

AN ACTIVIST'S GUIDE TO TRAVELLING TO GAZA

Travelling to Gaza (and back) is not very straightforward at the moment so we thought we would write about our experiences and give a step-by-step guide of how to get into Gaza. We have gone into some detail and have included some of the mistakes that we made in the hope that we might save other activists some time. Most of all we hope that this guide encourages others to travel to Gaza in solidarity. The siege being imposed against everyone in Gaza is isolating people in Gaza from the international Palestine solidarity movement. It is our job not to accept this isolation.

We got permits from the Egyptian government to cross through the Rafah border and work as volunteers. You can also apply to travel to Gaza as a journalist but this process is different. NGO workers and journalists for international mainstream newspapers do sometimes get permits to cross from Israel through the Beit Hanoun (Erez) crossing too, but this is by no means certain even if you have the right credentials. Below is the process we went through, followed by a checklist recapping the key points.

Getting an invite

The first thing that it's necessary to do is to get an invitation from an organisation in Gaza. This could be any organisation that is registered with the authorities in Gaza. If you need help finding a group to invite you, contact your local Palestine Solidarity group or email us at the addresses on page 4. The invitation needs to be signed and stamped by the organisation, show your full name, nationality and passport number and state what you will be doing when you are in Gaza.

Applying for a permit to cross Rafah

When you have the invite you need to send it to the Egyptian Embassy in your respective country to get a permit from Egypt to cross Rafah into Gaza. You need to email a scanned copy of your letter of invitation, passport details and a scan of your passport and request a permit to cross Rafah. Permits can take a long time to process. In our case our application took seven weeks and gave us a window of just four days to cross Rafah, which turned out to be at times when the Rafah border was closed. We were still allowed to cross when the border opened, despite our permit having expired, after speaking to the Egyptian security 'services' in Rafah.

Getting a Palestinian sponsor and permit

The organisation that invites you also needs to apply for a permit from the Ministry of Interior in Gaza and provide a named sponsor who is, in theory, responsible for you. When you get to Gaza you'll also be asked to provide an address and phone number in the Strip and the authorities may check where you are during your stay. Your sponsor also needs, in our experience, to collect you from the border on the Palestinian side and answer some questions from the Palestinian border officials.

Schedule 7 of the UK Terrorism Act

On previous trips to Palestine we have been stopped, detained and questioned by the British Special Branch under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000. Schedule 7 is a law that gives the police at UK borders and ports the power to stop, search and detain people without suspicion. It is an arrestable offence not to answer questions which are asked within the parameters set out by the Act, punishable on conviction with a three month custodial sentence or a fine. The guidance to the law clearly states that Schedule 7 "should only be used to counter terrorism and may not be used for any other purpose." However, it has been consistently misused by the British police.

Be aware that you may be stopped under the Act, decide on a strategy to deal with it and don't carry sensitive information with you. Be especially careful not to hand the police information about Palestinian people you met. Consider storing your notes and people's contact details securely online so you don't have to carry them across the border. For tips on how to use the web as securely as possible see the Tech Tools for Activism website (see the end of the factsheet for a list of useful websites).

We weren't stopped at all on this visit, possibly because the police are currently more wary about stopping activists because of public scrutiny and the possibility of legal challenges. There has been a recent public outcry over the use of Schedule 7 and also a High Court ruling stating that people stopped are entitled to have a solicitor present. Our previous articles about Schedule 7 can be read on the Corporate Watch website. The Cage Prisoners campaign and the Islamic Human Rights Commission also have useful information available online.

Preparing to travel

Before setting off we spoke to as many activists as possible who had done similar trips recently and got as much advice as we could. We gathered contacts in Gaza and got in touch with them about our trip. We also made sure that the network of local organisations and solidarity activists we are in touch with knew about our trip and were ready to give support and spread any information that we gathered. We visited our local Member of Parliament and asked her to be ready to support us should we need it and tried to ensure that our Trade Union would do the same. We put together a support team of friends and activists who would be kept informed about where we were, be ready to respond in emergencies and help us to get information out.

