

Narratives Under Siege (20): Deadline looms for another student trapped inside Gaza



Nevin Abu Taima fears she will lose her university scholarship if she cannot reach the US within the next few days.

During the last two days of August, the Egyptian authorities permitted approximately 3,300 people to cross the Gazan border at Rafah into Egypt ‘for humanitarian reasons’. Those who entered Egypt included Gazan patients, students, and an undisclosed number of Egyptians who had been stranded inside the Gaza Strip. The sight of more than fifty busloads of travelers heading out of Gaza may have given the impression that movement restrictions are finally easing inside the Gaza Strip. But almost 900 other Gazans on board the buses were turned back at the border. Amongst them was twenty year old Nevin Abu Taima from Rafah - who is still desperately trying to return to the US in order to resume her political science degree.

‘My family lives in the Brazil refugee camp, in [the south of] Rafah’ she says. ‘Our house was destroyed by the Israelis in 2005, and we spent the next six months living in a local UNRWA school. We are a big family of eleven children, and some of my brothers and sisters also have families of their own – all of us were living together in one classroom. Can you imagine that?’ Nevin left Gaza whilst her family was still being housed in the classroom. ‘I was only sixteen’ she says. ‘But I had very good grades at school, and I was offered a United World College Scholarship in Italy. I left my home and lived in Trieste [in northern Italy] for two years. I had to study Italian and English at the same time, and after two years I received my International Baccalaureate.’

Whilst she was living in Italy, Nevin traveled to Egypt each summer, to try to see her family in Gaza. 'I traveled to Rafah on the Egyptian side of the border twice, and waited for almost three months each time, to see if the border would open' she says. 'All my family is inside Gaza and I badly wanted to see them. But I never managed to get across the border, and had to return to Italy without seeing them.'

Israel's closure of the Gaza Strip has separated tens of thousands of Gazans from their immediate families. Individuals who travel outside of Gaza have often not been allowed to return for years, or else remain frightened of re-entering Gaza for fear of being trapped inside the Strip, as many subsequently have been. Many families are therefore forced to rely on photographs, telephones and the Internet to stay in touch with their parents, partners and siblings, though even Internet access is restricted to those who can afford it.

Nevin did not see her parents for three years. After receiving her Baccalaureate she was awarded a scholarship to study political science at St Lawrence University in upstate New York. The four-year scholarship, which covers her living expenses and tuition fees, is worth \$50,000 per year. Nevin traveled from Italy to New York, and spent the 2007/8 academic year at St Lawrence, where she also worked part-time to pay for her return flight back to Egypt, determined to try and visit her family again. 'I flew to Cairo on 9 May this year, went straight to Rafah and just waited for the border to open' she says. 'I was sleeping outside under some trees with other Palestinians who were also trying to enter Gaza: there were old people and sick people. There was no-one to help us. We waited for almost two months, and I reached the point where I was knocking on doors asking for food.'

At the beginning of July this year, the Egyptian authorities agreed to re-open the Rafah Crossing for three days for humanitarian cases to enter and leave Gaza. Nevin fought her way through the crowds surging to the border, and finally crossed into Gaza on 3 July. 'I had been away for three years, and the change was shocking' she says. 'I didn't even recognise the way back to my own house – there had been so much destruction since I left. It was wonderful to go home, but our land had also been bulldozed. I really didn't expect the situation to be so bad.' She knew that leaving Gaza would probably be very difficult, so she began making enquiries within a week. She needed to be back in the US at the end of August in order to start her second year at St Lawrence.

When rumours started circulating that Rafah would open for the two days before Ramadan, she went straight to nearby Khan Yunis to wait to board one of the Egypt-bound buses. After two days she was allowed on board and the bus joined the queue at Rafah. 'My passport was stamped [at Rafah] by the Palestinian officials, and I really thought we would cross' she says, 'but after waiting in the bus for four hours, stuck between Gaza and Egypt, the driver was ordered to turn the bus around and drive back to Gaza, because no else could cross. People were crying and screaming all the way back'.

During those two days that Rafah was partially re-opened, approximately 200 Gazan students studying at foreign universities managed to cross into Egypt. However, another two hundred, like Nevin, remain stranded inside Gaza. In addition, up to 1,200 Gazan

school leavers are in the process of applying to study at foreign universities, and are also completely dependent on being issued exit permits by Israel, or else managing to cross to Egypt. Rafah Crossing does not have regular opening hours, and even when it is open, there are no guarantees that Gazan civilians can enter Egypt. More than two months after the Egypt brokered *Tahdiya* between Israel and Gaza came into force, Gazans still do not have the basic human right of freedom of movement.

The bitter irony for Nevin is that St Lawrence has now emailed her, informing her that her scholarship is too expensive to maintain in her absence: unless she can manage to somehow travel to the US by Monday, she understands that her scholarship will be either suspended or canceled. She will also have to re-submit all of her documentation in order to re-enter the US, and may have her student visa canceled, leaving her in complete limbo. 'My university doesn't understand about life in Gaza' she says. 'My family live in a refugee camp, and they can't afford to send me to university in Gaza. I am now trying to travel via Erez [into Israel] and then from Jordan to the US. But I have very little time left.'