

Gazans Who Are Israeli Citizens Don't Have a Country to Save Them From Hell

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Their bags are packed, their farewells said, but the army's changing procedures are preventing 47 Israelis, some of them children, from crossing the border from Gaza

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Destruction in Deir al Balah last month. So far 102 Israeli citizens and residents crossed the border from Gaza, in three different groups. Credit: Abdel Kareem Hana/AP

On a recent Saturday evening her bags were packed. Jihan (a pseudonym) said her farewells - to the displaced people like her who have been huddled in a school in the central Gaza city of Deir al-Balah for more than five months, to the 40 women and girls she lived with all that time in one classroom.

She also said goodbye to the sea, which though soothing to the eyes is also a menace because of the Israeli warships that bombard the land from it.

And mainly, Jihan parted from her husband. She and their three children, who fled Gaza City due to the bombings, are Israeli citizens. They were assigned to a group of other Israeli citizens whose evacuation from the bombed and starving Gaza Strip was scheduled for April 8 and 9, a Monday and Tuesday.

But on the Sunday before those two days, an employee of the Gisha Legal Center for Freedom of Movement phoned Jihan and informed her that the group's departure to Israel had been postponed. Again. It had already been postponed at least three times, for different reasons, since the second week of March.

Jihan has another reason to panic. Her mother, a citizen living in Israel, was recently hospitalized. The first thing Jihan intended to do was go see her.

"When my father died about 20 years ago, it wasn't possible for me to leave the Strip, and I didn't say goodbye to him. I don't want my mother to die too without me being by her side," Jihan said by phone Thursday. They last saw each other in July.

The group that's set for release is made up of 46 Israeli citizens and one East Jerusalem resident who are married and live in Gaza or were visiting their families and were stranded when the war broke out. All of them - 23 children and 24 adults - have been waiting for a month or more to leave through the Rafah crossing with Egypt.

Palestinians and dual nationality holders fleeing from Gaza arrive on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing in December. Credit: AFP

Each time a date was set, they packed their bags and said their goodbyes, and then, almost at the last minute, someone from the Defense Ministry's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories informed Gisha and the HaMoked Center for the Defense of the Individual that no, departure wouldn't be possible at the scheduled time.

So once again they're all waiting, on the edge of their frayed nerves, in tents, schools or relatives' homes. They anxiously hear about Israeli plans to invade Rafah in the far south of Gaza, not knowing who will still be alive or unharmed if that happens, because Israeli warplanes keep bombing.

This is the fourth group of Israeli citizens and residents designated to leave Gaza since October 7. So far, 102 Israeli citizens and residents, including 45 children, have left for Israel on November 16, December 6 and February 19. Jihan explained why she didn't try to leave earlier.

"My husband isn't a citizen," she said. "We realized that they wouldn't let him leave with us. Then we were afraid to go to Rafah from the north because of the bombings and shelling on the way. And in general, nobody thought that the war would last so long. In previous wars, I stayed in Gaza City, and they ended after a few weeks or a month."

They were also exhausted from sleepless nights due to the bombings, while suffering from infections and diarrhea due to the contaminated water they've been forced to drink. Then there were the colds or some other virus due to the overcrowding. It's hard to think and plan clearly in such a situation. Hunger and the constant search for food for the children also take over their thoughts.

"On the holiday, we ate sausage that was handed out at the school, and bread that we bought for 5 shekels [\$1.33] instead of 1 shekel," Jihan said. They don't have the money to buy the expensive vegetables at the market. The hunger they're experiencing is constant, so she only mentioned it after being asked about it.

A refugee tent city that sprang up in Rafah, last month. Credit: MOHAMMED ABED - AFP

Saving the mother and children

Many of the women on the current list refused to leave at the beginning of the war for reasons similar to Jihan's. Four of them and their children explicitly asked the Israeli authorities not to separate them from their husbands and fathers. When Israel refused, they remained in Gaza - until the situation deteriorated so much that each family decided that the mother and the children should be saved.

One man who enters Gaza every few months to be with his wife and children is also on the current waiting list.

