

<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.731116>

Gazans Face New Clampdown on Travel, Imports

The change is a clear reversal of what had been a trend of gradually easing restrictions in the past six years, a policy that had been largely aimed at the Palestinian business sector.

Amira Hass

Jul 15, 2016 3:48 AM

At the initiative of the Shin Bet security services, restrictions have been tightened on Palestinians seeking to depart the Gaza Strip and on imports permitted into the territory. These restrictions cut into the Strip's already limited economic activity.

Those directly harmed by the change for the worse are the merchants and importers, including the veterans who employ hundreds of people; senior officials in charge of infrastructure and rehabilitation; doctors and academics who take in-service training courses and exams in the West Bank; the ill; those with families abroad and in the West Bank; and workers for international humanitarian groups and diplomatic missions.

The change is a clear reversal of what had been a trend of gradually easing restrictions in the past six years, a policy that had been largely aimed at the Palestinian business sector.

Israel had gradually eased restrictions in the past six years in response to warnings from donor nations and the World Bank of the risk of economic and environmental collapse in Gaza. Donor countries view the Palestinian business sector as a moderating force, in addition to playing an economic role. Thus, as a group these merchants have received the largest number of permits. Still, the easing of restrictions in recent years affected only a small minority of Gaza's population.

The policy of negating freedom of movement for Gaza residents and severing their connections with the West Bank began in 1991 and worsened in the 2000s, especially after 2006, when Hamas won the legislative elections and Gilad Shalit was captured. Taking trips abroad has been permitted only via the Rafah crossing, but since the fall of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt three years ago, the crossing is kept shut most of the time.

In recent months regular exit permits for about 1,400 merchants, about a third of some 3,700 business-people who have received long-term exit permits in recent years, have been canceled or not renewed. In a step that has an immediate and very damaging effect on Gaza's economy and attempts to rehabilitate it, the Shin Bet has also begun to forbid certain businessmen from importing their merchandise into Gaza. They are defined as banned by the Shin Bet for "security reasons" without further explanation. Mustafa Mortaga, 80, an engineer who owns a company that imports electric generators, pumps, and spare parts, has suddenly found himself on the Shin Bet list. Mortaga, who has been an engineer for half of his life, told Haaretz that he had heard about the prohibition five months ago at the Kerem Shalom crossing where goods he had imported had arrived. After a security inspection at the Ashdod port he paid the required customs duties. But as he waited for his containers to be transferred from the Israeli to the Palestinian side at Kerem Shalom, he was told it was forbidden to bring them in.

During the following months more merchandise arrived that Mortaga had ordered and purchased abroad before the ban went into effect. The merchandise, worth about \$1 million, is being stored in a warehouse owned by an Israeli citizen, on the Israeli side of the crossing. It includes small generators for operating elevators – a crucial item due to prolonged electricity blackouts in the

Strip, as well as pumps to improve the flow of water in the municipal network. Mortaga's special Strip, as well as pumps to improve the flow of water in the municipal network. Mortaga's special exit permit for businessmen (BMG) was not renewed in May.

A well-known businessman in the Strip told Haaretz that only 20 percent of the 400 people with a BMG have had these permits renewed, and only for a short period. He himself did not receive a permit, and after associates and people with connections made requests, he met with Shin Bet representatives at Erez four times.

"They treated me well, the questions were respectful, they didn't pressure me to cooperate," he said. And in the end he received an exit permit for only two weeks. The policy of canceling permits or refusing to renew them has been in place since February. In recent weeks the accumulation of cases and the lengthening list of merchants prohibited from importing goods has become a phenomenon that seems liable to continue for a long time.

Officials in the Strip told investigators from Gisha, a group that advocates for freedom of movement for Palestinians, that the results of the permit and import denials are already being felt on the ground as a commercial slowdown. Many transactions have been canceled and it's impossible to advance new ones. There is also a chain-reaction effect, in that freezing the activity of leading merchants in turn paralyzes the smaller businesses whose owners refrain from submitting requests to renew exit permits for fear they will be labeled as security cases. It's a label that sometimes deters Israeli businesspeople, who are not aware of its all-inclusive nature.

Among the cases Gisha has heard about involves a man in his 60s who asked for a permit to leave Gaza to receive medical treatment in Jordan. He and his wife had managed to obtain a Jordanian permit, a requirement for receiving an Israeli exit permit. The man's wife received a permit to accompany him, but the man himself was denied a permit. After Gisha telephoned the liaison officer to find out why, he was told that the requests would be sent back for a security examination. Gisha was told that the same couple had received exit visas to conduct visa interviews in Jerusalem and worship at Al-Aqsa mosque; in other words, then, there were no security concerns. In the end they were allowed to travel to Jordan but only a week after the date of the appointment they had set for the medical treatment.

A pregnant woman of 34 received a permit to go to a visa interview at a consulate in Jerusalem. But she was made to wait for many hours at the checkpoint and Gisha representatives were told there was a "security issue" with her case. She was allowed to leave in the afternoon but her appointment had already passed. In previous months she had worked regularly in the West Bank and abroad; in other words, there were no security problems cited at that time.

A student of 20 was invited to the United States but his request to go to an interview for a visa at the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem was denied. When he asked why, a representative from the Palestinian civilian authority replied that the Israeli authorities said there is a 100-year-long security precaution.

Twelve out of 25 doctors who registered to take the Palestinian licensing exam in Ramallah were denied exit requests a day before the date of their travels for "security reasons," and wound up missing the test, which is given only twice a year and is critical to their professional future. Checks made by Gisha and a Palestinian group found that at least two of those who were refused had received visas to leave Gaza six months ago.