

Israel's Real Easter Pilgrims

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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Easter celebrates suffering and compassion. Alhamdulillah, these human traits were on display on Easter Sunday at European airports and in the Holy Land...

Ben Gurion Airport was thrown into chaos for the third annual Flytilla on Sunday. As starry-eyed tourists arrived to visit the Holy sites and beady-eyed new Israelis arrived to kick more Palestinians off their land in the name of the Jewish State, thousands of Westerners with a sense of conscience presented their air tickets to suspicious officials in Europe and — if they were lucky — their passports in Tel Aviv, and held their breath.

Their intent was quite innocent — to visit beleaguered Palestinians in the West Bank; in one case, to help locals build a school. But the fact that 2,000 such do-gooders were planning to do so *en masse* as part of the annual Flytilla was a red flag to the Israeli bull. The world might take notice, the Palestinians might take heart, and Israeli crimes might finally be stopped.

But Israeli refusal to allow these innocent visitors to the West Bank would prove once again that the West Bank is an open prison inside Israel, with access at the whim of the prison guards.

The prison guards rose to the occasion. Airports around the world were issued no-fly lists with 730 names, and airlines were warned they better kick them and any other suspicious passengers off their planes, or the airlines would be charged for the cost of deporting them. 650 undercover police swarmed Ben Gurion with their guns and tear gas, just in case.

The high tech planning against the low tech protesters mostly worked. Members of “Welcome to Palestine” say up to 200 of the 2,000 activists from 15 countries, a third of them from France, were prevented from flying to Tel Aviv from Paris, Brussels, Basel, Geneva and Zurich on Sunday. Apartheid-complicit airlines included Jet2.com, Brussels Airlines, Lufthansa, Alitalia, Swiss Air and Turkish Airlines.

At Ben Gurion, a Swedish citizen was forced to sign a hastily-composed document stating that she would have no contact with pro-Palestinian groups while in Israel. Shortly after, a new illegal procedure was instituted at the airport demanding select passengers sign a statement saying they will not be in contact or work with “members of any pro-Palestinian organisations” and “will not participate in pro-Palestinian activities”. The Prime Minister’s Office released a letter that was handed to deported Flytilla activists telling them to “Go to Syria”.

The Welcome to Palestine Campaign stated: “Those who wanted to welcome our visitors and were brutally assaulted will remember how the same Israeli police let right wing fanatics

sing and disrupt at the airport. The whole world is now seeing Israel for what it is: a police state that fulfills all the requirements of being an apartheid pariah state per the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (1973)", and charged that "those airlines and governments that acted as subcontractors for the Israeli apartheid regime are being challenged by their own people."

Last year, around 800 people tried to join the campaign, 400 blocked from flying by the airlines. Another 120 were deported by Israel. The term "flytilla" recalls attempts by activists to reach Israeli-blockaded Gaza by boat, which have come to be known as "Freedom Flotillas".

A 23-year-old French woman who made it into Israel to take part in the protest said about half her group of 50 was detained. "The security forces in France and Israel treated us like criminals," she said. "It's very frustrating and surprising that the authorities cooperated with the Israeli claims and propaganda." The blacklist grows by leaps and bounds. The 270 people who made it to Tel Aviv in last year's protest had pride of place on this year's list and are banned from entering the country for 10 years. All those on this year's will be added.

Israeli apartheid is not perfect. Two lonely voices in the Knesset denounced the crackdown. Meretz leader Zehava Gal-On said blacklisting pro-Palestinian activists only deepens delegitimation of Israel. MP Haneen Zoabi said it proves that Israel violates human rights not only of Palestinians but of people from all around the world. An Israeli official admitted that 40 per cent of the names on Shin Bet security blacklist were not activists at all.

Included among the blacklisted were: a French diplomat and his wife looking for an apartment in Jerusalem; an Italian government official scheduled to meet her Israeli counterparts; and a member of the board of directors of German pharmaceutical giant Merck with 10 million euros for the Weizmann Institute of Science. In the mix-up, even Israelis were blacklisted. "We put people on the list who are as far removed from anti-Israel political activity as east is from west," one Israel Foreign Ministry official complained. "We have insulted hundreds of foreign citizens because of suspicions, and have given the other side a victory on a silver platter."

The daily stream of Jewish and Christian Disney-pilgrims continue to wail at one Wall or pass through another to visit a *faux* manger in Bethlehem, or a prettified Garden of Gethsemane. Only Egypt's Coptic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church refuse to give permission to pilgrims to make these jaunts, which give tacit approval to Israel's destruction of Jerusalem's Christian and Muslim heritage.

The flytillers, today's true pilgrims, are enduring their travail — bearing their cross — not to send home "I was there" pictures of Jesus's tomb, but to provide truly Christian compassion to the suffering Muslims and handful of Palestinian Christians who desperately cling to their remaining bits of land, and to emphasise to the world how Israel crucifies innocent Palestinians every moment. For them — Arab or Christian — every day is Good Friday.

Eric Walberg writes for Al-Ahram Weekly <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/> You can reach him at <http://ericwalberg.com/> His *Postmodern Imperialism: Geopolitics and the Great Games* is available at <http://claritypress.com/Walberg.html>

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About the author:

Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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