

## High Court hears petition on Palestinian student's forced return from Bethlehem U. to Gaza

By DAN IZENBERG

The High Court of Justice is due on Thursday to hear a petition filed by the human rights organization Gisha against the army's forced return of a Palestinian student in her last year of studies at the University of Bethlehem back to her home in the Gaza Strip.



Arab students in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. [illustrative]

Photo: Ariel Jerozolimski

The daily *Haaretz* reported on Tuesday that the US has taken interest in the case involving 21-year-old Berlanty Azzam and that State Department officials in Washington have made inquiries at the Israeli embassy as to why Azzam was expelled from the West Bank and how she was treated by the soldiers and police who drove her to the Erez checkpoint at the Israel-Gaza border.

Azzam was arrested by soldiers at the Jerusalem-Bethlehem checkpoint on October 28, as she was on her way from a job interview in Ramallah back to Bethlehem. The soldiers who examined her identity card saw that her recorded address was in the Gaza Strip and detained her on the spot along with another Palestinian whose address was registered in the Gaza Strip.

As soon as she heard about the arrest, Gisha attorney Yadin Elam called the army's legal adviser in the West Bank, and said it intended to file a petition against Azzam's expulsion. Capt. Noa Shafrir promised Elam that Azzam would not be expelled before the Gisha attorney's scheduled meeting with her on October 29. Instead, however, soldiers took Azzam a few hours later, searched and then blindfolded her and drove her away without telling her where she was going. Later in the evening, she was transferred from the jeep to a police van and driven to Erez checkpoint, where she was released at 10:30 p.m.

Azzam is in her last semester in a course of studies leading to a BA in business administration and translation.

According to the state's response to the petition, Azzam has been studying in the West Bank illegally for the past four years. In 2005, the government rejected her request for a permit to enter Israel on her way to the West Bank to study at Bethlehem University.

Instead, the authorities granted her a permit to come to Jerusalem for a limited number of days on a different pretext altogether. Once in Jerusalem, the state declared, she crossed into Bethlehem and has remained there ever since, without once visiting her family in Gaza.

According to the state, her request to study in the West Bank was rejected as part of the state's overall policy to refuse all requests by students to study in Israel because of security reasons.

Gisha was founded in 2005 to protect the freedom of movement of Palestinians.

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