

# Identity and movement control in the OPT

by Jennifer Loewenstein

**Israel rigorously controls the identities of the four million Palestinians living under its control in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. The occupying authorities have ingeniously engendered statelessness for an entire population.**

Since it occupied the OPT in 1967 – and regardless of the Oslo process – Israel has reserved exclusive power of civil registration and issuing of IDs for Palestinians. It unilaterally administers entry visas and work permits for the tens of thousands of Palestinian non-ID holders in the OPT and for foreign visitors. Israel controls all access to and from the OPT, to and from enclaves/cantons it has established within it and – despite ‘disengagement’ – has total control over all human and vehicular traffic into and out of the Gaza Strip.

In September 1967 Israel conducted a snap census in the territories it had just occupied. Anyone not registered had their residency rights revoked. Tens of thousands of Palestinians who were studying, working or travelling abroad immediately lost any entitlement to residency and today have no official identity. Some of this group arbitrarily dispossessed of any nationality later applied to return through a ‘family reunification’ programme. Some were granted the right to live in the OPT as temporary visitors or tourists but even this right has been difficult to obtain or to sustain.

Prior to the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, the

Israeli government – through the military occupation bureaucracy euphemistically known as the Civil Administration – issued identity cards to the residents of territory occupied in 1967. Those living in the West Bank had orange cards, those in the Gaza Strip had maroon ones and East Jerusalemites carried blue cards which indicate Israeli residency but not citizenship. It made

As a result of the Oslo Accords the act of issuing identity cards passed to the Palestinian Authority. Nonetheless, because Israel retained – and continues to retain – control over the Palestinian population registry, it is Israel that determines the rights and status of all Palestinians living on occupied land. The PA has no power to intervene on behalf of its people. Information on the name, age, date and place of birth, political affiliation and security record of all individuals are stored on a computer database accessed by Israeli officials at checkpoints and border crossings.

Today, ID-holding residents of the West Bank and Gaza are entitled

to change the colour of their ID cards to green, the colour of ID cards issued by the PA, though some still carry the older Civil Administration versions. East Jerusalemites still hold blue ID cards. The PA-issued ID cards contain a photograph and relevant personal information. While they appear to be identity documents issued by a sovereign authority, in fact



no difference whether they had lived for generations in Palestine, whether they were refugees, ‘official’ returnees (who accompanied officials of the Palestinian Authority back from exile following the 1993 Oslo Accords) or IDPs. Such terms are essentially meaningless within an Israeli-dominated administrative landscape in which Palestinians are either legitimate or illegitimate residents whose status can be altered at whim.

they are still directly linked to the Israeli-controlled population registry and corresponding information database. The information printed on the cards appears in Hebrew, Arabic and English. ID-card holders legally reside in the OPT but are citizens of no land, hence encounter constant obstacles using their ‘passports’ for international travel and the constant difficulties that accompany stateless persons across the globe.

**Adnan** is a Palestinian living in Gaza and married to an Algerian woman, Fatima. More than a decade ago they applied for legalisation of her residence but are still awaiting a response. Fatima cannot leave Gaza because she has neither an ID card nor passport. If she leaves, she may never be allowed back.

Particularly vulnerable are Palestinians who were born in the Gaza Strip but grew up in, went to school in, found work in, or married and moved to the West Bank. (Such movement was relatively easy prior to the mid 1990s.) Gazans in the West Bank may be deported back to the Gaza Strip as Israel refuses to change their place of residence on the registry records. Gazan students studying at West Bank universities have been prohibited from returning to study after making brief visits home. Israeli authorities have now begun preventing Gazan students accepted for study at West Bank universities from even enrolling. Travel to and from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is banned except for a small number of Palestinian 'VIPs'.

Palestinians living in the diaspora who may have hoped to get into Gaza following 'disengagement' have been prevented from doing so. Foreigners aiming to travel to Gaza, but weary of the lengthy security checks at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport, discovered that they, too, are prohibited from entering through the Rafah Crossing.

Many Palestinians without Israeli-validated IDs have had to regularly leave the OPT to renew their tourist visas in order to continue living together with their families. Many have been travelling outside the OPT – typically to Jordan, Egypt or Cyprus – every three months simply in order to immediately return and obtain a new Israeli visa. Israel has made no formal announcement about a policy change but since April has been systematically denying return to the OPT via the international Israeli borders at Ben Gurion Airport, Allenby Bridge, Sheikh Hussein Bridge and Eilat.

Those affected include:

- naturalised Palestine-born citizens holding Western – and particularly American – passports who have

- been forced by circumstances to acquire a nationality somewhere in the world or else be left with no national identity
- those who lost their entitlement to East Jerusalem residency as a result of study/employment abroad in 1967 and/or were victims of 'quiet transfer' policies designed to reduce the Palestinian population of the city
- former residents of Kuwait, expelled in 1991 after Yassir Arafat backed Saddam Hussein in the first US-Iraqi war, who returned to the OPT but who overstayed their temporary (tourist) visas as they had nowhere else to go. As they are not included on the Palestinian population registry they are considered illegal residents and can be deported at will by the Israeli authorities.

Foreign wives living in Palestine with their husbands and children for many years are now detained on arrival at Ben Gurion Airport and forced to purchase a ticket back to the country of embarkation. One Western woman married to a Palestinian is languishing in Jordan after 33 years of exiting the West Bank every three months. To make matters worse, her husband is being denied the right to exit the West Bank to visit her, a tactic routinely used to punish Palestinian activists since the occupation began.

The policy is affecting professionals and academics – of both Palestinian and Western origins – who are in the OPT for teaching, development programmes, research or international activism. Israel is determined to reduce the international presence in the West Bank and Gaza. When Palestinians protest on their own, the Israeli forces can and do use live ammunition against them. The presence of internationals is a deterrent to such violence.

The Ad-hoc Committee for the Protection of Foreign Passport Holders Residing in and/or Visiting the Occupied Palestinian Territory (CPFPH), launched in June 2006, is a support group of individuals and families affected by the new Israeli policy to deny entry to foreign passport holders to the OPT. CPFPH seeks to:

- contact the thousands of people still in Palestine and at risk of being denied re-entry to advise them not to leave and to share experience about ways of proactive legal action
- collect information and document cases of entry and re-entry denial
- urge consulates and embassies of affected citizens to formally protest and protect their nations victimised by these Israeli practices.<sup>1</sup>

Israel has ingeniously engendered statelessness for an entire population living under its control and increasingly denies them any freedom of movement. Because they would not be allowed to return to their homes if they left, those without IDs are effectively held prisoner by the Israeli state through a permit system that restricts even the most legitimate residents of these areas from crossing into another zone. 'Dispossession' has taken on a new significance as millions have lost not only their land but also any internationally-recognised validation of their identities.

Even those fortunate enough to have legitimate residence ID cards still face a permit regime which is even more complex and ruthlessly enforced than the pass system of the apartheid regime. Spontaneous movement from place to place has ground to a halt. Israeli ID policies are tearing apart families, ruining livelihoods and preventing access to property. Individual members of families – including parents of young children – are capriciously being prevented from returning to their homes. The silence of the international community in the face of these violations of humanitarian law is ominous.

*Jennifer Loewenstein is a Visiting Research Fellow at Oxford University's Refugee Studies Centre. She is writing a book on the Transformation of the Palestine National Movement, 1994-2006: the Rise of Hamas and the Fall of Fatah. She is a freelance journalist and has lived and worked in Jerusalem, Beirut and Gaza. Email: amadea311@earthlink.net*

1. For further information, visit <http://electronicintifada.net/bytopic/443.shtml>