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תאריך:

מילים: 1261

עמוד:

Keeping them down in the Strip

כותרת:

Traveling from Gaza to the West Bank has become a multi-year struggle for Palestinians

משנה:

Hass Amira

כתב:

לוגו:

כותרת על:

תת מדור:

Features

מדור:

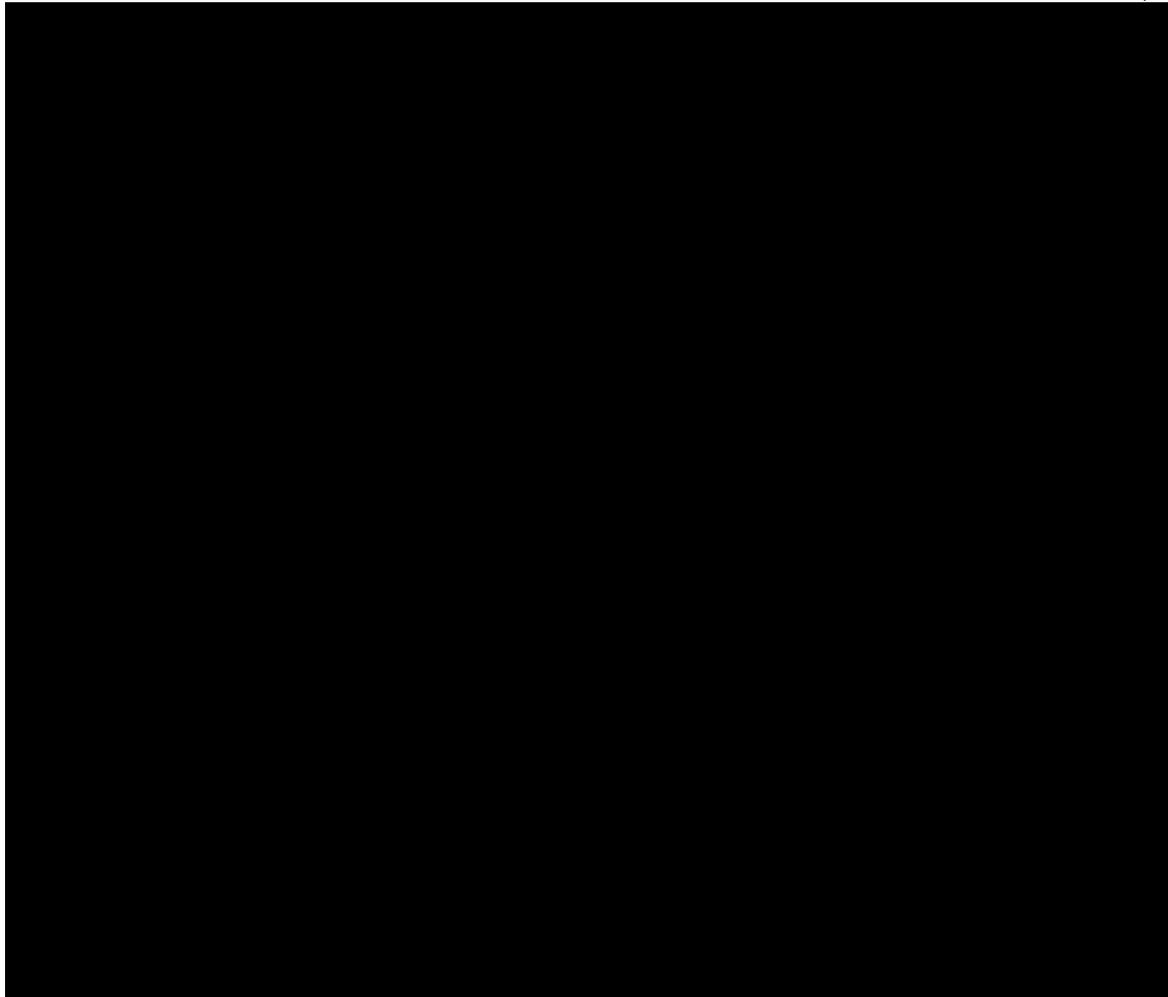
סוכנות:

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כיתובים:

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As "M" was about to take leave of his family in Gaza and depart for Ramallah where a good job awaited him, his mother and his sisters flung themselves upon him, wailed, and begged him to stay. "And if I had been offered a job in Saudi Arabia, would you also be crying so much," he asked them a bit impatiently. "Of course not," answered his mother. "Saudi Arabia is closer." Every Palestinian can identify with this questionable perception of geographical distance, since it is measured by the length of time between family or social reunions and the freedom to control that interval. From Saudi Arabia, the prodigal son can return whenever

he chooses and his family can go to visit him, too, if they have the wherewithal. But if he lives in the West Bank, an hour's journey away, years go by before family members are able to meet.

