

If You Were A Gazan.....

A Personal Account of the Restrictions on the Freedom of Movement

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If you were a Palestinian resident of the Gaza Strip, you would be confronted with heavy restrictions on your freedom of movement. Even a family visit to the other part of the Palestinian Territories, the West Bank, is denied. Only two choices would be available for you to attempt such a visit to the West Bank. The first choice is to infiltrate “illegally” through Israel. I do not advise you to take such a risk; you might be arrested and accused of an attempt to commit a “terrorist” suicide attack. Do not convince your self to take such a risk by saying that hundreds of your fellow Palestinian take the same risk on daily basis and have been able to work in Israel without posing any threat to Israel’s security.

The other choice is to obtain a “magnetic card” from the Israeli authorities. If you decide to obtain this magnetic card, you should go through the following procedure:

1. Go to a Palestinian liaison office to obtain a ticket. A handsome Palestinian soldier will receive you, verify your ID and then give you a piece of paper specifying the assigned date to obtain you magnetic card. At this stage you will not fill out an application, nor will you be told to expect to receive your magnetic card by mail. The soldier will simply inform you to come to the very same office on the specified date. Just take your ticket and wait for that date.
2. On the specified date you should come to the office at 6:00 AM or earlier. When you arrive at the office, do not be surprised by the hundreds of people already standing in line. Just hurry up to take your place in the line. Some of these people were smarter than you and arrived at the office as early as 3:00 AM. Do not get upset, however, within few minutes you will not be the last in the line; hundreds of other people will come after you. You might hear them cursing the line and the magnetic card and many other things. You might imitate them; your curse would not hurt anybody, but it might release your stress. But I do not advise you to curse at this moment; it would be too early to release your stress.
3. 7:00 AM, the line will move into a nearby building and in few minutes you will find your way onto a bus. Once you get into one of these buses, pay one shekel (25 cents) to the driver, get your seat, and then relax and wait. At 7:30 the buses will depart for the Erez Zone, where you obtain the magnetic card. The distance is only about three kilometers through the main street. It should take less than 5 minutes, but the drivers proceed very slowly and stop many times before arriving at Erez; they have been instructed to arrive at 8:00 AM and not earlier.

If You Were A Gazan.....

4. Now hurry to take your place in the line. The hundreds of people who were ahead of you in the early morning will also be in front of you now. But you will feel less discomforted when you find hundreds of other people hurrying after you. There will no longer be one line; but two or three lines overlapping one another in a route surrounded by steel bars. I call this the “turtle route”, as most of the time the lines do not move. Just be patient, at this moment you should only think about one thing: when you will move into the part of the “turtle route” which is covered, to avoid the hot summer sun or the winter rain. Do not curse anybody, do not blame anybody, you could have been prepared with an umbrella!
5. As time passes heavily, you will move with the crowd toward an Israeli office. Throughout the route, you will find Palestinian soldiers marching around, screaming, and trying to organize the lines. Poor Palestinian men and teenagers may offer you a *falafel* sandwich, a cold or hot drink, or even cigarettes. You may purchase whatever you want to fill your stomach, quench your thirst or to kill time. Do not get nervous if you see a Palestinian soldier escorting a few lucky gentlemen to the front of the line. You could have been one of those lucky persons if you had the right connections, or if you were not destined to be an ordinary citizen.
6. 11:30 AM, you should now be only a few meters from the door of the Israeli office. The door is barely visible because of the crowd. All you can see is dozens of Palestinians returning back through a parallel route. You will not know what happened to them, you see them whispering to one another, with angry faces. You may conclude that they did not obtain the magnetic cards and that they are now cursing the occupation and the very moment when they decided to come to this place. They have wasted many hours for no more than further frustration. At this moment it would not be the proper time to think about other people’s problems, stick to your own problems. At this moment your most pressing problem will not be whether you would be given the magnetic card. All you will think about is finding a toilet! You have been standing for more than five hours, and all your personal wishes and even national aspirations have shrunk to this simple desire to find a toilet!
7. 12:30 PM, you should get into the Israeli office. At this office you need to pass through a metal detector for security purposes. Then, an Israeli soldier will check your ID, and then put it in a small box with hundreds of other ID’s. The soldier will now ask you for the ticket that you got it earlier from the Palestinian office. Do not forget to keep it for this stage, otherwise you will be dismissed. The soldier will give you another ticket and then you leave the office from door at the opposite side.
8. In few minutes you will be out of the office and actually inside the Erez Zone, which is under complete Israeli control. You would see a bus waiting for those lucky persons who exited the same office. Just hurry up to take your place in the bus, not necessarily a seat. More than a hundred persons will get onto the two-story bus. When the bus is filled with people, you will see an Israeli soldier leaving the office with the box of ID’s. Other soldiers would be waiting for him in a military jeep. Now the bus will move under military escort to the headquarters of the Israeli Coordination Directorate, the new name for what was called the Israeli Civil Administration during the years of direct occupation of the Gaza Strip. Now the administration has been transferred with its Israeli staff to Erez and a new name has been fabricated to cope with the changes since 1994 and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority.

