

Have Israeli spies infiltrated international airports?

South Africa deports airline official after investigation

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South Africa deported an Israeli airline official last week following allegations that Israel's secret police, the Shin Bet, had infiltrated Johannesburg international airport in an effort to gather information on South African citizens, particularly black and Muslim travellers.

The move by the South African government followed an investigation by local TV showing an undercover reporter being illegally interrogated by an official with El Al, Israel's national carrier, in a public area of Johannesburg's OR Tambo airport.

The programme also featured testimony from Jonathan Garb, a former El Al guard, who claimed that the airline company had been a front for the Shin Bet in South Africa for many years.

Of the footage of the undercover reporter's questioning, he commented: "Here is a secret service operating above the law in South Africa. We pull the wool over everyone's eyes. We do exactly what we want. The local authorities do not know what we are doing."

The Israeli foreign ministry is reported to have sent a team to South Africa to try to defuse the diplomatic crisis after the government in Johannesburg threatened to deport all of El Al's security staff.

Mr Garb's accusations have been supported by an investigation by the regulator for South Africa's private security industries.

They have also been confirmed by human rights groups in Israel, which report that Israeli security staff are carrying out racial profiling at many airports around the world, apparently out of sight of local authorities.

Concern in South Africa about the activities of El Al staff has been growing since August, when South Africa's leading investigative news show, Carte Blanche, went undercover to test Mr Garb's allegations.

A hidden camera captured an El Al official in the departure hall claiming to be from "airport security" and demanding that the undercover reporter hand over his passport or ID as part of "airport regulations". When the reporter protested that he was not flying but waiting for a friend, El Al's security manager, identified as Golan Rice, arrived to interrogate him further. Mr Rice then warned him that he was in a restricted area and must leave.

Mr Garb commented on the show: "What we are trained is to look for the immediate threat - the Muslim guy. You can think he is a suicide bomber, he is collecting information. The crazy

thing is that we are profiling people racially, ethnically and even on religious grounds ... This is what we do.”

Mr Garb and two other fired workers have told the South African media that Shin Bet agents routinely detain Muslim and black passengers, a claim that has ignited controversy in a society still suffering with the legacy of decades of apartheid rule.

Suspect individuals, the former workers say, are held in an annex room, where they are interrogated, often on matters unrelated to airport security, and can be subjected to strip searches while their luggage is taken apart. Clandestine searches of their belongings and laptops are also carried out to identify useful documents and information.

All of this is done in violation of South African law, which authorises only the police, armed forces or personnel appointed by the transport minister to carry out searches.

The former staff also accuse El Al of smuggling weapons – licensed to the local Israeli embassy – into the airport for use by the secret agents.

Mr Garb went public after he was dismissed over a campaign he led for better pay and medical benefits for El Al staff.

A South African Jew, he said he was recruited 19 years ago by the Shin Bet. “We were trained at a secret camp [in Israel] where they train Israeli special forces and they train you how to use handguns, submachine guns and in unarmed combat.”

He added that he was assigned to “armed security” in the early 1990s. “Armed security is being undercover, carrying a weapon, a handgun and at that time as well, sounds crazy but we carried Samsonite briefcases with an Uzi submachine gun in it.”

Mr Garb claimed to have profiled 40,000 people for Israel over the past 20 years, including recently Virginia Tilley, a Middle East expert who is the chief researcher at South Africa’s Human Sciences Research Council. The think tank recently published a report accusing Israel of apartheid and colonialism in the Palestinian territories.

“The decision was she should be checked in the harshest way because of her connections,” Mr Garb said.

Ms Tilley confirmed that she had been detained at the airport by El Al staff and separated from her luggage. Mr Garb said that during this period an agent “photocopied all [her] documentation and then he forwarded it on to Israel” – Mr Garb believes for use by the Shin Bet.

Israeli officials have refused to comment on the allegations. A letter produced by Mr Garb – signed by Roz Bukris, El Al’s general manager in South Africa – suggests that he was employed by the Shin Bet rather than the airline. Ms Bukris, according to the programme, refused to confirm or deny the letter’s validity.

The Israeli Embassy in South Africa declined to discuss evidence that it, rather than El Al, had licensed guns issued to the airline’s security managers. Questioned last week by Ynet, Israel’s largest news website, about the deportation of the airline official, Yossi Levy, an Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, said he could not “comment on security matters”.

A report published in 2007 by two Israeli human rights organisations, the Nazareth-based Arab Association for Human Rights and the Centre Against Racism, found that Israeli airline staff used racial profiling at most major airports around the world, subjecting Arab and Muslim passengers to discriminatory and degrading treatment in violation both of international law and the host country's laws.

"Our research showed that the checks conducted by El Al at foreign airports had all the hallmarks of Shin Bet interrogations," said Mohammed Zeidan, the director of the Human Rights Association. "Usually the questions were less about the safety of the flight and more aimed at gathering information on the political activities or sympathies of the passengers."

The human rights groups approached four international airports – in New York, Paris, Vienna and Geneva – where passengers said they had been subjected to discriminatory treatment, to ask under what authority the Israeli security services were operating. The first two airports refused to respond, while Vienna and Geneva said it was not possible to oversee El Al's procedures.

"It is remarkable that these countries make no effort to supervise the actions of Israeli security personnel present on their territory, particularly in light of the discriminatory and humiliating procedures they apply," the report states.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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