



Reactions to the opening of the Ramon International Airport, near Eilat, to Palestinian passengers from Judea and Samaria

September 1, 2022

Overview

- ▶ On August 22, 2022, the first international flight with Palestinians as passengers left for Cyprus from the Ilan and Asaf Ramon International Airport, near Eilat. The Palestinians came from Hebron and Bethlehem as well as Israelis. The flight was the first in a pilot project led by the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) to allow Palestinians to leave for abroad from Israel.¹ In the future Turkish airline companies may also be able to use the airport to fly vacationing Palestinians to Turkey (Israeli media, August 22, 2022).
- ▶ Until now, most Palestinians who wanted to go abroad had to go to Jordan via the Allenby Crossing, east of Jericho, and fly out of the airport in Amman. The Israeli initiative was also launched because Palestinians complained of extreme congestion at the Allenby Crossing in both directions, especially during the summer months.
- ▶ Despite the fact that the new arrangement could make life significantly easier for traveling Palestinians, the flight led to a wave of Palestinian and Jordanian protest. The Palestinian Authority (PA) minister of transportation was sent to meet with Jordanian officials, and had previously threatened to impose sanctions on any Palestinians who used Ramon Airport. PA sources claimed its objective was to benefit itself and drive a wedge between the Palestinians and the Jordanians. Palestinians were called on to boycott the flight from Ramon Airport, and Hamas criticized the PA on the grounds that Israel had coordinated the initiative with the Palestinians.
- ▶ Various political commentators warned of an "Israeli trap" intended to damage Palestinian relations with Jordan. Some demanded the Allenby Crossing be made more efficient or to open the unused airport in Qalandiya, north of Jerusalem. Others called the Palestinian leadership "hypocritical" because they themselves were allowed to use Ben-Gurion

¹ The project is currently in its pilot stage. Israeli security is examining the process, which is complicated and will require passengers to undergo certain security checks to enter Israeli territory and board a plane.

International Airport. The Jordanians were dissatisfied and angry because such a move, they claimed, could cause them serious economic damage.

Reactions to the Opening of Flights to Palestinians

The Palestinian Authority (PA)

► **Musa Rahel, spokesman for the PA ministry of transportation**, said the PA's official position was to oppose Palestinian use of the airport. He claimed it was an Israeli economic venture whose objective was to attack Palestinian sovereignty. He called it a unilateral Israeli measure carried out without coordination with the Palestinians, which meant the PA had no advance knowledge about the Palestinian passengers on the flight (al-Andalou News, August 26, 2022).

► **Assem Salem, PA minister of transportation**, said they were considering imposing sanctions on any Palestinian who flew from Ramon Airport, and who would have to pay the same taxes paid at the Allenby Crossing. He noted that the Qalandiya airport belonged to the Palestinians, and they were trying to convince Israel to transfer its administration to the PA (Araby Post, August 24, 2022). With instructions from Mahmoud Abbas and Muhammad Shtayyeh, Salem spent several days in Jordan for meetings with the Jordanian ministers of transportation and the interior to discuss procedures at the crossing. He said they had decided Jordan would finance a project to improve conditions at a cost of 150 million Jordanian dinars (about \$200 million). He added that the Ramon Airport did not "interest" the Palestinians and they were focusing on improving the crossings and their relations with the Jordanians, who, he claimed, had been angered by the Israeli venture (PA ministry of transportation Facebook page, August 31, 2022).



Palestinians waiting to be checked in at Ramon International Airport (Ramallah News, August 24, 2022).



The Allenby Crossing

(Right: Paldf Twitter account, July 17, 2022; Left: Ultra Palestine, July 16, 2022).

► **PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh** gave a speech at the opening of the al-Rama power plant in the Jordan Valley, **attended by Jordanian Prime Minister Bisher al-Khasawneh**. Shtayyeh said Israel's intention in opening the airport was to attack Palestinian-Jordanian relations, and the Ramon International Airport or any other airport was not a replacement for the depth of the Palestinians' relations with Jordan. He added that anyone who wanted to make life easier for the Palestinians should open an airport in Jerusalem [a hint to Israel to open the airport at Atarot, north of Jerusalem, which the Palestinians call the "al-Quds airport" or the "Qalandiya airport"] which the Palestinians were capable of operating (Muhammad Shtayyeh's Facebook page, August 24, 2022).



Muhammad Shtayyeh speaking at the opening ceremony (Muhammad Shtayyeh's Facebook page, August 24, 2022).

The PLO

► **Wa'el Abu Yusuf, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee**, said the Palestinian leadership opposed Israel's move, which was meant to fool the world and improve Israel's image. For that reason, he called on the Palestinian public not to fly from Ramon Airport (al-Andalou News, August 26, 2022).

