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Legal expert Leila Hilal is fighting the Interior Ministry to return to her job in East Jerusalem. The ministry seems to think it knows what's best for both Hilal and UNRWA, her employer

Amira Hass | [Send me email alerts](#)

12.04.2010 09:49 Updated: 10:43 AM

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To the credit of the Interior Ministry, it must be said that it is not impressed by big names. The case before us involves a 41-year-old U.S. native whose resume is laced with prestigious institutions like Harvard University and Oxford University, work in the United States regarding labor laws and immigration, and consulting for the greatly respected South African Constitutional Court.

This is Leila Hilal, whose application to reenter Israel for work was denied. She is going through the extensive hassle typically experienced by people - mostly businessmen or academics - who are coming to work not in Israel but rather in the Palestinian Authority, or for organizations that work in the Palestinian community.

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Hilal, an expert on the development of international organizations, was employed by Adam Smith between 2002 and 2008. And no, she is not of Palestinian origin, and she does not have family here. Her obstacle course has included two denials of entry to Israel (in 2006 and 2009), forced absence from work, lobbying the American Embassy to intervene, accelerated blood pressure every time she has to renew her visa, and the accusations of border officials that she is lying by requesting a tourist visa, because after all, as she herself said, she works here. Go explain that you weren't working in Israel but rather in Palestinian territory, and that the Palestinians don't have the authority to issue a visa and therefore there are

gentlemen's agreements with Israel to let people like her to enter and leave the country every several months.

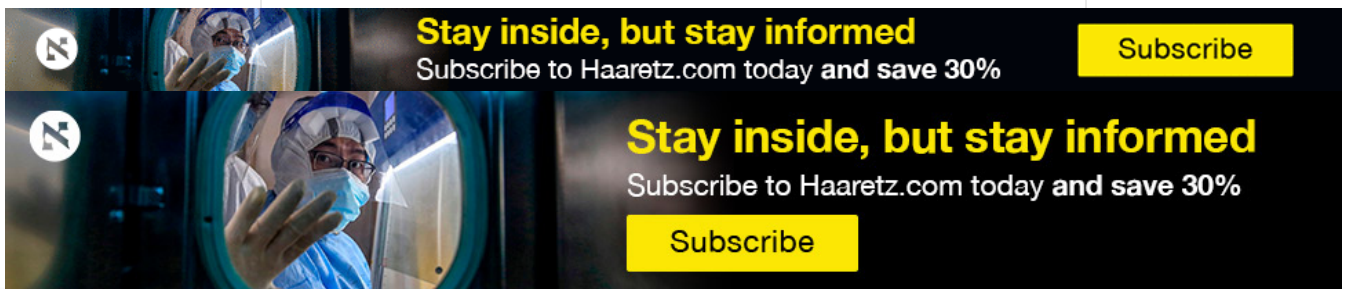
To all this must be added the abstruse, exhausting legalese of the state's replies. Here is an example: "The request from the American Embassy reinforces the decision to refuse entry to Israel, as the applicant resides in Ramallah only. In light of all that has been said above, it has been decided to refuse her entry to Israel for fear she will settle."

Is Ramallah part of Israel? Is work considered settling down? Haven't you ever heard of international consultants who routinely work in countries that are not their own?

In September 2008, Hilal signed an agreement to work as a consultant on a special project of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Her contract was renewed once, and now ends on October 31.

However, the Interior Ministry is waging a new battle to end her tenure. After much difficulty and legal intervention, she was allowed to stay in the country until the end of 2009, and the Interior Ministry is refusing to grant her another visa.

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the state, of course, has no objection. The state's objection is to the petitioner filling this position ... It would appear that an organization like UNRWA could find a suitable replacement for the petitioner, and work on the project would not stop only because the petitioner has left Israel."

UNRWA, as a United Nations organization, does not get involved in legal proceedings in countries where it works, says Hilal's attorney, Adi Lustigman of Jerusalem. Therefore it is remaining silent. However, three Israeli character witnesses have appended letters of support for Hilal: Ron Pundak of the Peres center for Peace; Israella Oron, a reserves brigadier general and now a researcher; and attorney Anat Ben Dor from the legal clinic at Tel Aviv University. All met Hilal at forums about solving the conflict, and were impressed by her professionalism.

On April 18, Judge Moshe Yoed Hacoen of the Jerusalem District Court, sitting as a court for administrative affairs, will deliberate her request to return. The state believes Hilal should not be present at the deliberation; Hacoen has ruled she can come for 72 hours, in return for a monetary deposit, even though thus far he has accepted most of the state's positions. Thus, in December, he did not issue an interim order to enable her to remain in the country until the petition itself was deliberated.

At that time Hacoen ruled that the petitioner "has no status in the relations between UNRWA and the Israeli authorities, and since the organization applied to the relevant authorities (the Interior Ministry and the Foreign Ministry) and was turned down, the petitioner herself has no status to manage the disagreement of the organization (UNRWA) with the authorities.

"The Interior Ministry, which has been given responsibility for the country's gates as far as noncitizens are concerned, has very broad authority to decide whether foreign citizens may visit, stay and work. The respondent is also exempt by law from the obligation to justify its position," said Hacoen.

However, Hacoen did not accept the contention by the state or the Interior Ministry that Hilal's attempts to receive a visa were tainted by a lack of honesty. The petitioner, noted Hacoen, "is the citizen of a country friendly to Israel and not of an enemy country.

"The refusal to grant her a work visa has not been justified by a criminal or a security reason," he stated.

Will Hacoen rule that an Israeli bureaucrat has the right to intervene in UNRWA's considerations and tell the UN organization to find another expert, in place of the one it has chosen?

Amira Hass

Haaretz Correspondent



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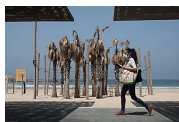
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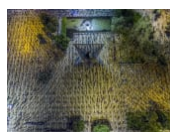
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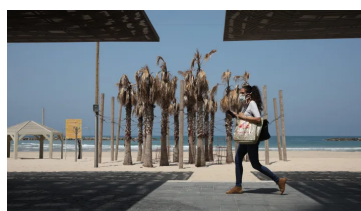


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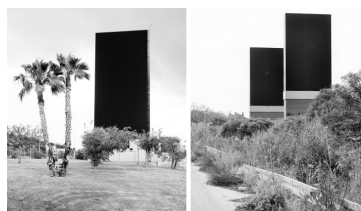
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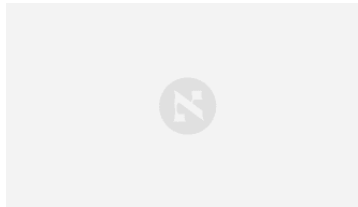
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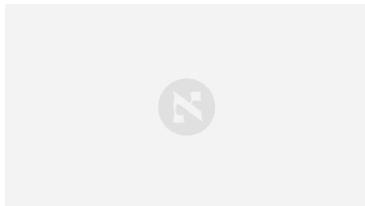
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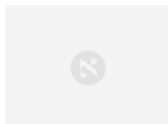
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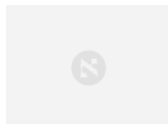
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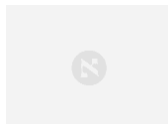
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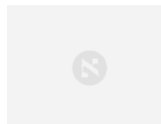
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