M was studying a lucrative field at Bir Zeit University. But beginning in 1995, he was denied transit permits to go from Gaza to the West Bank, along with approximately 1,300 other Gazans who register every year at universities in the West Bank. M - like most of the others - made his way to Ramallah without the necessary papers, but he dared not come home for holidays to see his family.

A short time before he finished his studies, "miraculously - or because of a computer error," he jokes, M received a transit and sojourn permit valid for three months, which immediately allowed him to visit his family, whom he had not seen for 18 months.

Before the permit expires he will depart Gaza, and who knows when his mother will see him again.

M would not even think of doing what a young person in another country might do: officially changing the address on his identity card from Gaza to Ramallah. He knows that there is little chance that Israel would grant such a change for him when it does not do so for hundreds of Gazans who for family or work reasons have moved permanently to the West Bank.

The presence of these "illegals" is an open secret. The Israeli authorities know, for example, that Salwa Abu Skhila, who was born in Jabalya and has a Gazan identity card, has been living in Ramallah for the past 15 years, ever since she embarked on her studies at Bir Zeit. In 1990, she married a resident of the West Bank, whom she met at the university. Since 1991, long before any transfer of powers to the Palestinians, her requests to change her address have been refused.

As long as Israel had direct control over all the territories, her place of residence did not affect her ability to maintain her ties with her family in Jabalya, and she visited them regularly.

Although transit permits have been required since 1991, the inspection of Palestinians traveling to and from the Gaza Strip - especially of women - has only in the last few years become more stringent. Thus, the last time Salwa visited her home was in the fall of 1994, a few months after civil powers were transferred to the Palestinian Authority. At that time, procedures for entering and leaving the Gaza Strip became stricter. Gaza residents who came from the West Bank without permits were subject to fines or imprisonment for "illegal sojourn," which sufficed to discourage Salwa and others like her from trying to see their families.

After 1994, she again submitted several requests to have her address officially changed. True, Salwa, now the mother of two, is married to a political activist who during the Intifada was sentenced to a year's imprisonment, and was later under administrative arrest until about two months ago. Her husband, Ali Jardat, is suspected by the Shin Bet security service of belonging to the Hamas movement. Yet how would security be endangered by giving official recognition to a reality of 15 years' duration?

Many of the "address-change refuseniks" are Palestinians who returned from the diaspora as PLO activists or as Palestinian police. They

arrived in 1994 via Rafah, and received "Gazan" identity numbers. Many of them actually live in the West Bank, and work as police or in government offices in Ramallah, but their movements between check points are hampered because officially they are Gaza residents and "refused transit."

Precisely this sort of uncertainty was to have been entirely eliminated by the Oslo agreement.

The Taba agreement (Oslo 2), which was signed in Washington in September, 1995, does, indeed, allow the PA to change a resident's address, requiring it only to report this change to Israel. The Palestinians saw the right to change addresses between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank as a logical extension of the basic principle that appears in the Declarations of Principle (Clause 4): "Both sides see the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a single territorial unit, the integrity of which will be preserved during the interim period."

A "safe passage" - left undefined in the agreements - was to have been implemented in ongoing negotiations and make operational the principle of "territorial integrity."

Unlike the safe passage, which was paralyzed before it was even born, the right to change addresses initially looked like a sure thing.

However, it soon became clear to PA officials that this was not the case. Khaled Salim, a senior official in the PA Office of Civil Affairs, says that the Israeli authorities refuse to merely receive reports of address changes, instead demanding, for "security reasons," the right to approve all changes of address from Gaza to the West Bank. Changes within the West Bank or from the West Bank to Gaza meet fewer obstructions. Not surprisingly, according to Salim, the Israelis refuse to put into writing the demand to deviate from the agreement. The denial of the right of the PA to change the addresses of Gaza residents to the West Bank (and the effective prevention of their ability to move) is a relatively new means by which the Israelis maintain control over the Palestinian population.

Thus, not only is there a demographic separation between Palestinian residents of the territories and Israeli citizens (on both sides of the Green Line), but also a geographical and socio-economic separation between residents of Gaza and residents of the West Bank.

Shlomo Dror, spokesman for the Israeli Government Coordinator in the territories, responded this way: "In principle, changes of address from Gaza to the West Bank are permitted. After the period of major terror attacks in 1996, [then prime minister] Shimon Peres gave orders to stop everything, including changes of address. Practically speaking, the Palestinians can come and say they are changing addresses. We have allowed this for humanitarian reasons, as in cases when Gazan women married West Bank residents, if there is no security problem..."

"True, the agreement states that they must only report address changes to us, but according to the agreement, security considerations override everything - though this to must be used to the correct extent..."

"We have informed the Palestinians that it is in their interests that there not be a massive move of people from Gaza to the West Bank. The PA has internal problems, and it is not interested in having all the poor of Gaza come to the West Bank, which could lead to economic collapse. There is silent collusion here - it is convenient for the

PA to tell people that Israel is the one who is not approving their applications, which often happens."

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