

Expelled West Bank student petitions Israel court

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A female Palestinian student who says she was handcuffed, blindfolded and hauled off to the Gaza Strip by the Israeli army in the middle of the night late last month asked Israel's supreme court Thursday to let her return to her studies in the West Bank.

The incident highlights a deep fear among the thousands of Palestinians originally from Gaza who now live in the West Bank — sudden expulsion by the Israelis to the Hamas-ruled coastal strip.

Berlanty Azzam, 21, was only two months away from finishing her business degree at Bethlehem University when she was stopped by Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint in the West Bank. After noticing her Gaza-issued identity card, soldiers detained Azzam and put her in the back of an army jeep.

When Israeli soldiers led her out of the vehicle around midnight, Azzam was shocked to see where she was — the border between Gaza and Israel. "I was so surprised, I didn't know what to say," Azzam recalled. "I tried to ask the soldiers if there's any other solution than this, and they just said, 'No, you've reached Gaza, you have to enter.'"

Yadin Elam, a lawyer with the Israeli human rights group Gisha representing Azzam, said such incidents happen on a daily basis and constitute a removal "by force" on the part of Israel of Palestinians from West Bank to Gaza.

Elam estimated that there are currently as many as 25,000 Palestinians living in the West Bank in danger of being deported to Gaza because their identification cards list a Gaza address.

Rights group lawyers and university faculty members asked the supreme court Thursday to allow Azzam to return to the West Bank. Azzam, denied a permit to travel to Jerusalem for the day, remains in Gaza.

Elam said during the hearing that Israel violated Azzam's basic legal rights by denying her access to a lawyer before deportation.

The Israeli supreme court ruled in 2007 that Gaza students had to obtain a permit if they wished to study in the West Bank. Elam said such permits did not exist when Azzam enrolled in Bethlehem University in 2005. At the time, she obtained a four-day permit to enter Israel so she could cross over to the West Bank. "How could they deport her for not having a permit that didn't even exist?" Elam said.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip lie on opposite sides of Israel. The Palestinians hope to form an independent state that includes both territories. Under the 1993 Oslo interim peace accord, both areas were to be considered a single territorial unit. But since Hamas militants violently seized control of Gaza in 2007, Israel has branded Gaza an enemy entity and imposed a blockade that includes strict travel restrictions on residents.

The Israeli army says Azzam was living in the West Bank illegally, and was rightly returned to Gaza.

The court on Thursday remanded the case to a military hearing to be held at the Gaza border next week, where Azzam can attend.

"My priority, what's most important, is to get back to my studies," Azzam said, speaking by phone from Gaza. "I was so close to finishing, I just want to get back to Bethlehem and finish."



Berlanty Azzam, a Palestinian student talks during an interview in Gaza Clty, Thursday, Nov. 12, 2009. Azzam was deported from the best bank city of Bethlehem by the Israeli army, to the Gaza Strip late last month. (AP Photo/ Tara Todras-Whitehill)



Berlanty Azzam, a Palestinian student talks during an interview in Gaza Clty, Thursday, Nov. 12, 2009. Azzam was deported from the best bank city of Bethlehem by the Israeli army, to the Gaza Strip late last month. (AP Photo/ Tara Todras-Whitehill)