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Israel Prize winners to Barak: Let Gazans study in W. Bank

Signatories include 2010 Israel Prize winners Avishai Margalit and Yehoshua Kolodny, past winners Jad Neeman, Yehoshua Sobol and more.

Ten Israel Prize winners and more than 50 other academics and intellectuals wrote to Defense Minister Ehud Barak on Wednesday, asking him to lift the sweeping prohibition preventing students from the Gaza Strip from studying in West Bank universities.

The signatories included 2010 Israel Prize winners Avishai Margalit and Yehoshua Kolodny, and past winners David Tartakover, Jad Neeman, Yehoshua Sobol and Nir Baram.

“We have learned that since 2000 there has been a blanket ban preventing residents of the Gaza Strip from traveling to the West Bank for studies,” the authors of the letter wrote to Barak and Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilna’i.

“The ban has dealt a severe blow to higher education in Gaza and to society at large, especially considering the fact that the study of vital professions such as occupational therapy, dentistry, physical therapy, speech therapy and health system management is offered only in the West Bank and not in the Gaza Strip.

“We, the undersigned academics and cultural figures, emphasize the importance of education for the development of a prosperous civil society. We believe that academic and professional training are vital for the well-being and growth of Palestinian society and the personal development of each young person who wishes to better him- or herself. Allowing our Palestinian neighbors to build a thriving and peace-seeking civil society is clearly an Israeli interest.”

The ban was imposed after the outbreak of the second intifada and has been in place ever since. According to the human rights organization Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, the High Court of Justice ruled in 2007 that students from Gaza wishing to study in the West Bank should be allowed to do so “in cases that would have positive human consequences.

Yet “to the best of Gisha’s knowledge, Israel has not allowed a single student to enter Gaza since then.”

Gisha added that before the year 2000, about 1,000 Palestinians from Gaza were studying in the West Bank, many in essential disciplines not available in Gaza.

Last year, Gisha represented Berlanty Azzam, a 22-year-old student at Bethlehem University, who was only two months away from obtaining her degree in business

administration. Azzam had entered the West Bank illegally in 2005. The university had accepted her application to study, but Israel would not allow her to move to Bethlehem.

Azzam obtained a permit based on humanitarian grounds to visit relatives in Jerusalem, and crossed from there into Bethlehem. She remained in the West Bank for four years without seeing her family in Gaza, but was eventually caught at a military checkpoint and immediately expelled.

Recently, Gisha appealed to the military authorities on behalf of three students from Gaza accepted for studies this year at Bethlehem University: Jawdat Michael, Dana al-Tarazi and Owda Aljelda. They are now seeking to attend the 2010 university summer session.