

A Gazan student's dream hangs in the balance

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By Lawahez Jabari, NBC News Producer

BETHLEHEM, West Bank – "I felt very nervous and frightened walking through the Erez Crossing today. I was forced to go back to Gaza. My family was waiting for me to return with my university degree, but I came home without carrying the dream that they were waiting for," said Berlanty Azzam, a 22-year-old woman from Gaza, in a phone interview Tuesday.

Azzam has been a student at Bethlehem University since 2005. Four years later and just two months shy of completing her degree in business management, Azzam was stopped on Oct. 28 at a routine Israeli checkpoint near Ramallah, in the West Bank, on her way to a job interview.

When the Israeli guard noticed Gaza City on her ID card, she was immediately arrested for being in the West Bank without permission. Within hours, according to her attorney, Yadin Elam, she was blindfolded, handcuffed, and removed to Gaza by force – without any kind of hearing or access to a lawyer before she was deported.



Tara Todras-whitehill / AP

Berlanty Azzam, a Palestinian student talks during an interview in Gaza City on Nov. 12.

Azzam admits that she did not have the required permission to study in the West Bank – something that has been increasingly difficult for Gazans to obtain since Hamas, the Palestinian militant movement, took over Gaza in 2007 and the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that students from Gaza had to obtain a permit.

But, Elam said, those permits didn't exist when she initially enrolled in Bethlehem University back in 2005. At that time, Azzam received a four-day permit to enter Israel, traveled to Bethlehem to enroll and never went back to Gaza. She also said that she repeatedly tried to get permit-application forms, without success.

Azzam, a well-spoken, educated woman, celebrated her 22nd birthday on Monday far from the campus where she hopes to obtain her degree. She particularly wanted to study in heavily Christian Bethlehem because of her faith (she is one of an estimated 1,500-2,500 Christians living in Gaza).

The Israeli government military, Elam says, makes no claim that Azzam poses a security threat. But, according to Israel's rules, even if a student from Gaza is declared risk-free and seeks to cross to the West Bank for the sole purpose of studying, once in the West Bank, that individual may in theory decide at any moment to engage in terrorist acts; therefore, he or she is not permitted to be there.

This policy has a particularly adverse effect on students' educational aspirations since many university programs don't exist in Gaza and can only be studied in the West Bank.

Her case has drawn widespread attention in Israel and has caught the attention of the U.S. State Department. According to the Washington Post, officials from the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv have made inquiries about the case with the Israeli government.

"Berlanty, and other Palestinian students from Gaza, have the right to access Palestinian universities in the West Bank," said Sari Bashi, the executive director of Gisha, an Israeli non-profit organization that uses legal assistance to try to protect the freedom of movement of Palestinians and is representing Azzam.

"Allowing them to do so also promotes Israeli and U.S. interests in helping young people access the educational resources they need to build a better future in the region," said Bashi. "There is no security claim against Berlanty. It is not clear what Israel gains by preventing her from completing her degree."

The pressure appears to have worked: Israel's high court ordered the military to give Azzam an opportunity to challenge her removal to Gaza at an administrative hearing. The military held a hearing Tuesday on the Gaza side of the Erez Border Crossing between Israel and Gaza, attended by Azzam and her attorney.

"The army did today what it should have done that October night when Berlanty was arrested, handcuffed, blindfolded and forcibly removed to Gaza. [It] listened to what Berlanty has to say," said Elam. "We hope that they will decide the right thing and allow her to go back to her studies."

Until her case is decided, Azzam is biding her time and hoping that she will be able to return to school soon.

"After the military hearing today, I'm optimistic about returning to Bethlehem soon to be able to achieve my family's dream of receiving a degree," Azzam said over the phone from Gaza on Tuesday night. "And so I can prove to the whole world that the degree was my main – and only – goal in the West Bank."

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