

Demonising the Fly-in: Welcome to Palestine, Unwelcome to Israel

Les Levidow <L.Levidow@btinternet.com>
20 July 2011

The 'Welcome to Palestine' initiative aimed to challenge Israel's blockade on Palestinians receiving foreign visitors. They have been effectively barred from Palestine unless pretending to be tourists or Christian pilgrims. Even prisoners have some rights to receive visitors, but the Israeli prison known as 'the West Bank' keeps out pro-Palestinian visitors.

To challenge this restriction, several hundred of us planned to arrive at Ben Gurion airport on 8th July for a week-long programme of events.¹ In the publicly advertised plan, we would openly declare our intention to visit Bethlehem and to be hosted by the Al-Rowwad Cultural Centre there. This initiative came to be called the fly-in. Some mass media called it the flytilla, by analogy to the Gaza flotilla being simultaneously blocked by Greece, though our week-long programme had been planned several months earlier.

Nearly all of us were blocked enroute to Palestine (see below), resulting in high-profile mass-media coverage in Israel and Europe. This achieved a major aim of the initiative, said Dr Mazin Qumsiyeh:

The local organizers of the "Welcome to Palestine" campaign, while sad about our continuing isolation from the international community, are pleased that this episode and brutal Israeli assault removes one of the last illusions about "Israeli Democracy."²

Blocking hooligans?

Just before 8th July, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced us as 'provocateurs' intending to cause disturbances and criminal damage.³ 'Our intelligence says some of these people want to cause confrontation', he said. He personally inspected prison facilities for detaining us. Internal Security Minister Yitzhak Aharomowitz warned, 'We will block these hooligans from entering the state.'⁴

Pre-emptive actions ensued. Israel sent airline companies a list of banned individuals, who the day before received email messages barring them from their flights, e.g. from Paris, Brussels, Frankfurt and Geneva. On 8th July protests at those airports were filmed and posted on YouTube with the title 'Israeli checkpoint'.⁵ A spokesperson for the fly-in said, 'Charles de Gaulle Airport is under Israeli occupation.'⁶

The Israeli government encouraged such a view of its political influence in Europe. Commenting to the mass media, Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon said that Israel's diplomatic efforts led to the airlines' cooperation in preventing the departure of the activists. This political basis was denied by airlines: 'The fact that we prevented the activists from boarding the planes is no evidence of our supporting the State of Israel against the activists, or the opposite.'⁷ According to Lufthansa, their action was legally constrained: airlines are obliged to block anyone 'whose entry is refused by the destination country, as in this case'.⁸

We learned about the Europe-wide blockages on the day before our departure and so anticipated problems at London's Luton airport on Friday morning 8th July. Fortunately, we smoothly boarded our Easyjet flight (except for one well-known activist who had been interviewed on Israeli radio). As we proceeded to the passenger area upstairs, some of us were stopped by a British official – probably from MI5, the political police. He asked to see our boarding passes, apparently to identify anyone on the Tel Aviv flight, and then asked exactly where we planned to go or whether we planned to attend a demonstration. When one woman

said no, she was accused of lying. Here the UK government was turning Luton airport into an Israeli checkpoint, acting on the paranoia and lies of the Israeli government.

Arriving at Ben Gurion airport, when we told passport control that we intended to travel to Bethlehem, 14 of us were detained – but were never questioned by Israeli authorities.⁹ Delegates arriving earlier from other countries had a similar experience; only a few of them were questioned. We all had stated our travel destination in order to challenge the blockade.

Nevertheless the government attributed subterfuge and deception to us. An official told the mass media that ‘most of the activists were identified and taken in for questioning during the afternoon hours’, implying that they had a great task to identify us.¹⁰ Moreover, the Prime Minister later commented: ‘We stopped the defiant fly-in against the state of Israel. Israel will continue to frustrate provocations and attempts to break through our borders, whether by land, sea or air.’¹¹ Such paranoid language attributes physical force to people seeking to enter the country in the normal way. If openly visiting Palestinians is ‘against the state of Israel’, then what kind of the state is it?

While awaiting transfer from the airport to prison, at least 60 of us were crowded into an office of the Border Police. Officials there seemed unprepared for dealing with us, even embarrassed at detaining us. After a couple hours, 21 soldiers and police stormed in, grabbed some activists and dragged them downstairs to a police vehicle, where handcuffs were waiting and applied.

