank. These individuals live under the constant threat of deportation to the Gaza Strip simply because they are registered with intentionally erroneous Gaza addresses.

The revised "settlement procedure" the military presented in August 2013, purportedly addresses this predicament, but in fact it compels these individuals to live in their own country like foreigners, subject to "stay permits": even those who have been living in the West Bank for decades, must now prove that their center-of-life is in the West Bank, and must enter an ordeal of applying for "West Bank stay permits", which initially must be renewed every six months; after the person has been in possession of such permits for at least three years, the military commander may consider (!) whether to update the person's address, and give him the status of "permanent resident of the West Bank". Rather than easing, as purported, the process for those who have been living in the West Bank for many years and wish to have their registered address corrected – this directive in fact presents them as offenders, and requires they obtain a permit in order to remain in their homes, or risk deportation to Gaza.

Israel has long since acknowledged that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are two parts of a single integral entity. It is inconceivable that Palestinians who live in one part of their own country would turn, overnight, into illegal immigrants or infiltrators.

Travel between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank must be renewed immediately, and Palestinians must be allowed the freedom to choose where they wish to live.



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