

## Deportation could leave Gaza student without degree



Berlanty Azzam says she was blindfolded, handcuffed and sent back to Gaza by Israeli forces.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Gaza student returning from job interview is detained, later deported
- Israeli military says Berlanty Azzam was residing illegally in West Bank
- Group petitions Israeli supreme court to allow Azzam to resume studies

**Jerusalem (CNN)** -- For Berlanty Azzam, Wednesday's two-hour round trip from Bethlehem to Ramallah was supposed to signal the possibility of a new life chapter for the 21-year-old college student.

Azzam, a senior studying business at Bethlehem University, had a job interview in the West Bank capital, hoping to land a sales position after her graduation in December. Azzam made it to the interview, but on her way back to Bethlehem she was stopped at an Israeli Army checkpoint. She handed over her identity papers to the soldiers who told her she could not leave.

She said she was held at the checkpoint for five hours with no explanation, and then blindfolded, handcuffed and put into a military vehicle.

"I did not know what they were going to do with me or where they were taking me," Azzam said in an interview.

As it turns out, Azzam was being removed from the Palestinian [West Bank](#) and brought to the Gaza Strip. She called the experience "frightening and dehumanizing."

The Israeli military released a statement saying Azzam was "residing illegally" in the West Bank and had overstayed a permit "allowing her to stay in Jerusalem for a few days in August 2005."

Azzam, who grew up in [Gaza](#), left her home four years ago after receiving a travel permit from the Israeli government to visit the West Bank. Azzam said she was "scared of something like this happening" and had not returned home to Gaza for that reason. She acknowledged that the Israeli government had issued a temporary permit but said she stayed on in the West Bank because it was the only way for her to attend school.

Azzam's return to Gaza means there is a strong likelihood she will not be allowed back to the West Bank to finish her studies.

In a stated effort to isolate the radical Islamist group Hamas which controls Gaza, Israel has imposed extremely tight restrictions on Palestinians leaving the densely populated coastal strip. The restrictions have extended to Gaza residents who have been accepted to universities in Europe and the United States in addition to the West Bank.

The issue received notoriety last year when the U.S. State Department exerted pressure on Israel to allow some Fulbright scholarship winners to leave Gaza to attend schools in the United States.

Azzam's case has been taken up by Gisha, an Israeli organization which advocates for Palestinian freedom of movement. The group's executive director, Sari Bashi, told CNN that they were petitioning the Israeli supreme court to allow Azzam to immediately return to her studies in the West Bank.

Bashi said that Azzam's forced return to the Gaza Strip is part of a recent campaign by the Israeli military "to search the West Bank for Palestinians whose ID cards are registered in Gaza and to remove them to Gaza by force." Bashi said the right of Palestinians from Gaza to stay in the West Bank is being litigated in the Israeli courts and that the military's "aggressive" treatment of Azzam constituted "a blatant attempt to avoid judicial review."

Mark Regev, a spokesman for the Israeli government, said he was not aware of any policy to remove Palestinians from the West Bank to Gaza and said that in the past there have been concerns about Hamas using access to the West Bank as a way of placing their activists in universities.

Officials at Bethlehem University said they were worried that Azzam's case could set a precedent for the removal of more of their students who come from Gaza and questioned why it was a problem to allow her to finish her studies.

"She has been here since 2005," said Brother Jack Curran, a vice-president at the Vatican-sponsored university. "Name one security concern that she has been involved in."

"It's really not about political posturing," he said. "It's about a young woman's life and her dream and her goal for her university education."

Azzam said her return to Gaza has been bittersweet. After four years away, she said she was happy to see her family but disappointed she was returning without her degree.

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