



Published on Addameer (<http://www.addameer.org>)

[Home](#) > Family Visits

Family Visits

RESTRICTIONS ON FAMILY VISITS

July 2017

Until the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa, or Second Intifada in September 2000, family visits to Palestinian prisoners and detainees held in Israeli prisons were regular and took place largely without interruption. However, following the Israeli re-invasion of the West Bank and the resulting imposition of movement restrictions, all Palestinian families from the occupied territory who wish to visit a family member detained in Israel – with the exception of Jerusalem ID holders – must now receive an entry permit into Israel. The application process for entry permits is lengthy and can take between one and three months, while the permit itself is valid for only one year. The application is submitted via the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and then transferred to the Israeli authorities.

Visits to Palestinian prisoners and detainees are restricted to first-degree relatives – children, spouses, parents, siblings, and grandparents only, thus isolating the detainee from his or her social and professional environment. Men between the ages of 16 and 35 are typically prevented from visiting prisons inside Israel and receive the special entry permits only once a year if they are the brother of the detainee and biannually if they are the son of the detainee. Furthermore, in practice, hundreds of families fail to receive permits at all, based on undisclosed “security grounds”. Israeli authorities never provide any justification for the rejection of a permit application apart from the standard phrase: “forbidden entry into Israel for security reasons”. In many cases, only old and young relatives – children under the age of 16 who do not require permits – are able to visit relatives detained in Israel. As a result, thousands of Palestinian prisoners serve their entire sentences without receiving regular family visits.

When family visits are allowed, they take place once every two weeks for 45 minutes. In the visiting room, a glass window separates the visitor and the prisoner. Physical contact with the detainee is generally forbidden and communication takes place through a telephone or through holes in the glass. Only children under the age of eight are allowed physical contact with the detainee, but strict time restrictions are imposed. Prison guards usually allow children to enter the detainee’s side of the visiting room for the last 10 or 15 minutes of the visit.

For every prisoner, only three adults and two minors are allowed to visit at the same time. Frequently, the suspension of these family visits to a given prison or detention facility is used as a form of collecting punishment.

VISITS TO GAZAN PRISONERS

On 6 June 2007, citing unspecified security reasons, Israeli authorities suspended the ICRC Family Visits Programme in the Gaza Strip, effectively barring all means of communication between Gazan prisoners and the outside world. The family visits ban was upheld by Israel's High Court of Justice in December 2009 and compounded by an IPS prohibition of telephone communication between all detainees and their families. The use of phones was not made available to Gazan detainees even after the suspension of the ICRC Family Visits Programme or during Israel's aerial and ground aggression against Gaza from 27 December 2008 – 18 January 2009. When and if phone contact is allowed, it remains a very rare exception. During Palestinian prisoners' mass hunger strike in April 2012, one main demand of the prisoners was to reinstate family visits to Gaza prisoners. Though Israel agreed to resume the visits upon the conclusion of the hunger strike, as of 30 August 2012, only around half of the current 445 Gaza detainees had received one family visit, and it remains unclear whether any will receive consistent visits.

RESTRICTIONS ON COMMUNICATION VIA LETTERS AND TELEPHONES

The isolation of prisoners is further exacerbated by a general IPS prohibition of telephone communication between prisoners and their families and friends. Although communication via letters is allowed, due to huge delays caused by the censorship imposed by the IPS, prisoners and detainees effectively stop sending letters. Most prisoners interviewed by Addameer report that they stopped writing letters to their families when they heard that the addresses rarely, if ever, receive them.

THE JOURNEY TO PRISON

For Palestinian families who visit relatives detained inside Israel, the journey from home to prison depends on the family's residence and on the type of ID they hold. For most West Bank residents, the round-trip journey takes anywhere from eight to 15 hours depending on their place of residence – village or city – the number of checkpoints they must cross and the location of the prison, i.e. in the northern, central or southern regions of Israel. In many cases, the journey involves waking up as early as 4 or 5 a.m., taking public transportation to the ICRC meeting point in a governorate city and then taking the ICRC bus to the nearest Green Line crossing. During this first part of the journey, visitors are subjected to random searches at checkpoints and multiple ID checks. Once they arrive at the Green Line crossing, family members are forced to walk through between seven and 10 sets of revolving doors and are subjected to lengthy body searches. The family's bags are emptied and searched in separate rooms. This process can last around two hours. Afterwards, families are directed to Israeli-registered ICRC buses waiting on the other side of the Green Line. Escorted by police vehicles, the buses continue their journey to the prisons housing Palestinian prisoners and detainees. Upon arrival at the prison door, family members are routinely subjected to body searches. On occasion, they are also subjected to humiliating strip searches.

Frequently, families of prisoners and detainees report being turned away from a Green Line checkpoint despite holding a valid permit authorizing them to enter Israel on a prison visit. In addition, prisoners are often transferred to different detention facilities just before a scheduled family visit. Such transfers are rarely communicated beforehand to the families, who then make the long journey only to find out that their visit had been canceled.