Meanwhile the police were filming us, perhaps hoping to get a violent response to show the mass media, though we simply huddled together for protection. We would have appeared as implausible hooligans, especially given our social composition: more than half were women, and approx. one-third were more than 50 years old. Without physical resistance, the rest of us walked downstairs to the police vehicles, which took us to Givon Prison near Ramle. There a wing had been allocated to us, with separate sections for the men and women.¹² This prison is normally used to detain people who are classified as ‘illegal immigrants’, originating mainly from the global South.

We never received an official explanation for why we were detained. According to the UK consulate’s second-hand account from the Israeli government, officially we had never entered Israel and so were still ‘in transit’, despite being imprisoned 30 km from the airport. Although Israel has formal rules and rights for illegal immigrants, ‘You are in another dimension’, the Givon Prison chief told us. In response to the blockage, the Welcome to Palestine organisers stated: ‘Over 120 internationals attempting to visit Palestine are still being illegally detained – kidnapped – in two Israeli detention centers, in Ramle and in Beer Al-Saba’ (Beersheva).’¹³

Demonising Arab-European activists

After our imprisonment, the Israeli authorities attempted to salvage their original storyline that the fly-in posed a violent threat. Here is how...

The day after we arrived in the prison, a couple Border Police officials visited the prison with an offer – initially to me: ‘For humanitarian reasons, you can go to Bethlehem if you sign a document promising not to visit any place where there is conflict with the Army.’ I asked, ‘Couldn’t there be conflict with the Army anywhere?’ They clarified that the restriction meant places such as Bilin, Silwan, Jayous, etc. – i.e., flashpoints around the Apartheid Wall.¹⁴ As they also clarified, this offer was open to all the prisoners more than 55 years old.

After discussion among the older men, we agreed to accept the travel restriction – if the offer was extended to all the prisoners, regardless of age. We discussed our idea with the younger men, who supported our counter-proposal. Then we put this to the Border Police officials, who gave no verbal response.

Why the age limit in the Israeli proposal? Youth was being used as a marker for the dangerous Other: the French and Belgian younger men (approx. 30-50 years old) were mainly of North-African Arab descent, while only one older man was. The Border Police aimed to use the older men for a political aim: if we accepted their offer, then the ethnically Arab-European men could be isolated and stigmatised. Israel more widely uses youth as a marker for danger, e.g. in its 2009 ruling that only the under-15s and the over-50s males could go pray in Al Aqsa during Ramadhan and for a few weeks afterwards.

The Israeli offer to us was repeated several times. It was put individually to some older prisoners during our four days there. And was put again to eight of us (Brits and Americans) when brought back to Ben Gurion airport on Tuesday 12th July. An hour before our London flight, the Border Police repeated the offer. ‘We can take you to Jerusalem this evening’, one said half-jokingly.

In my final opportunity to probe the rationale of the Border Police, our interchange went as follows:

Q: Why is this offer only for the older people?

A: We first made this offer especially to you.

Q: Why me?

A: Because we know that you won’t act in a violent way.

Q: When we proposed to accept your offer if it was open to all the prisoners, why didn’t you agree?

A: Because our intelligence agency has information about the others.

Q: What information?

A: Involvement in terrorism.

So the original threat was upgraded – from provocateurs and hooligans to terrorists. Supposedly the Israeli officials had such information yet had not warned airlines about ‘terrorists’ on passenger lists.¹⁵

Colluding with the Occupation

Non-violence was a central principle of the ‘Welcome to Palestine’ fly-in.¹⁶ As peace-keepers, international solidarity activists often join Palestinians in trying to protect their houses or their olive crops against pressures from illegal settlements. Sometimes the presence of internationals helps to deter terrorist activities by the IDF and settlers. So, how could Israel label the fly-in participants as hooligans or terrorists? Like its precedents in European colonialism, the Zionist state has generally projected its terrorist activity onto its colonial subjects, thus portraying its own crimes as self-defence against ‘terrorism’.¹⁷

Unfortunately, this strategy has ideological resonance with EU laws conflating terrorism with any resistance to oppression and even verbal solidarity. Under EU law, a vaguely defined ‘terrorism’ encompasses offences committed with the aim of ‘unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act’, anywhere in the world.¹⁸ On this basis, the EU banned a list of organisations (e.g. Hamas) as ‘terrorist’ and even authorised penalties against anyone associated with ‘terrorism’, as a means to deter European solidarity with resistance against oppression abroad.

