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# 'Fly-in' set to challenge Israeli isolation of the West Bank

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Apr. 12, 2012 NCR Today

More than 1200 international activists are scheduled to arrive at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel, this Sunday for a "fly-in," protesting Israeli isolation of the West Bank.

The travelers, who include families with children, are participants in Welcome to Palestine 2012, a Palestinian-organized initiative that has invited people to openly visit the West Bank during the second week of Easter.

"There is no way into Palestine other than through Israeli control points. Israel has turned Palestine into a giant prison, but prisoners have a right to receive visitors," reads a statement on the Welcome to Palestine 2012 website.

Palestinian organizers say they have planned a week-long program for their visitors that include informative tours, cultural exchange programs and helping to build a new school in Bethlehem.

"We invite internationals to come see Palestine for themselves. Come get involved in building the school and other peaceful activities in Palestine," said Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh, a spokesman for the initiative.

Israeli security officials are reportedly gearing up for the en masse arrival of the internationals which some have dubbed, "flytilla" in reference to the flotillas that challenged the blockade of Gaza. Sunday, the day after Passover ends, marks the busiest day at Ben Gurion Airport.

Earlier this week, Israel's public security minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch said he is communicating with various European airlines in an attempt to prevent activists from boarding planes in their home countries. Those activists who manage to get through will be detained at Ben Gurion and then deported, he told The Irish Times.

"Israel will prevent this provocation, the same way any other country bars the entry of hostile entities," Aharonovitch told The Irish Times. "We will handle the provocateurs as quickly and efficiently as possible, but we will not be chasing them down the airport halls."

Aharonovitch has reportedly already held a number of meetings to coordinate plans between the police, the airport authority, and customs and immigration services.

Sunday's "fly-in" marks the third mass protest challenging Israel's control of access to the West Bank. During last July's "flytilla," Israeli officials sent international airlines the names of people who would be denied entry into Israel. Approximately 350 activists were prevented from boarding planes in their home country, prompting demonstrations and legal challenges. (Palestinian organizers say several European airlines have told them they will not prohibit participants from boarding planes this year as this requires reimbursing passengers.)

An additional 127 activists were arrested at Ben Gurion Airport, detained for several days and then deported. Only seven of the approximately 500 internationals who hoped to visit the West Bank made it through.

Les Levidow, a senior researcher at Britain's Open University, was among those arrested at Ben Gurion last July. Fearing a denial of entry, internationals who visit the Palestinian Territory typically use subterfuge to get past airport officials. But participants in the Welcome to Palestine campaign are required to be truthful about the purpose of their visit. Levitow said he was stopped after he told passport control that he planned to visit Bethlehem.

"If openly visiting Palestinians is 'against the state of Israel', then what kind of the state is it?" he wrote in an essay describing his detention experience.

On Tuesday, a chapter of the French labor union CGT at the Roissy-Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris issued a statement of support for Welcome to Palestine 2012 and criticized French authorities for acquiescing to Israeli demands last July by prohibiting participants from embarking on planes.

"[W]e reject the complicity of the French authorities in this violation of the freedom to travel and demand that they do not play the role of auxiliaries of the jailers of the Palestinian people," the CGT statement said.

Terry Galloghly, 73, from Belfast is among those bound for the West Bank on Sunday.

Galloghly told The Irish Times April 11: "I have been three times to Palestine and each time I have had to lie to the Israelis to be allowed in.

"Last time, in December, I said I was visiting Christian sites. I did visit Christian sites but that wasn't the purpose of my visit. This time I am going to be frank and honest and tell them I am there for the peaceful purpose of visiting my friends.

"My Irish passport asks that [the bearer] be allowed to pass freely and without hindrance. I expect the Israelis to respect that."

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