

SOAS ICOP Policy Briefings

To Inform Government and Parliamentary Debates

Petitions Debate (13/05/2024): A UK Gaza Family Scheme Is Imperative by Gaza Families Reunited Campaign and *Hasan Pandor* (SOAS University of London) (10th May 2024)

Family unity is a human right, and UK-based Palestinians have a right to reunite with their loved ones trapped in Gaza. The UK Government must urgently introduce a Gaza Family Scheme modelled after the Ukraine Family Scheme to protect Palestinian lives and uphold Palestinian families' right to unity. This is particularly pressing given Israel's [internationally condemned](#), escalating attack on Rafah and wider military campaign in Gaza, which has already and will continue to result in catastrophic levels of death and suffering.

Existing immigration routes to the UK are not working. Under the Immigration Rules, Palestinians in Gaza **are required to enrol their biometrics at a Visa Application Centre (VAC) before the Home Office will decide on an application.** However, the VAC in Gaza is closed, and it is now impossible in practice for Palestinians in Gaza to reach alternative VACs in Ramallah or Jerusalem, contrary to a [statement](#) made by the Minister for Legal Migration, Tom Pursglove, in February 2024.

Although it is possible to request a deferral of biometric requirements, **the Home Office [has rejected every request](#) for biometric deferral and predetermination made by Palestinians in Gaza since 7 October 2023.** Those seeking to exit Gaza are thus trapped in a Catch-22: they cannot enrol their biometrics because they cannot leave Gaza, and they cannot leave Gaza because they cannot enrol their biometrics. As of 24 March 2024, **two Palestinians were killed 'waiting for the Home Office to waive or defer UK fingerprint rules.'**

In early March, **through judicial review**, two UK residents were able to challenge the Home Office's decisions. In both cases, the Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) (UT) found that **the Home Office [had breached Article 8 ECHR \(the right to family and private life\)](#).** The UT also deemed as "[irrational](#)" the requirement for Gazan families to show that their circumstances are worse than other individuals there for their application to be compelling. **Judicial review, however, remains costly and inaccessible** for the majority of applicants, leaving them unable to challenge the Home Office's unreasonable requirements.

Driven to desperation, Palestinians have been forced to crowdfund the [extortionate](#) "coordination" fees payable to the Egyptian travel company Hala to arrange for cross-border travel (though it remains to be seen if and how Palestinians will be able to exit Gaza in light of Israel's offensive in Rafah and closure of the border crossing). The transfer costs are approximately 5000 USD per adult and 2500 USD per child. In addition, before family members can be transferred, the sponsor must first travel to Hala's office in Cairo to register, prove they are related, and pay the full sum for evacuation [in cash](#).

Once in Egypt, permission to stay is generally only granted for short periods of time. **Palestinians risk falling out of status while they await the outcome of an application to join loved ones in the UK** (if they have been able to afford it and are eligible under existing routes). They are effectively in limbo, without access to state support (such as education and healthcare) to rebuild their lives.

The proposed Gaza Family Scheme does not seek to undermine or negate the Palestinian right of return – it seeks to protect the lives of those entitled to that right so that they will eventually be able to exercise it in accordance with international law. In the words of one Palestinian seeking to bring family to the UK, "People always wanted to stay in Gaza, but with how violent this war is and the destruction it has caused, leaving is the only option." More information can be found in the full brief [here](#).

We urge all MPs to support the creation of a Gaza Family Scheme. As with the Ukraine Family Scheme, the scheme would enable UK-based Palestinian sponsors to bring their immediate and extended family members to the UK on a temporary basis. It would also include a provision for deferred biometric enrolment and for the FCDO to provide consular assistance to enable Palestinians to exit Gaza.

For further information contact the authors at migrantjusticepalestine@gmail.com. Contact Prof Alison Scott-Baumann for access to other experts at as150@soas.ac.uk, and visit [our website](#) for more information. *The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*