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A tourist visa to go home?

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The Israeli government has been practicing and perfecting the art of ethnic cleansing since 1948 right under the nose of the world and no one has the power or the guts to do anything about it. In 1948 the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 194 on the question of Palestine, which "resolves that refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return..."

The government of Israel, however, opposes this universally granted right in order to preserve the Jewish character of the state. Today there are more than 3.7 million Palestinians living in refugee camps and many more exiles scattered worldwide. The following is a true story of one such individual. Perhaps through her own words, some may understand the heartbreaking consequences of denial.

"I am Palestinian - born and raised - and my Palestinian roots go back centuries. No one can change that even if they tell me that Jerusalem, my birthplace, is not Palestine, even if they tell me that Palestine doesn't exist, even if they take away all my papers and deny me entry to my own home, even if they humiliate me and take away my rights. I am Palestinian.
Name: Zeina Emile Sam'an Ashrawi; Date of Birth: July 30, 1981; Ethnicity: Arab.

This is what was written on my Jerusalem ID card. An ID card to a Palestinian is much more than just a piece of paper; it is my only legal documented relationship to Palestine. Born in Jerusalem, I was given a Jerusalem ID card (the blue ID), an Israeli Travel Document and a Jordanian Passport stamped Palestinian (I have no legal rights in Jordan). I do not have an Israeli Passport, a Palestinian Passport or an American Passport. Here is my story:

I came to the United States as a 17-year-old to finish high school in Pennsylvania and went on to college and graduate school and subsequently got married and we are currently living in Northern Virginia. I have gone home every year at least once to see my parents, my family and my friends and to renew my Travel Document as I was only able to extend its validity once a year from Washington DC.

My father and I would stand in line at the Israeli Ministry of Interior in Jerusalem, along with many other Palestinians, from 4:30 in the morning to try our luck at making it through the revolving metal doors of the ministry before noon - when the ministry closed its doors - to try and renew the Travel Document. We did that year after year. As a people living under an occupation, being faced with constant humiliation by an occupier was the norm but we did what we had to do to insure our identity was not stolen from us.

In August of 2007 I went to the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC to try and extend my travel document and get the usual "Returning Resident" VISA that the Israelis issue to Palestinians holding an Israeli Travel Document. After watching a few Americans and others being told that their visas would be ready in a couple of weeks my turn came. I walked up to the bulletproof glass window shielding the lady working behind it and under a massive picture of the Dome of the Rock and the Walls of Jerusalem that hangs on the wall in the Israeli Consulate, I handed her my papers through a little slot at the bottom of the window.

"Shalom," she said with a smile. "Hi" I responded, apprehensive and scared. As soon as she saw my Travel Document her demeanor immediately changed. The smile was no longer there and there was very little small talk between us, as usual. After sifting through the paperwork I gave her she said: "Where is your American Passport?" I explained to her that I did not have one and that my only Travel Document is the one she has in her hands. She was quiet for a few seconds and then said: "You don't have an American passport?" suspicious that I was hiding information from her. "No!" I said. She was quiet for a little longer and then said: "Well, I am not sure we'll be able to extend your Travel Document."

I felt the blood rushing to my head, as this is my only means to get home! I asked her what she meant by that and she went on to tell me that since I had been living in the US and because I had a Green Card, they would not extend my Travel Document. After taking a deep breath to try and control my temper I explained to her that a Green Card is not a passport and I cannot use it to travel outside the US. My voice was shaky and I was getting more and more upset (and a mini shouting match ensued) so I asked her to explain to me what I needed to do. She told me to leave my paperwork and we would see what happens.

A couple of weeks later I received a phone call from the lady telling me that she was able to extend my Travel Document but I would no longer be getting the "Returning Resident" visa. Instead, I was given a 3- month tourist visa. Initially I was happy to hear that the Travel Document was extended but then I realized that she said "tourist visa." Why am I getting a tourist visa to go home? Not wanting to argue with her about the 3-month visa at the time so as not to jeopardize the extension of my Travel Document, I simply put that bit of information on the back burner and went on to explain to her that I wasn't going home in the next 3 months.

