

More East Jerusalem Palestinians seek Israeli citizenship

Palestinians want rights and freer travel but Interior Ministry takes average of three years to rule on applicants

By **KARIN LAUB** and **MOHAMMED DARAGHMEH**

22 March 2017, 4:21 pm



Palestinians queue in front of the Interior Ministry branch in East Jerusalem, July 6, 2008. (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner, File)

AP — More Palestinians in East Jerusalem are applying for Israeli citizenship in hopes of swapping their vulnerable status as mere city residents for the rights and ease of travel that come with an Israeli passport.

But after long touting its offer of citizenship to them, Israel is now dragging its feet in granting it, those who track Palestinian applicants say. Lawyers said their Palestinian clients now wait months for an appointment with the Interior Ministry and an average of three years for a decision.

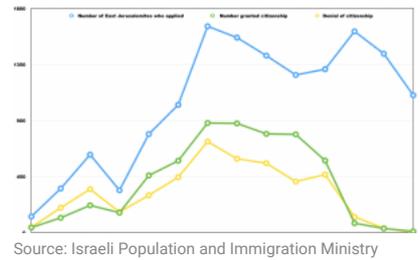
Israeli officials denied they were trying to discourage applications through stalling tactics, saying delays resulted from a rise in the number of requests.

Get The Times of Israel's Daily Edition by email and never miss our top stories

FREE SIGN UP

The citizenship debate reflects the unsettled status of Jerusalem's 330,000 Palestinians — who make up 37 percent of the city's population — 50 years after Israel captured and annexed the eastern sector.

The vast majority have city residency documents, allowing them to work and move about, but aren't citizens of any country. For travel abroad, they use temporary documents issued by Israel or Jordan.



Stigma

Asking for an Israeli passport still carries the stigma of implied acceptance of Israeli control, and only about 15,000 Palestinians have requested one since 2003; of those, fewer than 6,000 were reportedly approved.

An Israeli-Palestinian peace deal is meant to end the uncertainty one day. Palestinian leaders hope East Jerusalem will become the capital of a Palestinian state that will also encompass the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories Israel captured in 1967.

But prospects for statehood are distant, and over 200,000 Jewish Israelis now live in East Jerusalem neighborhoods.

Many Arab East Jerusalem residents also feel neglected by the Palestinian autonomy government, which runs parts of the West Bank but is barred by Israel from operating in Jerusalem.

Palestinians who have sought a passport said they had to be pragmatic.

“I didn’t want to lose my right” to live in Jerusalem, Ruba Mueller, a descendant of the city’s prominent Nashashibi clan, said of her decision to become an Israeli.

Married to a German, the 37-year-old Jerusalem native feared that without the shield of citizenship, her extended stays in Germany would enable the Israeli authorities to strip her of her Jerusalem residency.

“I was born here, I am a Palestinian,” Mueller said. “I don’t want a visa that says I’m a tourist.”



The Israeli passport of Jerusalem-born Palestinian Ruba Mueller, stamped as cancelled because she left Israel immediately after obtaining it 10 years ago, March 14, 2017. (AP Photo/Karin Laub)

Just wanting to ‘live normally’

Another Arab resident said getting citizenship ended his numerous bureaucratic hassles. The 34-year-old land surveyor, who spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid being labeled unpatriotic by fellow Palestinians, said he simply wants to “live normally.”

Israel’s 1967 annexation of East Jerusalem — opposed by most of the world — did not come with an offer of automatic citizenship for the tens of thousands of Palestinians living there.

The alternative of residency made sense at the time, said Daniel Seidemann, a Jerusalem expert who tracks and writes about Israeli policies in the city. “We never seriously offered citizenship. The world would never have allowed that and the Palestinians didn’t want it.”

Israeli officials subsequently suggested citizenship was still on offer, even if most Palestinians chose not to seek it. Mayor Nir Barkat, when asked to respond to complaints of official discrimination, has said the path to citizenship is open.

Palestinian officials said East Jerusalem’s globally recognized status as occupied territory won’t change if more Arab residents get Israeli passports.

“The city will be liberated one day and these citizenships will mean nothing,” said Adnan Husseini, the official in charge of Jerusalem affairs in the Palestinian Authority.



View of the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Issawiya from the Bezalel Art Academy on Mount Scopus, December 15, 2016. Photo by Hadas Parush/Flash90

Rise in applications

Still, there has been a rise in applications. In 2016, a peak year, 1,081 families submitted applications, compared to 69 in 2003, 547 in 2008 and 704 in 2013, the Interior Ministry said.

According to figures [first published on the Times of Israel news site](#) in September, the processing of requests has slowed dramatically since 2014. Out of more than 4,000 individual applications, only 84 were approved, 161 were rejected and the rest were pending.

Israel’s Interior Ministry blamed a heavier work load.

“There hasn’t been any slowing in the review process, but there are a growing number of applications every year,” said spokeswoman Sabine Haddad.

Lawyers representing Palestinians said they believe Israel wants to deter Arabs from applying.

“We see a clear link between these seemingly innocent bureaucratic measures and Israel’s demographic interest to reduce the number of Arabs inside its borders, especially Arabs with voting rights,” said lawyer Adi Lustigman, who has represented Palestinians seeking citizenship.

Since 1967, Israel has revoked the residency rights of 14,500 Palestinians, often on grounds that they were absent from the city for more than seven years, even if they moved to nearby West Bank suburbs for cheaper housing.

Arab residents are “subject to constant fear, real fear, of losing their residency,” Lustigman said.

For now, citizenship appears to offer the best protection. But the path is often difficult.



Adi Lustigman (Courtesy)

Passport canceled

Mueller learned recently that her passport wouldn’t be renewed because she had left Israel immediately after obtaining it 10 years ago. She won’t lose her citizenship, but has to go back to using a travel document that has to be renewed every two years.

Even the fact that her grandmother was a niece of one of Israel’s most famous writers, Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon, hasn’t helped. The grandmother married into the Nashashibi family in the 1940s and converted to Islam. She later divorced and returned to Judaism.

Applicants need to prove they've lived in the city for at least three years and are asked to provide electricity, water and municipal tax bills for that period. They also need proficiency in Hebrew, even though Arabic is an official language in Israel. Other grounds for refusal include minor criminal offenses or a veto by the Shin Bet security service.

"The main category is the people who don't get an answer at all," Lustigman said.

Yoav Yeivin, a member of Jerusalem's municipal council, said Israeli authorities are concerned about absorbing more Arab citizens, who already make up more than one-fifth of the state's population.

On the other hand, he said, awarding citizenship to East Jerusalem residents would hasten their integration into Israeli society, strengthen Israel's claim to the city and help reduce years of neglect of Arab neighborhoods.

"If they (Palestinians) live under our rules, we want them to have the same that other citizens have in Jerusalem," he said.

READ MORE:

- [Israel & the Region](#)
- [Israel Inside](#)
- [East Jerusalem](#)
- [Israeli citizenship](#)
- [Palestinians](#)
- [passport](#)
- [Interior Ministry](#)
- [citizenship](#)
- [Population Immigration and Border Authority](#)
- [Daniel Seidemann](#)



SPONSORED CONTENT

Recommended by

SPONSORED STORIES

FROM THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Why the Non-Jewish World Hates a Religion and People Founded by a...

Was Moses' wife a monkey?

Against the slow Christianization of Orthodox Judaism

Apartheid in Judea and Samaria, enforced by the PA and supported by...

Israel to deploy tear gas-dropping drones on planned Gaza border...

Trump is ruining my marriage!

Recommended by