

Israeli deal for Palestinian "safe passage" tramples on democratic rights

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The world's press acclaimed the signing of the Palestinian "safe passage" deal as another step forward in the Middle East "peace process". Journalists listed the humiliating conditions that would allow some Palestinians limited travel between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and concluded that the new arrangements constituted an "improvement".

Yet freedom of movement for Palestinians remains a privilege, not a basic human right. Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat approved the deal. It opens a 44-kilometre route between the Erez checkpoint at the northern end of the Gaza Strip, through Israel to Tarqumiya in the landlocked West Bank. Some Palestinian representatives described the arrangements as degrading and humiliating.

Under the agreement, Palestinians wishing to travel must apply to the Palestinian Authority for magnetic entry cards. If Palestinian officials approve the requests, they would turn the applicants' names over to the Israelis for a security check. The Israeli officials would have two days to process and approve those proposing to go by public transport, or five days for those wanting to travel in their own cars. The Israelis may refuse permission to travel without giving any reason. Once approved, the applicants would pick up a plastic swipe card from a joint Israeli-Palestinian office, to be used to "clock in and clock out" from the transit route.

This would be open between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. It would close for the main Jewish holidays. Special arrangements would be agreed for Moslem holidays. Buses would take two hours and cars 90 minutes. Those who exceeded the permitted travel time would be detained and investigated by Israel. The Palestinian Authority would be informed. The magnetic cards would be valid for between three months and one year.

A second route linking Gaza to the northern West Bank would open in four months' time.

These arrangements contrast starkly with those for the

Israeli settlers in the Occupied Territories. After the Oslo Accords in 1993, the then-Labour government, with Arafat's consent, began to implement an old plan to link the settlements to Israel through a network of highways or "bypass roads"—broad, high-speed, tarmac roads which ensure safe and unrestricted access at all times. These roads have dissected the West Bank and Gaza and disrupted the natural links between towns and villages.

Currently, only a handful of Palestinians are allowed to make the journey through Israel. Restrictions on freedom of movement have been in existence since 1989 when magnetic cards were first introduced. Those with criminal or security records (as defined by Israel) were the first to be denied the right of entry into Israel. Then in 1991, during the Gulf War, Israel imposed a lengthy curfew, paralysing the Palestinian economy and rescinded general exit permits. All Palestinians were henceforth obliged to carry personal permits authorising travel into Israel.

What began as an emergency measure became a permanent policy. The borders were subject to lengthy and "hermetic closure". Passes were only granted to a few people. In 1994, with the advent of the Palestinian Authority, travel was made even more difficult. The Occupied Territories were separated from Israel by an electrified fence, controlled checkpoints, multiple roadblocks and sophisticated surveillance systems. In effect, it was mass internment.

Not only was the West Bank cut off from Gaza, but it was divided into north and south, separated by Jerusalem, and a special pass was required to enter the city—the economic, cultural, religious and medical capital. Thus the Israelis confined the Palestinians to three distinct ghettos. Work in Israel, upon which the majority depended, became impossible. The prolonged closures cut incomes, tax collection and investment, raised farmers' costs and created huge surpluses. Educational, health-related and social visits outside the West Bank or Gaza

were out of the question for the masses. Families were left stranded.

As a result of the restrictions on travel, living standards plummeted. Per capita income fell by 7 percent in 1992 and 27 percent in 1993. A recent study by the Palestinian Economic Research Institute (MAS) found that at least 19 percent of the population were “poor”—10 percent in the West Bank and 36 percent in the Gaza Strip—with an average annual per capita expenditure of \$650.

The World Bank estimates that Israeli closure cost the Palestinian economy between \$6 million and \$10 million per day.

Such restrictions on travel make a mockery of any kind of Palestinian autonomy, let alone independence. As Amira Hass, an Israeli journalist who lived in Gaza for four years, explained in her book, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza* *, "For Palestinians, freedom of movement was no longer a right but a privilege allotted to an entitled few." Israel awarded different grades of passes with incremental privileges to a small group of favoured people.

Since people's livelihood depended on travel permits, "Freedom of movement translated into power, business opportunities, and great material comfort". The Palestinian leadership and the coterie around it were the beneficiaries.

"To sum up", she writes, "the Oslo Accords have ensured Palestinian segregation from the Jewish-Israeli population, which elects the sovereign power, enjoys geographic and economic domination, commands all natural sources, and controls a pass system limiting the Palestinians' movements".

*Amira Hass, *Drinking the Sea at Gaza*, Penguin, 1999, ISBN 0-241-13946-5

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