We have spent a lot of time working in the West Bank over the years and had a pretty good idea of the kinds of issues to be aware of when travelling to Palestine. If you've never been to Palestine before it's really important to meet people who have experience and can give you tips on how to work productively and minimise risks. The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) has many years of experience and is the best source of information for people considering visiting Gaza. Activists from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign in the UK also have experience of travelling to Palestine: contact them to find out about your local group.

Travel to Egypt

We travelled to Cairo at the end of October 2013, one day before the four day window on our permit was due to begin. Since Al Sisi's military coup against Mohammed Morsi in July 2013, the Egyptian authorities have been severely repressing Muslim Brotherhood activists and intensifying the war for control of North Sinai. Egyptian policy toward Gaza's Hamas government, which has its roots in the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood movement, has lead to the tightening of restrictions at the Rafah crossing to the point of strangulation. Activists calling for greater freedoms within Egypt are also being violently repressed.

At the time we arrived there was still a curfew imposed in Cairo and we had to pay over the odds for our flight to arrive in the morning after the curfew (when everyone else wanted to arrive, too). Shortly before we arrived two foreign activists who were en-route to Gaza had been arrested and imprisoned so we decided to get out of Cairo as soon as we could. We also decided not to travel with a Press Card as we thought this could cause problems. If you do stay in Cairo we would suggest somewhere away from Tahrir Square, where clashes with the police and army often take place.

Cairo to North Sinai

There is currently a low intensity war going on against the Egyptian army in the Sinai, particularly in the areas close to Al Arish and Rafah and in villages in between the two. The whole of North Sinai is potentially dangerous, although past attacks have been targeted against the police and army.

We have heard that people may be prevented by the police from travelling to North Sinai before the border opens and forced to stay in Cairo until the day that it does. Police sometimes come to people's hotels to make sure they do not travel.

We had booked a private car direct from the airport to Rafah, a journey of five or six hours (on a good day). Some people think it's safer to take a bus to Al Arish, but our gut feeling was to opt for a private car. On the day we arrived, the bridge across the Suez Canal had been closed by the military and people were taking a ferry across after crossing a military checkpoint. We

were stopped by soldiers and our permits to cross Rafah were scrutinised. Our luggage was searched and we were asked to hand over passwords to our computers which were looked at by the roadside before we were allowed through. We had wiped all our electronic devices clean before travelling so this was no problem.

We arrived in Al Arish in Sinai without further incident after about five hours. However, at the checkpoint heading out of Al Arish the soldiers, after inspecting our permits, told us that the Rafah crossing had closed that day and that we would not be allowed through. The soldiers also ripped the sun shades off the windows of our car (for "security reasons") and cut holes in them with Stanley knives before throwing them in a ditch. Our driver, who had never visited North Sinai before, was shocked at their behaviour and argued with them. They screamed back at him.

The Egyptian army in North Sinai acts like any army of occupation. The locals are both afraid of and enraged by them. Men wearing balaclavas and carrying machine guns can be seen atop armoured personnel carriers (APCs) surveying the streets of Al Arish and even firing off shots.

In the end we stayed five days in Al Arish waiting for the border to open. We stayed in Hotel Mecca, a cheap, friendly place where many Palestinians waiting for the border to open were also staying. We went to the border twice on the off-chance that it would be open. This is a pointless exercise as local people in Al Arish will know when the border is open and it is better, and safer, to wait until then. We arrived just after the military had reported an attack on them outside Al Arish and telephone and internet services were cut off during the morning and afternoon. The length of time the connection was cut off had been reduced by the time we left but restrictions on public communications do seem to be a regular occurrence.

During the time that Rafah was closed our permit to cross ran out. We went to the security office in Rafah town. They took our passport numbers and said it would be ok to cross the day the border opened despite the fact that our permits had run out.

