

## Narratives Under Siege (14): Gaza's 700 Stranded Students



**Hadeel Abu Kwaik is one of 7 students whose Fulbright scholarships were recently withdrawn, then swiftly reinstated by the US State Dept. But almost 700 other students remain stranded in Gaza**

Three days ago, on 1 June, Hadeel Abu Kwaik was sitting in her computer lab at Al-Azhar University in Gaza looking worried, and perplexed. Today, having just been told her Fulbright scholarship has been reinstated, she says she is “Happy but still worried. I’m still not sure we will [all] be able to leave for the US.”

Hadeel is one of seven Gaza students who, on 29 May, all received letters from the US Consulate in Jerusalem, informing them that their Fulbright scholarship applications would not be finalised. The US consulate letter gave no reason for the sudden withdrawing of the 7 scholarships: instead all seven students, three women and four men, were “Strongly encouraged” to re-apply for the same Fulbright scholarships the following year, and assured they would receive “Priority consideration.”

The withdrawing of these Fulbright scholarships caused international uproar, momentarily focusing the world’s attention on the plight of the seven Gaza Strip students. US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice intervened, saying she was “Surprised” by the decision, and adding “If you cannot engage young people and give complete horizons to their expectations and their dreams, I don’t know that there will be any future for Palestine. We will take a look.”

In the face of mounting criticism from both within the US and Israel, the US State Department swiftly reinstated the seven Fulbright scholarships, and on 2 June assured the students they were “working closely” with Israeli officials to secure permits for the students to leave Gaza. Hadeel is now waiting to travel to Jerusalem, where she will be interviewed at the US Consulate in order to secure her US visa. Then she will return to Gaza in order to prepare for her departure at the end of summer. She hopes to study her MBA in software engineering at Minnesota University.

For the mainstream press, this story “moved quickly” and has now concluded with a positive ending for the Gaza Fulbright seven. But hundreds of other Palestinian students remain stranded inside the Gaza Strip, and the number is expected to rise this summer. According to data from the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), almost 700 Palestinian students are still waiting to leave Gaza in order to pursue studies, and scholarships, abroad. “This number will increase within the next month, after the schools announce their exam results and Gaza students want to move onto universities” says Khalil Shaheen, a senior PCHR researcher. “All of these students are stranded inside the Gaza Strip because of the Israeli siege and closure, and they are being denied their rights to pursue their education, and their futures.”

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights both explicitly confirm the rights of all people to freely travel to and from their own state. The Israeli closure of the Gaza Strip, which is about to enter its third year, is systematically and deliberately destroying the Gazan economy, its health and education services, and crushing the future of its people. Gazan students who want to pursue specialist education abroad, many of whom intend to return to Gaza afterwards and assist in rebuilding their country, are being denied this right because Israel remains intent on its illegal policy of collective punishment. An Israeli human rights organization, GISHA, has just gone to the Israeli Supreme Court to petition for 2 Gaza students, Wissam Abuajwa and Nibal Nayef, to be permitted to leave Gaza and study their Masters in the UK and Germany.

Meanwhile, 29 year old Said Ahmad Said Al-Madhoun has been waiting more than a year to pursue his Master of Law abroad. After being awarded a fellowship by the Open Society Institute in January 2007, he was accepted onto a Masters program at the American University, Washington College of Law, but has been unable to reach the US. “I managed to get out of Gaza in December 2007 and to travel to the Egyptian border” says Said. “It was a complex journey – because of the closure we were forced to travel through Erez Crossing (in northern Gaza) and then via another Israeli crossing, at Kerem Shalom, to the Egyptian border. But I was turned back at the [Egyptian] border because I had no US visa.” Said could not obtain a US visa, because, like the vast majority of other Gazans, he is not permitted to travel to Jerusalem, where the US Consulate issues its visas. He attempted to leave Gaza once more in early January, and was turned back at the Egyptian border again. His academic career, and life, suspended, Said is still waiting. “This is so frustrating for me, and for all of us students in Gaza” he says wearily. “We want to work and to learn. We want to enjoy our freedom of movement. We want to determine our future.”

When Hadeel Abu Kwaik first heard that her Fulbright scholarship had been withdrawn, she said she felt angry and disappointed. “I wonder if Israel wants an educated neighbor or an angry one” she stated publicly. Like Said Al-Madhoun, Hadeel wants to pursue her studies overseas and then return to Gaza and work in her own community. Although she says she’s happy her Fulbright scholarship has been reinstated, she admits she is still worried about whether she will actually be able to leave Gaza, and her anxiety is clearly

tainting her joy. “I won’t be relieved until we actually reach the United States (to start my studies),” she says.