Another woman in this fourth group was on the second list of Israeli citizens due to leave Gaza, but Israeli tanks stopped at her doorstep in Gaza City, so she couldn't make the dangerous journey to Rafah. And one elderly woman who has been in contact with HaMoked for many years is sticking with her decision to stay with her husband no matter what.

Foreign citizens living or staying temporarily in Gaza (whether they're Palestinians or married to Palestinians), or people with first-degree relatives who are foreign citizens, turned to their countries' Cairo embassies, which coordinated their departure with the Egyptian and Israeli authorities. The length of this bureaucratic process is subject to the discretion of the foreign ministries and embassies and the sway of the applicants and their relatives abroad.

In the first four days of last week, 246 holders of foreign citizenship were set to leave, as indicated in COGAT'S daily reports on humanitarian aid to Gaza. According to the data published at mid-week, so far Israel has facilitated the departure of 16,312 foreign citizens and dual citizens from 69 countries "following a security evaluation and in coordination with Egypt and the United States." Spouses of people who hold foreign citizenship are allowed to leave with them, unlike the spouses of Israeli women (and fewer men).

Israeli citizens and residents in Gaza, and their relatives living in Israel, don't have a state institution they can directly appeal to. Their "embassies" are effectively the two Israeli human rights organizations mentioned above, Gisha and HaMoked. Even before the war, these groups worked via legal procedures and advocacy for the rights of "split" families - where one spouse and some of the children live in Gaza, others in Israel. They strove for the members of these families to live together or at least see each other at reasonable intervals.

During the war as well, Gisha and HaMoked are doing the arduous coordination between the citizens and the Israeli authorities to ensure that the departure date is adhered to. Since the beginning of the fighting they have continuously been in contact with those Israeli citizens in Gaza, inquiring about their desire to leave.

Displaced Palestinian girls on the beach in Rafah last week. The sea is soothing but is also a menace because of the Israeli warships that bombard the land from it. Credit: AFP

"Before each round of departures we check who is interested and able to reach the crossing," an employee at HaMoked said. "At the end of each departure round, we try to coordinate the next round, depending on the circumstances. The list is updated according to the requests we receive. If there's a new applicant who heard about the departure and asks us to help coordinate, we send their details to COGAT and ask to add them to the list. Usually, this is possible."

That's how the current list was formed: 14 women and nine men, 15 girls and nine boys.

One person who contacted Gisha and HaMoked and made it onto the current list was a man who was presented as Mahmoud on Kan Bet public radio. (In a written article by the broadcaster he was presented as Mohammed.) He entered Gaza before the war to visit his family and has been stuck ever since. He took the initiative, called the news organization's Arabic-language reporter and explained his plight: Despite his citizenship, he and his children couldn't leave.

"I'm asking [COGAT chief] Ghasan Alyan to help me, and I'm asking the prime minister to get me out of here. I'm not in a good situation at all," he repeated on the broadcast. It turns out that he witnessed Israel's missile strike on aid workers from World Central Kitchen.

COGAT declined to comment for this article.

Jihan told Haaretz that her neighbors' house was bombed while she and her family were at home. Their house no longer exists. If we asked every person on the list, there is no doubt that the answer would be that everyone witnessed a bombing or shelling and its results. Many people escaped death or injury by the skin of their teeth.

According to the Kan public broadcaster, its reporters - who seem to have had difficulty understanding how Mahmoud/Mohammed, an Israeli citizen, couldn't return home - contacted COGAT and were told that the issue was under review.

Smoke over a market in Gaza City last week. Jihan: "Nobody thought that the war would last so long. In previous wars, I stayed in Gaza City, and they ended after a few weeks or a month." Credit: AFP

Roundabout route

The bureaucratic ordeal that repeatedly delays the rescue of Israeli citizens from fear, hunger and death in Gaza has several aspects. The Israeli authorities insist that Israeli citizens leave through Rafah to Egypt. From there they're driven south to the Taba crossing in northern Sinai. Any necessary coordination with the Egyptians inevitably complicates the process. Indeed, one postponement was explained by the fact that the Egyptians didn't approve the departure from Rafah.

