

Ambassador Lars Faaborg-Andersen  
Delegation of the European Union to Israel  
Paz Tower 15th - 16th floors  
5-7 Shoham Street  
Ramat Gan - P.O.Box 3513

7 March 2017

Re – International travel restrictions affecting the native Syrian population of the Occupied Syrian Golan

Dear Ambassador,

I am the director of Al-Marsad – Arab Human Rights Centre in the Golan Heights. Al-Marsad is a non-profit human rights organisation that monitors and documents violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed by Israel in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

I am writing to inform you about the severe international travel restrictions affecting the native Syrian population of the Occupied Syrian Golan and to respectfully request immediate action to rectify this situation.

As I am sure that you are aware, following the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan in 1967; Israel enacted the *Golan Heights Law* in 1981 which purported to annex the Occupied Syrian Golan into the state of Israel, an illegal action widely condemned by the international community.<sup>1</sup> As part of efforts to legitimise this action, on 17 January, 1982, the Israeli Ministry of Interior began administrative procedures to impose Israeli nationality on the remaining native Syrian population. Despite intimidation by the Israeli authorities that included arrests and the use of 'administrative detention', the Syrian population organised a general strike in early 1982 calling for the annexation to be suspended and for attempts to impose Israeli nationality on them to stop.

Today, the overwhelming majority of the native Syrian population continue to reject Israeli nationality and hold a form of permanent residency status.<sup>2</sup> The situation is similar to that of Palestinians living in Occupied East Jerusalem. Yet whilst Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem are permitted to have Jordanian nationality, the native Syrian population of the Occupied Syrian

<sup>1</sup> See: United Nations Security Council Resolution 497 (1981) which states that: '[...] the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect'. Available at: <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/73D6B4C70D1A92B7852560DF0064F101>

<sup>2</sup> This residency status may be revoked if an individual's 'centre of life' changes or if citizenship of another country is obtained. According to Al-Marsad research, around 100 native Syrian inhabitants of the Occupied Syrian Golan have had their permanent residency status revoked since 1982 following travel and residency abroad for study or work. These people are unable to return back to their homes and join their families in the Occupied Syrian Golan.

Golan are recognised by the Israeli government as having an 'undefined' nationality and are only awarded an Israeli 'Laissez-Passer', if they wish to travel (see below).



Figure 1 - An example of an Israeli travel document issued to the Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan. Note - Nationality is stated as 'Undefined'.

As a result of this 'undefined' nationality status, the Syrian population of the Occupied Syrian Golan face multiple obstacles for international travel. Indeed, the Syrian population must apply for visas prior to travel for the overwhelming majority of countries in the world.

This is frequently a lengthy and costly process which typically involves: a visa application to the relevant embassy in Tel Aviv; the submission of supporting documentation such as bank statements, statements from the local council and employer; letters of invitation from an individual / organisation in the desired destination country; a day to travel from the Occupied Syrian Golan to Tel Aviv for an interview at the relevant embassy.

The total cost of this process can be in excess of 500 USD for certain countries. Further – and of most concern to the Syrian population – is that visa applications are frequently denied by certain countries, primarily Russia, Ukraine, the United States, the United Kingdom and some EU countries.

It is understood that one major contributing factor to the denial of visas is the unusual categorisation of the Syrian population as having an 'undefined' nationality on their travel documents with the result that many countries, mistakenly believe that visa applicants are potentially seeking to flee the Occupied Syrian Golan and intend to seek asylum on arrival in the destination country – which they are not.

Onerous visa requirements and a lack of understanding of the situation of the Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan are seriously impeding the Syrian population from benefitting from international travel for leisure, family visits, study or work; resulting in an infringement of their basic human rights, in particular the right to freedom of movement.

As such, the situation of the Syrian population holding permanent residency status and therefore an Israeli 'Laissez-Passer' with 'undefined' nationality, could not contrast more to that of Israeli nationals who enjoy visa-free or visa on arrival travel to 147 countries.<sup>3</sup>

The alarming consequence of restrictive travel policies from a significant number of countries is the creation of substantial pressure on the native Syrian population to take Israeli nationality, solely to facilitate travel abroad. Indeed, it is a damning indictment of such policies that they are a greater contributing factor to the Syrian population taking Israeli nationality – against their wishes – than multiple discriminatory Israeli policies that seek to sever the connection between the Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan and the rest of Syria.

Given the above, I am sure that you can understand my concern. Hence, I respectfully call on you and your international partners to implement a policy of visa-free or visa on arrival access for the Syrian population holding permanent residency status in the Occupied Syrian Golan, on an equal basis as that of Israeli nationals.

In the meantime, I respectfully request that visa applications from the native Syrian population in the Occupied Syrian Golan made under the existing arrangements are not prejudiced by the categorisation of 'undefined' nationality on travel documents, or any similar factors beyond applicants' control.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of this important matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Nizar Ayoub  
Director, Al-Marsad  
nizar@golan-marsad.org

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.henlevyglobal.com/files/download/HP/hvri/HP%20Visa%20Restrictions%20Index%20160223.pdf> .