

By Nick Langer*

The day starts very early for Abu Abdullah, a 39-year-old Jordanian of Palestinian origin. As the dawn tears the veil of the dark night on this dull, dirty and over-populated Baqaa refugee camp, the skinny, pint-sized man leaves home in search of a job at a square in a nearby town.

Abdullah wraps a traditional *keffiyeh* around his stooping shoulders to protect him from the desert's lashing cold wind and walks down the filthy alleys of the camp. He cruises past strewn garbage with its pungent smell – a wake-up call for school students and workers as they begin their day.

A nightmare begins

Abdullah recently woke up to live a nightmare come true. His Jordanian national number, which identifies Jordanians from foreigners, was “illegally” and “unconstitutionally” revoked, a move political analysts say is unconstitutional and smacks of racism against Palestinians.

The declared reason by authorities to revoke the yellow card, which equals citizenship, is Abdullah's failure to renew a residency card in the West Bank, in what constitutes abuse of power by authorities by denying a large group of citizens their basic human rights, which violates their constitutional right that secures their citizenship.

It happened when he attempted to renew his Jordanian passport a year ago. With the stroke of a pen from a mid-level government employee, Abdullah and his children changed from Jordanian citizens to alien residents, only allowed to stay courtesy of temporary passports. A week later he was fired from his job because his position required him to be a Jordanian citizen, a privilege he no longer enjoys.

Now in this squalid refugee camp, job security is Abdullah's top priority, so he can feed his family. In a country already grappling with soaring unemployment and poverty, Abdullah found himself competing with an army of foreign expatriates for a job. A typical working day involves chasing potential customers near a bustling square to move their homes, build or break a wall, or any type of manual work.

“I always felt more privileged as a Palestinian refugee with a Jordanian passport because it allowed me to freely work

and travel. They condemned my family to (an) uncertain future,” he says.

Privileges that accompany the Jordanian national number include a five-year passport offered to trans-Jordanians, unhindered access to most job opportunities, freedom of travel, and education. Now Abdullah has no access to public health institutions or national aid. “My life has been turned upside-down. The law is being twisted for political reasons and interpreted according to the whims of officials at the Ministry of Interior.”

Without a homeland

During the 1967 war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled to Jordan at gunpoint. Known as the *nakbeh*, or “catastrophe,” it was the second defeat after the 1948 War.

A green card is granted to Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank to cross into Jordan. A yellow card, which has many more privileges, allows Jordanians of Palestinian origin to enter the West Bank, Gaza, or Jerusalem. About 300,000 individuals from the West Bank are holders of Jordanian green and yellow cards.

When yellow-card holders fail to have the cards renewed when they are outside the West Bank and are unable to return for some reason, they are condemned to green cards and granted temporary travel documents. In practical terms, this means withholding all civil rights that Jordanian nationals have, including voting in the parliamentary elections.

“The only crime I have done,” Abdullah says, “is being born as a son of a Palestinian refugee who crossed the Jordan River six decades ago.”

Another heart wrenching and equally provoking story belongs to A.D., who gained Jordanian citizenship in 1977 and has lived in the country ever since. But A.D. has maintained a link to his roots. He was imprisoned in Jordan for two years for a felony he committed. While in prison he couldn't renew his yellow card and this allowed Israel to revoke his residency in the West Bank and to bar him from entering, while Jordan took away his national number.

Now, A.D., a former Jordanian citizen, is a jobless expatriate in his own country, struggling to regain his

nationality with little hope, knowing most cases are rejected by the higher court of justice.

A country that revokes the nationality of its own citizens?

The revoking of citizenship drew wide condemnation from legal experts who viewed it as a flagrant violation to the Constitution and international treaties because it “breaches the Constitution.” “The power of revoking citizenship is granted to mid-level government employees who act unprofessionally and according to their mood,” said political analyst Helmi al Asmar. Former President of the Jordan Bar Association, Saleh Armouti, slammed the practice as a “disregard to human rights and international agreements.”

Legal experts say Jordan is the only country to revoke nationality of its citizens. The government insists its actions are legally sound and politically justified as they attempt to avoid “emptying the Palestinian lands from people under Israeli pressure,” according to Minister of Interior Nayef al Qadi. The decisions are based on the 1988 disengagement agreement between Jordan and Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), to pave the way for peace talks with Israel in what lead to the 1993 Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA).

Unity between the West Bank and Jordan was established in the early 1950s after the 1948 War, allowing Jordan to grant citizenship to more than a million Palestinian refugees. But Jordanian authorities have excluded Palestinians from public posts, such as those for security apparatus and government posts, for six decades, fearing Palestinian domination.

“Revoking citizenship of yellow-card holders is, in fact, an embodiment to the type of discrimination practiced against Palestinians for decades,” according to a political analyst who preferred to be unnamed due to the sensitivity of the issue. He said, “even rich Palestinian businessmen don’t feel safe, as they do not have the political clout needed to protect their interests from poachers within Jordanian conservative circles.”

Interior Minister Qadi rejects allegations of systematic disposition to citizenship, insisting rule of law and the Constitution are respected. “We are definitely not carrying out a certain agenda. This is a routine work to rectify legal status of the Palestinians,” said Qadi, noting 500 individuals lost their citizenship in the past two decades.

But according to sources, in the year 2007 alone, 700 citizenships were revoked. Authorities are sifting through records of 300,000 Jordanian Palestinians to make a decision about their national numbers. Marwan Dudgein, a former minister of Palestinian affairs, admitted “mid-level government employees, often driven by their mood, hold sway over the fate of hundreds of thousands.”

Dudgein is a member of the Senate. Members are hand-picked by the king to serve as guardians over the sanctity of the Constitution. While insisting such measures are necessary to protect the Palestinian cause, Dudgein admitted that even his daughter, born in Bethlehem, was subjected to “ill treatment from officials at the passport department,” and almost lost her national number.

With the final solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict under the spotlight, conservative Jordanians are sounding the alarm of a swelling fear that Jordan will end up an alternative homeland to 3.5 million Palestinians. An analyst fears the move is to marginalize Palestinians and create a state of fear and a sense of vulnerability among Palestinians.

Abu Abdullah says a national number will not make him lose his eternal right to his Palestine homeland, but it will help him raise his children with dignity.

**Nick Langer is a reporter based in Jordan.*