She instructed me to come back and apply for another visa when I did intend on going. She didn't add much and just told me that it was ready for pick-up. So I went to the embassy and got my Travel Document and the tourist visa that was stamped in it.

My husband, my son and I were planning on going home to Palestine this summer. So a month before we were set to leave (July 8, 2008) I went to the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC, papers in hand, to ask for a visa to go home! I, again, stood in line and watched others get visas unhindered to go to my home.

When my turn came I walked up to the window; "Shalom" she said with a smile on her face, "Hi" I replied. I slipped the paperwork in the little slot under the bulletproof glass and waited for the usual reaction. I told her that I needed a returning resident VISA to go home. She took the paperwork and I gave her a check for the amount she requested and left the embassy without incident.

A few days ago I got a phone call from Dina at the Israeli Embassy telling me that she needed the expiration date of my Jordanian passport and my Green Card. I had given them all the paperwork they needed time and time again and I thought it was a good way on their part to waste time so that I didn't get my visa in time.

Regardless, I called over and over again only to get their voice mail. I left a message with the information they needed but kept calling every 10 minutes hoping to speak to someone to make sure that they received the information in an effort to expedite the tedious process. I finally got a hold of someone. I told her that I wanted to make sure they received the information I left on their voice mail and that I wanted to make sure that my paperwork was in order.

She said, after consulting with someone in the background (I assume it was Dina), that I needed to fax copies of both my Jordanian passport and my Green Card and that giving them

the information over the phone wasn't acceptable. So I immediately made copies and faxed them to Dina.

A few hours later my cell phone rang. "Zeina?" she said. "Yes" I replied, knowing exactly who it was and immediately asked her if she received the fax I sent. She said: "ehhh, I was not looking at your file when you called earlier but your visa was denied and your ID and Travel Document are no longer valid." "Excuse me?" I said in disbelief. "Sorry, I cannot give you a visa and your ID and Travel Document are no longer valid. This decision came from Israel, not from me."

I cannot describe the feeling I got in the pit of my stomach. "Why?" I asked and Dina went on to tell me that it was because I had a Green Card. I tried to reason with Dina and to explain to her that they could not do that as this is my only means of travel home and that I wanted to see my parents, but to no avail. Dina held her ground and told me that I wouldn't be given the VISA and then said: "Let the Americans give you a Travel Document".

I have always been a strong person and not one to show weakness but at that moment I lost all control and started crying while Dina was on the other end of the line holding my only legal documents linking me to my home. I began to plead with her to try and get the VISA and not revoke my documents; "put yourself in my shoes, what would you do? You want to go see your family and someone is telling you that you can't! What would you do? Forget that you're Israeli and that I'm Palestinian and think about this for a minute!"

"Sorry" she said, "I know but I can't do anything, the decision came from Israel".

I tried to explain to her over and over again that I could not travel without my Travel Document and that they could not do that - knowing that they could, and they had! This has been happening to many Palestinians who have a Jerusalem ID card. The Israeli government has been practicing and perfecting the art of ethnic cleansing since 1948 right under the nose of the world and no one has the power or the guts to do anything about it. Where else in the world does one have to beg to go to one's own home?

Where else in the world does one have to give up their identity for the sole reason of living somewhere else for a period of time? Imagine if an American living in Spain for a few years wanted to go home only to be told by the American government that their American passport was revoked and that they wouldn't be able to come back!

If I were a Jew living anywhere around the world and had no ties to the area and had never set foot there, I would have the right to go any time I wanted and get an Israeli passport. In fact, the Israelis encourage that. I however, am not Jewish but I was born and raised in Jerusalem, my parents, family and friends still live there and I cannot go back! I am neither a criminal nor a threat to one of the most powerful countries in the world, yet I am alienated and expelled from my own home.

As it stands right now, I will be unable to go home - I am one of many." If the Israeli stand on right of return were accepted as rule of law, it would not be just the 3.7 million Palestinian refugees who would suffer. This would be a blow to a basic human right of any individual anywhere in the world. If the Israelis truly want to live in peace with their neighbors, then they should stop denial of such rights to Palestinians. Are there enough courageous Israelis to do that?