If You Were A Gazan.....

SINCE 1974 AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY.

9. In about two minutes, the bus and the jeep will reach the headquarters. The soldier with the box will enter the building, and you should rush to take your place in an allocated line. Dozens of people will already be waiting in this line from a previous bus trip. Just take your place in the line and do not think of anything other than the toilet!
10. 1:30 PM, the line should now be moving inside the headquarters. As you come closer to the entrance, you will hear a voice over the loudspeaker, in poor mixed Arabic and Hebrew, ordering people to take off their jackets, belts, watches, cigarettes and any metal objects. Do not get nervous; this is almost the same security check that you have just experienced. This metal detector is equipped with more sophisticated and sensitive devices. Do not get nervous or worried if the alarm goes off when you cross this gate. Just obey the orders of the soldier who is sitting behind steel bars in front of you. You may even be ordered to take off your shoes. Once you have successfully passed this security check, other soldiers will stop you for a body search.
11. 2:00 PM, you will now make your way to a huge waiting room. In this room you will find hundreds of other people who, like you, have made it successfully so far.
12. Here you will finally find toilets. What state they might be in is no longer relevant, just make your way and end your suffering. Nearby, you will find a soft drink machine, you may purchase one, and then put your tired body in a seat.
13. Keep your eyes on the soldier standing behind the barred window ahead of you and listen to the loudspeaker until he calls your name. The box of ID's is now in a security office waiting for approval or dismissal.
14. While waiting, you will hear lists of names being called. As each name is called the person will go to the soldiers, collect his ID and leave the building. Like the people turned back from the "turtle route" this morning, these people's applications have been rejected for non-specified security reasons.
15. You will now hear another, shorter, list of names. These people will be taken into offices and interrogated by agents of the Israeli General Security Services (*Shabak*). A number of them will be arrested; others may be blackmailed, and offered the magnetic card only in exchange for collaboration with the *Shabak*.
16. Now your only thought will be whether your name will be called for dismissal or for interrogation.
17. If you pass this stage successfully your name will be called, you will collect your ID, and the soldier will direct you to another window. Take your place in the line, and prepare 35 Shekels (US\$9). Pay the money, hand over your ID once again and return to your seat
18. Now wait to hear your name. Once your name is called, you will be led to an internal office. Take your seat and wait for another call. Once your name is called, enter yet another room to have your photo taken. All you need is a big smile (cheese) for the camera and then return to the main lounge.
19. Now you are on the safe side, just waiting to hear your name over the loudspeaker.
20. 5:00 PM. Your name is called. Just go to the soldier, get your magnetic card and leave the headquarters through an exit route.
21. At this stage, be prepared to walk for ten minutes until you reach the Israeli office through which you leave Erez after a final security check.
22. Then, finally, you will be out of Erez, and you may return home in local

If You Were A Gazan.....

Palestinian transportation.

23. Return safely to your wife and kids, proud of your magnetic card.
24. With your magnetic card, you are qualified now to apply for a permit to visit the West Bank. ATTENTION: YOUR MAGNETIC CARD DOES NOT QUALIFY YOU TO ENTER ISRAEL, FOR THAT YOU MUST APPLY FOR ANOTHER PERMIT. This is another story...

Further Clarifications:

1. The magnetic card was first introduced by the Israeli occupation forces in 1989. Any Palestinian male from the Gaza strip was required to obtain this card to enter Israel or to pass to the West Bank through Israel. Thousands of Gazans failed to meet the criteria defined by the Israeli authorities for issuing such card, and were, therefore, denied access and their right to free movement violated. The criteria were based on alleged security and financial reasons (e.g: an overdue phone bill was sufficient to deny a person the magnetic card.)
2. In the wake of the Gulf war in 1991, a total closure was imposed on the Occupied Palestinian Territories by the Israeli authorities. Forty days later, gradual easing measures were introduced, under which the magnetic card was no longer sufficient for the residents of the Gaza Strip to pass through Israel. The magnetic card, which was valid for a period of one year, was now no more than the precondition to obtain another permit. This new permit would be valid for a much shorter period, ranging from a few hours to one month.
3. This permit system continued even after the redeployment of the Israeli forces under the first Israeli–Palestinian interim agreement of 1994. The provisions of this agreement, which assured the territorial integrity of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the opening of safe passages between them, continued to be defied by Israel.
4. In October 1999, a safe passage was opened between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Tarqumia. According to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, and other human rights organization, the safe passage has failed, so far, to guarantee freedom of movement for Palestinians. Up until the end of 1999, more than 5000 persons from the Gaza Strip were denied access to this safe passage. Furthermore, the average time for a return trip from Gaza to Ramallah, in the center of the West Bank, through the safe passage takes more than 10 hours, while under normal conditions the same trip takes two and half hours. Considering that the safe passage is open 10 hours daily, it is almost impossible for a person to make a return visit in one day.

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