

Israel blocks pro-Palestinian “flytilla”

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Israel mounted a massive international effort at the weekend to prevent pro-Palestinian activists from entering Tel Aviv’s Ben-Gurion International Airport, en route for Bethlehem in the West Bank. Up to 2,500 activists were due to take part in an international “flytilla” to join a week-long series of events hosted by the “Welcome to Palestine 2012” campaign, comprising 25 Palestinian organisations.

The campaign’s declared aim is to expose Israel’s brutal treatment of the Palestinians, including its control of movement in and out of the Palestinian occupied territories, “while the settler paramilitaries and army commit brutal crimes against a virtually defenceless Palestinian civilian population.”

It follows a similar flytilla last July when hundreds of international activists sought to board flights to Palestine via Israel, only to be blacklisted and prevented from flying. A further 127 were detained at Ben-Gurion airport for several days. Some were banned from Israel for 10 years.

Once again, Israel’s Interior Ministry circulated a list of 1,200 pro-Palestinian activists to international airlines, demanding they be banned from flying to Tel Aviv.

It claimed without any evidence “that they intend to arrive on commercial flights from abroad, in order to disturb the peace and confront security forces at Ben-Gurion International Airport and at other points of friction.”

The ministry also warned that the list was incomplete and that others would be banned as they sought to pass through immigration after landing. Such a travel ban means that anyone seeking to enter a country without a valid entry visa or who is denied a visa on landing would have to be flown back at the airline’s expense. The Interior Ministry threatened punitive sanctions against the airlines if they failed to comply with its demand.

By Thursday, Lufthansa had contacted those on the list and informed them that their tickets had been cancelled “by order of Israel” and would be refunded. According to the *Guardian*, Jet2.com cancelled three tickets without refunding the cost.

People who had nothing to do with the flytilla were prevented from flying. These included Israeli citizens, a Frenchman with a diplomatic passport and his wife, an employee of Italy’s Communications Ministry who was meeting her Israeli counterparts, and a Dutch member of the board of directors of German pharmaceutical giant Merck.

Police later claimed that many of those blacklisted had either been arrested for protests in the West Bank or had been listed online in connection with pro-Palestinian groups.

Other campaign supporters travelled to airports only to find that they were banned from boarding their flights. Angry demonstrations broke out at Brussels airport where about 100 people were prevented from flying, at Geneva airport where 45 out of 70 were banned from boarding an Easyjet flight, and at Charles de Gaulle airport outside Paris, where a similar number were banned. Turkish Airlines, Austrian Airlines, Alitalia, Air France and Jet2.com also stopped passengers from boarding their aircraft.

In addition, the Israeli authorities mobilised hundreds of plainclothes police personnel at Ben-Gurion airport, who refused entry to 78 activists when they landed. Many were transferred to the Givon Prison for “illegal aliens” and two were held in a detention centre pending deportation, while the rest were sent back. A further six Israelis and a French national already in the country were detained.

In a separate incident in the West Bank on Saturday, Andreas Ias, a Danish activist, was hit in the face with an M-16 rifle by a senior army officer, who falsely claimed that the activists were violent. Two other

activists were also injured in the incident. But the scene was filmed and posted on YouTube the next day by the International Solidarity Movement who had organised the cycling tour, forcing the government to denounce the officer.

There is nothing democratic, let alone legal, in the Interior Ministry's refusal of entry to people landing at Ben-Gurion airport to visit the West Bank via Israel. Since the territory is under Israeli military control, there is no option but to travel through Israel to enter Palestine, a stance upheld by an Israeli court only last year.

Israel has illegally occupied the West Bank and Syria's Golan Heights since the 1967 war, and annexed East Jerusalem and Golan in defiance of international law and countless United Nations resolutions. Israel has imposed military rule on the 3.5 million Palestinians, detained without trial thousands of people, expelled Palestinians from the West Bank, carried out tens of thousands of house demolitions and evictions, and continues to build illegal settlements, making daily life a misery for the Palestinian population.

It has launched numerous murderous assaults on the Palestinian people, most recently against Gaza in 2006 and 2008/09, and fomented civil war among the rival factions of the Palestinian bourgeoisie. Within Israel itself, Palestinian citizens are routinely discriminated against.

As a result, Israel has justly become an international pariah. With the backing of Washington, it has reacted to the hostility of ordinary people around the world, if not the leaders of "the international community" and their media mouthpieces, with increasing arrogance.

Unable to justify its actions in the court of public opinion, Israel has sought to counter criticisms of its warmongering and virulent anti-Palestinian measures from well-known figures by falsely equating criticism of Israeli government policy with anti-Semitism.

Just last month, German Nobel Laureate Gunter Grass, who wrote a political poem "What must be said" accusing Israel of endangering world peace with its plans to attack Iran, became the target of an unprecedented witch-hunt by the media and leading political figures in both Israel and Germany. Israel has declared him "persona non grata" and banned him from entering the country. In both countries, few of the

mainstream media channels have defended Grass against these vituperative attacks.

Swedish writer Henning Mankell, who accompanied the two aid flotillas to Gaza in 2010 and 2011, was similarly excoriated by Israel and expelled twice from the country.

Far from protecting Israel's image as deputy foreign minister Ayalon maintains, Israel's actions have once again drawn attention to its inhuman and illegal treatment of the Palestinians and its own anti-democratic policies.



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