Once a departure is approved due to exit arrangements in Rafah, the people leaving arrive at the Taba terminal in the evening - when it's closed. For security reasons, the Egyptians aren't willing to have the Israelis spend the night in Egyptian territory.

In previous releases, the Israeli side of the crossing was opened in the middle of the night, and the people waited there for the border clerks to arrive in the morning. Now for some reason this arrangement isn't possible.

In addition to the long process and the cumbersome red tape involved in exiting through Rafah, the impoverished Israeli citizens must pay for a visa to Egypt, a bus ride and unidentified payments. "They told me to prepare about 2,000 shekels to pay to Egypt for me and the three children," Jihan said.

Several times rights groups have proposed - for the first time in November - that the Israeli citizens should leave directly from the Kerem Shalom crossing in southern Gaza. Through this crossing, people who were arrested by Israel in Gaza during the war were returned, as well as workers who were in Israel or the West Bank when the war broke out.

At one point, Gisha and HaMoked were told that the crossing was under Hamas' control and therefore dangerous. Another time, the answer was that it was only a goods crossing. Later, it was said that it was a one-way crossing - from Israel to Gaza. Then the explanation was that pedestrians couldn't depart there.

And so, instead of traveling between 30 kilometers (19 miles) and 100 kilometers from Gaza to their home in Israel, the departing women and men travel about 210 kilometers south from Rafah to Taba, and then another 250 to 350 kilometers north in Israel.

Since Rafah and Taba are border crossings, the Israeli citizens are required to exit with passports. But before the war, their passports (and ID cards) were deposited at the district coordination and liaison office (subordinate to COGAT) at the Erez checkpoint on Gaza's northern border.

In the last three exits, Israeli citizens were allowed to leave Rafah based on photocopies of their documents. Then COGAT officials traveled all the way from Erez to Taba and brought the passports of the outgoing citizens with them. This trip also demands coordination according to everyone's schedule.

At the Taba terminal, a team from the Shin Bet security service waits to question the people who are leaving Gaza. In the previous three departures, the arrival of Shin Bet and COGAT employees was set for the same day for the entire group. For the current round, COGAT demanded that the group be split in two for questioning on two consecutive days, contributing to the cumbersome process.

Shifa Hospital in Gaza, earlier this month. Despite the damage caused to the health care system, Israel demands that children of Israeli citizens undergo genetic testing to prove they are related to their parents. Credit: OCHA/Reuters

Another problem that arose - in the second exit by citizens - concerns children who haven't yet been registered in the Israeli population registry, even though, since they have a parent who is an Israeli citizen, their entitlement to citizenship isn't in doubt. For this reason, in December, Israel refused to let out the children of one of the Israeli citizens who married in Gaza. Israel demanded that the children undergo a genetic test to prove that they are indeed the children of that citizen, not children that someone wants to "smuggle" out of Gaza.

Genetic testing during the fighting and destruction of much of the medical system isn't possible in Gaza. Gisha petitioned an administrative court against the requirement to perform a genetic test and claimed that birth certificates and other documents should suffice.

The judge's ruling established a procedure: When the children haven't yet been registered, family members in Israel must file a claim with a family court, which will issue an order for a genetic test to prove motherhood. When this order has been issued, the children will be allowed to go to Taba.

There, officials of the Population Authority will perform the genetic test. The families will deposit 10,000 shekels per child to ensure their return to Gaza if it turns out that they aren't the mother's children. The family also has to pay for the tests and for their delivery from a hospital lab in Tel Aviv to Taba and back.

In this fourth round, four families were in a similar situation: They wait until they all received the court order for genetic testing and the collecting of the money delayed the release of everyone on the list. The bureaucratic principle that has been added: No one on the list is allowed to leave until all are ready to leave.

The bombs? The hunger? The fear? The message they receive from the many delays is that the state and its institutions don't care about rescuing citizens and residents of Israel who have decades of family ties to Gaza.

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P.S.

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<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-04-16/ty-article-magazine/.premium/gazans-who-are-also-israeli-citizens-dont-have-a-country-to-save-them-from-hell/0000018e-e6c5-de97-a5bf-f6f5981e0000>