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Israeli policy splits Palestinian families

Parents, children, and lovers in the West Bank and Gaza are torn apart by Israel's strict 'separation policy'.

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The Gaza Strip 'will not be liveable by 2020' unless Israel's blockade comes to an end, says the UN [Reuters]

To Westerners and Palestinians, Gaza "is hell", says Ali Batha. "It's a scary place ... It's the last place in the world [people want to go]."

There's Gaza's 30 per cent unemployment rate, and the Israeli blockade that restricts imports and exports. Clean drinking water is increasingly scarce. Fuel and electricity shortages cause daily blackouts.

And, according to the United Nations, the Gaza Strip "will not be liveable by 2020" unless the blockade, isolation, and Israeli-Palestinian conflict all come to an end.

Despite the bleak outlook, and despite the fact that Batha, 31, is in the prime of his life, he is planning to leave the West Bank to move to Gaza. It's the only place where he and his wife, Rehab, can live together.

Because of Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement, it's been three-and-a-half years since the two have seen each other.

Batha and Rehab are just one of thousands of Palestinian families who have been torn apart by Israel's "separation policy".

"The dominant aspects of it are to disallow travel between Gaza and the West Bank, to prevent Palestinians from Gaza from moving to the West Bank, and to induce or coerce Palestinians from the West Bank to move to Gaza," says Sari Bashi, executive director of Gisha, an Israeli NGO that advocates for Palestinian freedom of movement.

When asked about the separation policy and its aims, a spokesman from the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories - who requested anonymity - answers that because "terrorist groups in Gaza" seek "to relocate the existing terrorist infrastructure to [the West Bank], Israel has adopted a policy which reduces movements between Gaza and [the West Bank]".

Love blossoms

Batha and Rehab met in 2000 at Birzeit University in the West Bank, where Batha studied economics and Rehab earned a degree in business administration. "It was in a discussion about mythology," Batha recalls. "She started to talk and I was like, 'Oh my god, there is a beautiful girl and she is talking about serious things in an [intelligent] way.'"

The two quickly became friends. After one month, Batha confessed his love to her, adding, "I don't need an answer from you, just take your time."

He then embarked on a campaign to win Rehab's heart. "I did a lot of crazy things," Batha smiles. He scaled the side of her dormitory to reach her balcony. He also covered the sidewalk to her building with drawings and poetry.

Rehab fell for him and they moved in together.

When Rehab graduated in 2004, the couple struggled to decide whether Rehab should travel to the Gaza Strip to visit her parents.

Although Rehab was born in Lebanon, her family moved to Gaza in the early 1990s, as Israel was beginning to restrict Palestinian freedom of movement. In 2000, Israel blocked Gazans from travelling to the West Bank to study. Rehab was one of the last to receive permission to do so.

Because Rehab worried that she wouldn't be able to return to the West Bank to complete her studies, she did not visit Gaza while she was earning her degree.

After much discussion, Batha and Rehab agreed that she would spend a month in Gaza with her family. But, just as the couple feared, Israeli authorities refused the travel permit she needed to return to the West Bank.

Painful separation

The couple reunited and married in Dubai in 2007. When they tried to go back to the West Bank a year-and-a-half later, Israeli soldiers refused entry to Rehab because she had a Gaza ID. So the two went to Egypt, where Rehab's family now lives, and tried to solve the problem from there.

They conferred with high-ranking officials from Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) who, according to Batha, suggested they obtain a referral to a West Bank healthcare facility. Israeli authorities allow a small number of Palestinians to travel from Gaza for medical purposes.

While Palestinians are free to move to Gaza, Israel prevents family reunification in the West Bank, Bashi explains, "unless you are an orphan under the age of 16 with no relatives to care for you in Gaza, an elderly person in need of constant care with no relatives to care for you in Gaza, or a chronically ill person with no relatives to care for you in Gaza".

Bashi calls the policy "extraordinarily restrictive", pointing out that it excludes "any healthy adult".

In addition to recommending that Rehab get a medical referral, PA officials said she might have a stronger case if she were in Gaza. So in 2009 she went alone. As a woman who does not wear a *hijab*, Rehab found the move to conservative Gaza difficult. But she remained there, without family, for three years before returning to Egypt.

On numerous occasions, the couple submitted the necessary paperwork to the PA, which passes on requests to the Israelis.

"[Our] file has been with the [Palestinian] Ministry [of Civil Affairs] for a long time," Ali says, adding he has made countless attempts to follow up on the application.

"The Israelis say, 'We didn't receive anything from you' ... [The PA] says 'bring your papers,

bring your papers'. I don't know where [the PA] put the papers. Maybe in the garbage."

While Batha is angry with the PA for not doing more to help, he blames the Israeli government for the painful separation from his wife, which he likens to "a prison".

Israel also maintains the Palestinian population registry, which gives it the final say regarding official address changes.

Mother who disappeared

In Nisreen Asaid's case, this means that Israel decides whether or not the 30-year-old mother of two will be able to live with her children.

Asaid was arrested at an Israeli checkpoint inside the West Bank in 2007 as she tried to travel from Ramallah to Qalqilya. Soldiers told Asaid that her address was registered in Gaza, where she had lived until she was 14.

She was interrogated and then transferred against her will to the Gaza Strip. Asaid was not allowed to say goodbye to her daughter, who was 10 at the time, or her toddler. She has not seen her children, who remain in the West Bank, for more than five years.

Thanks to a 2011 gesture brokered by the Quartet, Asaid has managed to update her address to the West Bank. But she has been unable to get permission from Israel to travel back from Gaza.

Her son doesn't understand why his mother disappeared from his life and why she can't come back to Ramallah. When they talk on the phone, Asaid says, he sometimes tells her, "We will bring a car to the Erez checkpoint and we will raise the fence and you can go underneath."

Another family has a similar problem. A mother who is stranded in Gaza, raising five children on her own, got her address changed to her husband's home in the West Bank city of Jenin.

Now Israeli officials say she must pick up the new ID in the West Bank. They refuse, however, to issue her the necessary travel permit.

Bashi says Israeli attempts to control Palestinian movement within Gaza and the West Bank violate international human rights law.

"Because Gaza and the West Bank are part of a single territorial unit, Israel is obligated to respect the right of Palestinians to travel freely within the territory and to choose their place of residence within the territory," she explains.

"Any restriction on that right can only be implemented for security reasons, or out of security concerns about the passage [through] Israel."

But a spokesman for the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories disputes this, saying the Israeli Supreme Court has found "no fault" with the policy.

"There is no legal obligation to allow free movement between Gaza and [the West Bank] ... Regarding this specific issue, Gaza and [the West Bank] cannot be declared as a single territorial unit."

Bashi points out that Israel does not have security claims against any of the families interviewed. "And there is certainly no security reason to prevent these families from being together," she says.

As the peace process stagnates and the blockade grinds on, Asaid waits and hopes to see her children. And Batha contemplates his next move: "I can go to Gaza, I can go to hell - whatever - just to feel that I can be with her."