The night before the border was due to open an APC full of Egyptian security and police arrived at our hotel and demanded

to see us. We gave them our passports and permits and they radioed our details through. They told us they wanted to escort us to Rafah and we were not allowed to leave without them. In the morning we found that our driver had had a similar visit during the night and that they were waiting for us. An APC drove in front of our car throughout the one and a half hour journey to Rafah.

A private taxi from Al Arish to Rafah should cost 70–100 Egyptian Pounds (LE) (£7–10). A night in a cheap hotel in Al Arish costs about 80 LE (£8).

The Rafah Crossing

The Rafah crossing was open for roughly ten days per month during the times that we were there, but in 2014 the border has been closed for over a month at a time. Opening times were erratic and were not publicised in advance. The crossing is almost exclusively for people, although some small donations of medicine, construction materials and aid are occasionally let through. The closure of the Rafah crossing is one of the biggest issues for people living in Gaza, as it is the only exit from the Strip for most people.

We arrived at Rafah and walked towards the crossing, accompanied by the security man. Before entering the terminal we were asked for our documents by soldiers. As we were giving them we were approached by a man who said he worked at the crossing and wanted to help us. It seems that a number of people work at the crossing as 'fixers' helping people get through, and rely on tips from the people they help. In the end these services turned out to be pretty invaluable. We paid about 100 LE (£10) to a 'fixer' for each time we crossed the border, as well as 100 LE to the security man. We may have been a bit overgenerous but we were very keen that we would cross the border without any issues, particularly bearing in mind our expired permit.

We filled out a departure card and paid about 2 LE (about 2 pence) for a stamp and then gave that with our passports to the officials behind the desk. We waited in the departure hall for a couple of hours and then, after our names were called out, we were allowed to head to the bus which takes you across the border. We paid a 105 LE (£10.50) exit fee and 20 LE (£2) for the bus.

Palestinian border control

We were unlucky enough to get turned away on the Palestinian side on the first occasion as our sponsor had failed to apply for the permit from the Ministry of the Interior and wasn't there to pick us up. We were only able to get in the next day after the permit had been applied for and we had paid more baksheesh (tips) on the Egyptian side and enjoyed another police escort.

On the second try we got into Gaza with no problems after a representative of our sponsor organisation had met us and been questioned by border officials. We were asked about the purpose of our visit and where we were staying in Gaza. We were then given a permit to stay in Gaza for one month.

In Gaza

While in Gaza it's good to stay in touch with your sponsor organisation and inform them if you change your address. We have heard that international activists who have tried to live outside Gaza City recently have been told by the government to move to a 'secure area' for security reasons. Other than that we found it easy to do our research in Gaza and did not encounter any difficulties from the Palestinian authorities.

It's important that international activists get training from experienced activists about cultural issues when working in Palestine and about potential risks before travelling.

Leaving Gaza

In order to leave Gaza through the Rafah crossing you need to register your passport details with the Palestinian Ministry of Interior, the authority which prioritises who can go through Rafah and provides lists to the Egyptian authorities. You can do this at the Al Qatiba security office close to Al Deira restaurant at El Mena in Gaza City.

Crossing Rafah is an uncomfortable experience as foreign visitors are put at a high priority along with people going outside for medical treatment and students with scholarships abroad. Many Gazan people, who are not considered high priority, are unable to pass through Rafah due to the backlog.

On our first attempt to cross Rafah we arrived at the crossing at 9am (too late as it turned out). There was a crowd of people desperate to get on one of the buses across the border. There were scuffles with the Palestinian guards at the gates to the terminal and people sat in front of buses that carry people across the border in an attempt to get on.

We were eventually ushered through the gates to a taxi which charges 20 shekels (£3–4) for the 200 metre drive to the terminal building. We were asked to wait while security guards checked that we were on the list then we were put onto a crowded bus.

