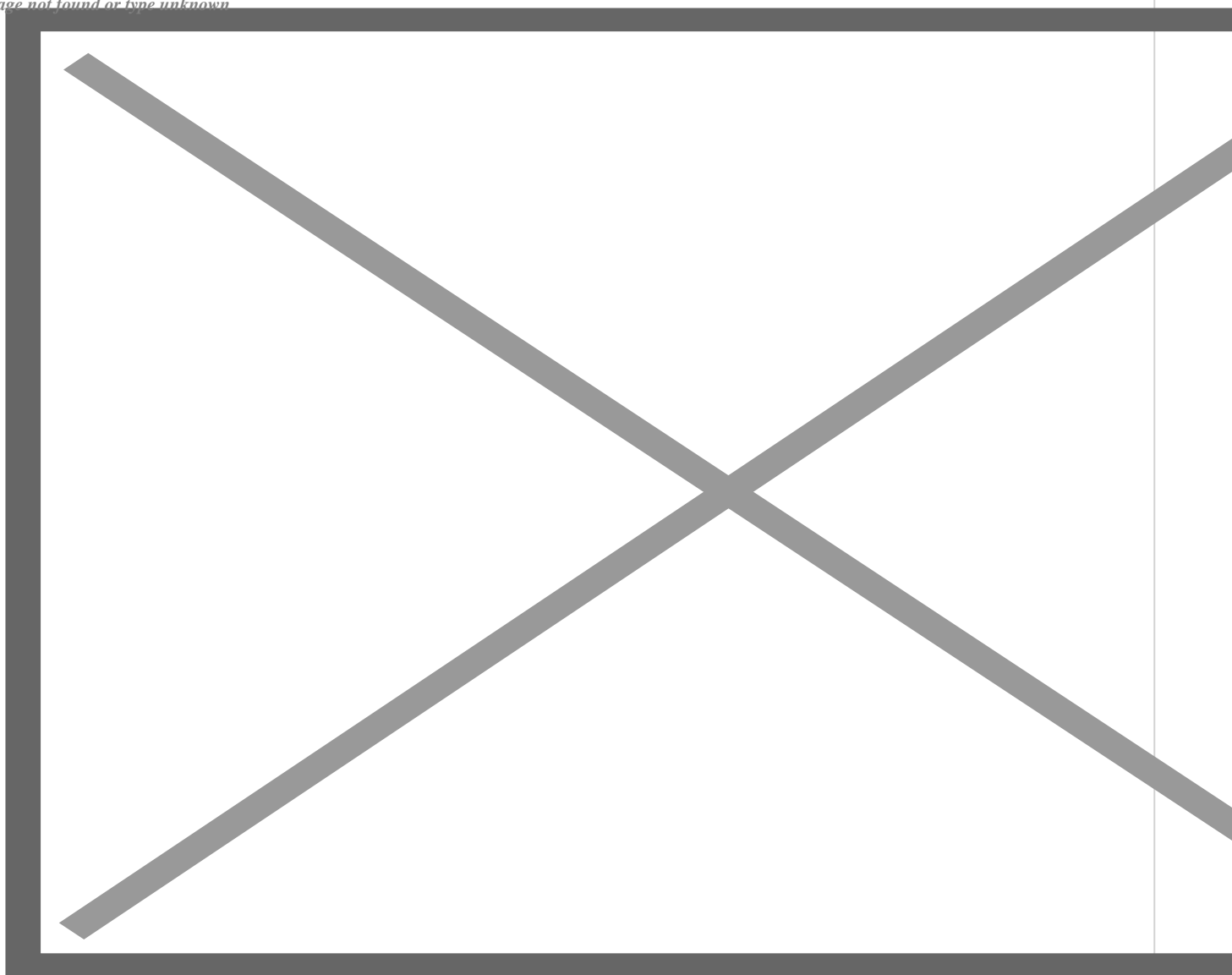


Israel revokes permit of Palestinian foreign minister

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Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki's permit was seized on Sunday [Photo: Hamad I Mohammed/Reuters]

Ramallah, March 22 (RHC)-- Israel revoked the VIP permit of the Palestinian foreign minister after he returned to the occupied West Bank from a trip to the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Israeli and Palestinian officials have confirmed.

A Palestinian official said Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki was stopped on Sunday as he entered the occupied West Bank from Jordan through the Israeli-controlled crossing.

Al-Maliki's VIP card was seized, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was discussing a sensitive diplomatic issue. Losing the VIP status makes it harder for him to move through Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank, and travelling abroad will require Israeli permission.

Israeli officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to discuss the matter, confirmed the incident, but directed questions to the Shin Bet security agency, which declined to comment. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office also declined to comment.

The move comes amid Palestinian support for an ICC investigation into possible war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories. The ICC's chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, announced earlier this month that she was opening an investigation into possible war crimes committed by Israel in the West Bank and blockaded Gaza Strip.

The investigation is expected to look at the Israeli military's conduct in a 2014 war against Hamas armed fighters and during months of mass protests along Gaza's frontier with Israel in which dozens of unarmed Palestinian were killed or wounded by Israeli gunfire. The probe is also set to examine Israel's settlement policies in the West Bank and occupied east Jerusalem, areas captured in 1967.

According to the Palestinian Foreign Ministry, al-Maliki met Bensouda last Thursday and urged her to expedite the investigations "to end the era of impunity and to start the path of accountability" for Israel.

The investigation was launched in response to a request by the Palestinians, who joined the court in 2015 after being granted non-member observer status in the United Nations General Assembly.

Israel has fiercely condemned the investigation, accusing the ICC of bias and saying it has no jurisdiction since the Palestinians do not have a state. Israel is not a member of the ICC, but its citizens could be subject to arrest abroad if warrants are issued.

The court said last week it has sent formal notices to both sides about the impending investigation, giving them a month to seek deferral by proving they are carrying out their own investigations.

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