In particular, bank accounts in Europe can be denied or frozen, simply on grounds of suspicion. This happened to the UK’s Viva Palestina convoy, though eventually it found an alternative bank. A Muslim charity providing aid to Palestine has been disrupted by three investigations about supposed links to terrorism, on the basis of no credible evidence.¹⁹

By contrast to those political targets, the EU’s allies are never subjected to the vague definition of terrorism. For example, President Sarkozy is sponsoring a September 2011 conference on victims of terrorism. The organisers emphasise attacks on Israelis but remain silent about their attacks on Palestinians.²⁰

In those ways, the EU political-legal system encourages Israel to portray its war crimes as self-defence by an innocent victim. When the Border Police attempted to isolate Arab-European men from other European delegates, this attempt complemented the EU's 'counter-terror' regime. The European fly-in became another target of Israel's racist apartheid system, especially its demonization of resistance.

In the future we may face more systematic collusion between the EU and Israel in protecting its Occupation of Palestine against international solidarity. How best to anticipate and challenge this collusion?

Author's note

Thanks to the following: the 'Welcome to Palestine' network for organising the event, Scottish PSC for coordinating the London Easyjet contingent, fellow delegates for helpful comments on an earlier draft and of course the Givon Prison residents for camaraderie.

Bio-note: Les Levidow has been opposing the Israeli Occupation through various UK campaigns since the 1980s. These include: the 'Return' petition against the Israeli Law of Return (late 1980s), Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Jews Against Zionism (JAZ),²¹ Jews for Boycotting Israel Goods (J-BIG), and the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP). He also participates in the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC), www.campacc.org.uk, which opposes 'anti-terror' powers of the EU and UK.

Notes/References

¹ Palestine Justice Network, www.palestinejn.org

² <http://palestinejn.org/palestinianspring/>

³ <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=227768>

⁴ <http://mondoweiss.net/2011/07/netanyahu-effort-to-travel-to-the-occupied-territories-through-ben-gurion-airport-is-an-effort-to-undermine-israel's-right-to-exist>

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4IFBVMWLLk>,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhny5X977Bo>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kExgVOQo8Dc>

⁶ <http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?ID=228474&R=R1>

⁷ [http://www.freedomflotilla.eu/en/home/groups/viewdiscussion/2577-](http://www.freedomflotilla.eu/en/home/groups/viewdiscussion/2577-Israel+begins+deportation+of+proPalestinian+flytilla+activists?groupid=4)

[Israel+begins+deportation+of+proPalestinian+flytilla+activists?groupid=4](http://www.freedomflotilla.eu/en/home/groups/viewdiscussion/2577-Israel+begins+deportation+of+proPalestinian+flytilla+activists?groupid=4)

⁸ <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/world/israel-deports-detains-allows-some-activists-58912.html>

⁹ Another UK participant was allowed through passport control, soon received a phone call about our detention, tried to protest, was arrested and then was detained with the rest of us.

¹⁰ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/65-pro-palestinian-fly-in-activists-transferred-to-detention-facilities-1.372215>

¹¹ <http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/51664/flytilla-now-greens-leader-lucas-asks-hague-why-activists-were-banned>

¹² For more on the experience of the London Easyjet travellers, see www.scottishpsc.org.uk, and especially from the women's perspective at <http://agtottenham.blogspot.com/2011/07/released-from-israeli-jail.html>

¹³ 'Israeli authorities set stringent conditions for release', <http://palestinejn.org/palestinianspring/>, which includes reports on experiences of French and Belgian detainees.

¹⁴ When the 'Welcome to Palestine' tour reached Bilin, 'There Israeli soldiers prevented the bus-loads of passengers and local Palestinians and Israeli supporters from holding a peaceful demonstration', see 'Israeli authorities set stringent conditions for release', <http://palestinejn.org/palestinianspring/>

¹⁵ A Zionist website tried another demonization tactic, saying that older members of the delegation had been 'flirting with fascism', e.g. by effectively supporting Hamas or Hizbollah via involvement in the Palestine Solidarity Campaign,

<http://cifwatch.com/2011/07/10/guardian-airbrushes-extremist-links-of-british-flytilla-participants/>

¹⁶ Mazin Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine*, Pluto Press, 2010.

¹⁷ 'Zionist Origins of the War on Terror', <http://www.palint.org/article.php?articleid=25>

¹⁸ <http://www.statewatch.org/terrorlists/listsbground.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.interpal.org.uk/en/press-release/130-interpal-vindicated-by-charity-commission-inquiry>

²⁰ Alain Gresh, 'Un congrès imposture sur le terrorisme', *Le Monde diplomatique*, 17.07.11,

<http://blog.mondediplo.net/2011-07-16-Un-congres-imposture-sur-le-terrorisme>

²¹ Speech on behalf of JAZ on Al Quds Day 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gqh-72Ilruk>