We were driven a few hundred metres to the Egyptian guardpost and then held for five hours, along with several Palestinian Ministry of Health ambulances, not being informed what was going on. We were told that the first two buses had eventually been allowed through but our bus was turned back on the orders of the Egyptians.

The border was then closed for another ten days. There was no news about when it would open again. The best source of news on the border turned out to be the 'fixer' who worked at the Rafah terminal. When the border was finally opened it was initially only reported in the Arabic language press: It's worth translating the news on www.samanews.com as well as checking Twitter.

When we returned to Rafah we arrived at 6.30am. The Palestinian waiting area was already crowded with hundreds of people and more were arriving. Eventually we were ushered onto the Egyptian side of Rafah where hundreds of people were jostling to have their passports stamped. Many Palestinians received only 48 hours permission to visit Egypt for transit

purposes, and we saw many who were being threatened with being put back on the bus to Gaza by Egyptian bureaucrats.

By the time we walked out of the terminal into Egypt it was 3.15pm. Hundreds were still waiting to get through, the Egyptian border officials seeming not to care that those waiting would have to put themselves in danger travelling in the dark through North Sinai because of the constant delays. Parts of the road to Al Arish close after 4pm making the journey more dangerous.

We took a cab to Cairo (which can be as little as 450 LE (£45), although we paid 600 LE (£60). A seat in a shared car is 100 LE (£10 each). As we were driving through the village of Sheikh Zwaid, a few miles outside Rafah we saw a large explosion on an adjacent road about 150 metres away. People scattered in panic, drivers stepped on their accelerators and people rushed to close the shutters of their shops. We later read that the army claimed that they had opened fire on a vehicle driving toward a military base and it had exploded.

The drive to Al Arish was difficult. We arrived at a checkpoint shortly after the attack where one of the soldiers was standing in the road randomly firing his machine gun into the desert. We turned our car around and drove along dirt tracks and minor roads until we reached the main checkpoint into Al Arish. However, this was closed too and we were only able to reach the town after several more detours. There were a further three checkpoints between Al Arish and Suez, at one of which they asked us a couple of questions. We arrived in Cairo at 10.30pm.

CHECKLIST

- Contact an organisation in Gaza and ask for an invitation. The invite needs to include your name, passport number, date of birth and how long you plan to stay.
- Apply for a permit to cross Rafah from the Egyptian embassy in your country of residence. Send them the invitation from Gaza and scans of your passport. Be prepared to wait up two months and remember that the permit will only be for a few days from the earliest date you requested.
- When you have the permit from Egypt ask the organisation that invited you to apply for a Palestinian permit for you to enter Gaza from the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior and provide a sponsor who will be officially responsible for you while you are in Gaza.
- If you are travelling from the UK be aware that you may be stopped under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000 when leaving and returning. Be careful about what information you are travelling with.
- Make sure you check the news about the situation in Cairo and in North Sinai before travelling and think carefully about where you stay and how you travel. Check if there is a curfew in place in Cairo.
- You will need to pay a \$15 (£8) visa fee when entering Egypt.
- Travel to Rafah. You need to carry a copy of your Egyptian permit to cross Rafah. Your luggage and equipment may be searched on the way.
- Pay 105 LE (£10.50) border fees and 20 LE (£2) bus fare when leaving Egypt. Be prepared to pay some baksheesh (tips) too.
- You need to be met at the Palestinian border by your sponsor, who should be an individual from the organisation that invited you. You will also need to tell the Palestinian border officials where you are staying in Gaza and the purpose of your visit.
- When you want to leave you need to let the Ministry of the Interior know. You can do this at the Al Qatiba security office close to Al Deira restaurant at El Mena in Gaza City.
- You'll need to pay another \$15 visa fee and 105 LE border fee when crossing back into Egypt.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.corporatewatch.org

www.corporateoccupation.org

International Solidarity Movement: www.palsolidarity.org

Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org

Tech Tools for Activism: www.techtoolsforactivism.org

If you have questions contact us at tom@corporatewatch.org or theresia@corporatewatch.org