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Athletes and artists show Gaza still occupied

Media Mention of Hussein Ibish in NOW Lebanon - April 8, 2014 - 11:00pm

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/542672-athletes-and-artists-show-...> [1]

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Recent cases involving athletes and musicians show how much Gaza is still under Israeli occupation

I recently participated in a debate in New York City where two noted American pro-Israel advocates, Rabbi Shmuel Boteach and *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens, both kept insisting that there is no Israeli occupation in Gaza. Tell that to the 30 runners who applied for Israeli permission recently to participate in the upcoming Second International Bethlehem Marathon in the occupied West Bank.

They were arbitrarily denied permission by Israeli military officials who said the event "does not meet the rules for exceptions for sports events," because the Marathon "has political overtones." Presumably this means that it's a Palestinian event being held under occupation, which implies that Palestinians can do things without Israeli permission in their own land, and that – horror of horrors – they may be preparing for the eventual independence both they and the rest of the world expect and demand.

Under Israel's own rules, exceptions on the blanket travel ban for Palestinians in Gaza are to be made for, among a small group of others, members of the Palestinian Olympic team and the Palestinian national soccer selection. One of the runners who applied was Nader Masri, who actually ran in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. No dice.

The Israeli rights group, Gisha, appealed on behalf of Masri to Israel's Supreme Court, which turned them down flat. It's easy, in their own comfort and freedom in the United States, for people like Boteach and Stephens to delude themselves by insisting there is no occupation in Gaza because the settlements have been removed. But try squaring that with this arbitrary, and cruel, denial of the right of a qualified and apolitical Palestinian runner from Gaza to participate in a Palestinian marathon in the occupied West Bank. Or the 29 others who simply wanted to run.

There's no question under international law that Gaza remains occupied by Israel. But supporters of Israel wave away international law and UN Security Council resolutions. They cite an absence of Israeli forces in the heart of Gaza or settlers on its periphery. What they don't recognize is that Israel nonetheless controls the ability of ordinary people in Gaza like these runners to deal with their brethren in the West Bank, and

that its policy default is to deny this.

If they had to apply for permission to travel within their own country to a foreign army of occupation, only to be turned down on spurious pretexts that reflect mass punishment rather than anything to do with security, they'd know they are very much still living under foreign military occupation.

It's true that there is one potential crossing for people to get out of Gaza that is controlled by Egypt, but Hamas' reckless policies in and toward the Sinai Peninsula have made the Egyptian government, whether under the Muslim Brotherhood or the new interim authorities, very reluctant to keep that border open on a regular basis.

But all the main channels of ingress and egress out of Gaza, including the seaport, any air route and the only real commercial crossing with industrial equipment, are all controlled, and closed, by Israel. And even if Masri and the others had been able to cross into Egypt, to get into the occupied West Bank and to the marathon in Bethlehem, they would have still needed to enter Palestine with the permission of Israeli soldiers, which they would be denied.

In another example of what Palestinian residents of Gaza face in trying to access the other part of their country and their brethren in the West Bank, 39 Gaza-based musicians asked for permission to travel to the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem to participate in a festival of music and culture. You guessed it: request denied.

Israeli military authorities have not explained the logic of refusing to allow musicians to travel from Gaza to the rest of Palestine for an artistic program, and they say that a final decision hasn't been made, but such denials are rarely reversed. All these restrictions are almost certainly part of a policy of collective punishment directed at the Palestinians of Gaza by Israel because they also have to suffer under the misrule of Hamas.

These policies are not only inhumane, arbitrary, cruel, and simply bewildering, they are also entirely self-defeating for Israel. They don't enhance Israeli security, they fuel Palestinian resentment. They don't undermine Hamas' rule in Gaza, they make the Palestinians of Gaza more dependent on Hamas and less independent, and more cut off from the outside world. Like most blockades, they accrue directly to the benefit of the governing entities, in this case Hamas, at the expense of ordinary people.

And these stories are not the exception but the norm, even when the rules technically shouldn't apply. Gaza is still under Israeli occupation, because if you live there, you can't play sports or music, except in your own neighborhood, without the permission of the Israeli army. You are in prison and the guards at the gates are Israeli soldiers.

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