

Israelis Risk Jail to Smuggle Palestinians

600 sign up for campaign of disobedience

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Nearly 600 Israelis have signed up for a campaign of civil disobedience, vowing to risk jail to smuggle Palestinian women and children into Israel for a brief taste of life outside the occupied West Bank.

The Israelis say they have been inspired by the example of Ilana Hammerman, a writer who is threatened with prosecution after publishing an article in which she admitted breaking the law to bring three Palestinian teenagers into Israel for a day out.

Ms Hammerman said she wanted to give the young women, who had never left the West Bank, “some fun” and a chance to see the Mediterranean for the first time.

Her story has shocked many Israelis and led to a police investigation after right-wing groups called for her to be tried for security offences.

It is illegal to transport Palestinians through checkpoints into Israel without a permit, which few can obtain. If tried and found guilty, Ms Hammerman could be fined and face up to two years in jail.

But Israelis joining the campaign say they will not be put off by threats of imprisonment.

Last month, a group of 11 Israeli women joined Ms Hammerman in repeating her act of civil disobedience, driving a dozen Palestinian women and four children, including a baby, through a checkpoint into Israel.

The Israeli women say they are planning mass “smugglings” of Palestinians into Israel over the coming weeks.

“The Palestinians who join us are mainly looking to have a good time after years of confinement under the occupation, but for us what is most important is our act of defiance,” said Ofra Lyth, who helped establish an online forum of supporters after attending a speech by Ms Hammerman.

“We want to overturn this immoral law that gives rights to Jews to move freely around while keeping Palestinians imprisoned in their towns and villages,” she said, referring to regulations that bar most Palestinians in the occupied territories from entering Israel, and Israelis from assisting them. Exceptions are made for Palestinians with permits, sometimes issued for a medical emergency or to some labourers with security clearance.

For the Palestinian women, though, it is not about making a statement or defying an unjust law, said Ms Lyth.

“The Palestinian women tell us: ‘Go ahead and make your political point, but for us we’re breaking the law so that we can enjoy ourselves and remember how life was before the checkpoints and the wall.’ One woman told me: ‘I just want to be able to breathe again’.”

For Palestinians in the West Bank, it is not often easy to breathe. The territory is home to a growing population of 300,000 Jews in more than 100 settlements. The settlers are able to drive into Israel on roads that the army oversees with checkpoints.

It was through one such settler crossing, near Beitar Ilit, south of Jerusalem, that Ms Hammerman took the three Palestinian teenagers this year.

For their protection, she has not identified the young women or the West Bank village where they live. She refers to the women as Aya, Lin and Yasmin. They, too, could face jail for breaking the law.

In Ms Hammerman’s article, published in the Haaretz newspaper in May, she admitted that she was aware her actions were illegal.

She told the women, who were 18 and 19, to take off their hijabs for the day and dress in western-style clothes to avoid attracting attention from soldiers at the checkpoint. She also taught them an easy Hebrew phrase — Hakull beseder, or “Everything is okay” — in case a soldier spoke to them.

She then took them on a tour of Tel Aviv, visiting the city’s university, a museum, a shopping mall and the beach, which she noted none of them had ever seen even though it is only about 40km from their village.

Gisha, an Israeli human rights group, said Israel introduced a permit system to limit Palestinian movement out of the West Bank in the early 1990s – about the time the young women were born.

Ms Hammerman wrote that the only dangerous moment during the trip was when a plain-clothes policeman stopped them and asked for the women’s identity cards. Ms Hammerman lied to the officer, telling him that the women were Palestinians from East Jerusalem and therefore entitled to enter Israel.

In June, Yehuda Weinstein, the attorney general, was reported to have approved a police investigation of Ms Hammerman after a settler organisation, the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel, complained.

The ranks of Ms Hammerman’s supporters have swollen since the group placed an advertisement, titled “We refuse to obey”, in Haaretz this month. The ad said the group was “acting in the spirit of Martin Luther King”, the US civil rights leader, and demanded that Palestinians be treated as “human beings, not terrorists”.

Over the past week, the online forum has attracted more than 590 Israelis signing up to repeat Ms Hammerman’s act of civil disobedience.

“That has really surprised and encouraged me,” she said. “I did not realise there were so many other Israelis who have had enough of this outrageous law.”

Still, the coverage of Ms Hammerman and her supporters in the Israeli media has been largely hostile. During a television interview last week, she was accused of endangering Israelis with her trips. The show's host, Yaron London, asked whether she had inspected the Palestinian women's underclothes for explosives before allowing them into her car.

She will not be deterred, though. She said the group had discussed future trips for Palestinians, including taking them to pray at al-Aqsa, the mosque in Jerusalem that has been inaccessible to most Palestinians for at least a decade, and visits to Palestinian relatives they cannot see in Jerusalem and Israel.

"We need to get Israelis meeting Palestinians again, having fun with them and seeing that they are human beings with the same rights as us."

She said her immediate goal was to kick-start a discussion among Israelis about the legality and morality of Israel's laws and challenge the public's "blind obedience" to authority.

Ms Lyth added that the Palestinian women "who have gone on our trips are the heroes of their village. They and their families know they are taking a big risk in breaking the law, but harassment is part of their daily lives anyway".

Till now the trips have been restricted to smuggling Palestinian women and children only, said Ms Hammerman. "It is harder to bring men in without being discovered and the authorities would be likely to treat Palestinian men much more harshly if they were caught."

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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