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

► The PFLP also called on the Palestinian public not to use Ramon Airport because it would only entrench the "occupation" more strongly. The PFLP claimed Israel's objective in letting Palestinians use the airport was to damage Palestinian-Jordanian relations and improve Israel's economy. Operations at Ramon Airport would have a direct negative impact on the Jordanian economy. According to the PFLP, Israel's "plan to isolate the Palestinians from the Arab nation" will fail (al-Quds, August 25, 2022).

Hamas

► **Mahmoud al-Zahar, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, claimed all of Palestine was occupied land, and that included Ramon Airport. He said Israel's ("the occupation") announcement about using the airport infringed on the right of the Palestinians and of Hamas, rights which Israel denied. Therefore, Palestinians had to decide if flying through Ramon Airport favored or hindered the interests of the Palestinian cause (Dunia al-Watan, September 1, 2022).

► The Twitter account of the **Hamas-affiliated Shehab news network** issued a video blaming the PA and Mahmoud Abbas and claiming they were responsible for opening Ramon Airport to Palestinians going abroad. According to the video, the plot had been concocted in July 2022 by Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Mahmoud Abbas, and it was a direct attack on Jordan's economy. The video also accused the PA of not having done anything to prevent local residents from using Ramon Airport (Shehab Twitter account, August 28, 2022).



Right: Palestinian cartoon showing the plane [that took off from Ramon Airport] as an aerial prison (Facebook page of Muhammad Sabaana, August 22, 2022). Left: Palestinian cartoon claiming it did not matter if Palestinians left through Ramon Airport and returned through the Allenby Crossing because Israel had full control of both (Facebook page of Muhammad Sabaana, August 24, 2022).



A unique Palestinian cartoon in favor of Ramon Airport because of the difficulties and complexities of going through the Allenby Crossing compared with flying from the airport. "Long story short..." (al-Ha'msa news website in the Gaza Strip, August 30, 2022).

Jordan

► Israel was also criticized by Jordan. For example, the London-based *al-Araby al-Jadeed* reported Jordanians were dissatisfied and angry because Ramon Airport might cause economic difficulties for the airport in Amman (*al-Araby al-Jadeed*, August 25, 2022).

Palestinian Political Commentary

Independent commentators

► **Akram Ata Allah, a Palestinian political commentator**, said the interests of Jordan had to come first. He said that in a Jordanian-Israeli equation, Israel ("the occupier ruling the Palestinians") was the stronger side and therefore made the decisions. Jordan, he said, was vulnerable and weaker. The PA, he said, was marginal because it had no control over the crossings or flights, and its hold over the West Bank was declining in the wake of Israeli control and general burnout. He added that many senior PA figures flew in and out through Ben-Gurion Airport, so they could not prevent civilians from using Ramon Airport. However, he said, since it was in Jordan's interest for them to go through the crossings, that was the important, necessary arrangement, and it has to be promoted without hesitation in every way. Jordanian-Palestinian interests had to prevail, not Israeli interests (*al-Ayam*, August 26, 2022).

► **Hani al-Masri, a Palestinian political commentator, who is the chairman of the Palestinian Center For Policy Research And Strategic Studies (Masarat)**, wrote that the PA's position on flights leaving from Ramon Airport was widely criticized and ridiculed.

- ◆ In the first place, because the PA had been silent for months, and only with the first outbound flight did they threaten to punish people who used the airport. Second,

because thousands of senior Palestinians from the private sector, members of NGOs and their families, and holders of VIP permits and BMCs (businessman cards) use Ben-Gurion Airport.

◆ For the PA to prove it was serious about its opposition, it would require decisions from every level, beginning with Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO Executive Committee, the prime minister and the government ministers, to have the police, the security forces and the relevant ministries ban the use of both Ramon Airport and Ben-Gurion Airport.

◆ He added that the PA had to work with Jordan to improve conditions at the Allenby Crossing regarding time, cost and the treatment of travelers, and to exert Palestinian-Jordanian pressure on Israel to make passage through the crossing easier and to keep it open around the clock, as American President Joe Biden promised at his last visit (al-Quds, August 23, 2022).

► **Jamal Zaqout, a member of the Palestinian National Council and one of the leaders of the second intifada**, claimed the PA had to take full responsibility for protecting the rights of Palestinians to freedom of movement and passage through all the existing crossings. The PA also had to demand that the Arab states and the rest of the world intervene to force Israel to abide by the rules of international law and the Geneva Conference, which ensured Palestinians freedom of movement. Israel also had to be forced to obey the protocols of the crossings agreement, which ensured unlimited freedom of movement, including operating secure passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (al-Quds, August 30, 2022).

► **Bassem Barhoum, a Palestinian political commentator with *al-Hayat al-Jadeeda***, wrote that the deception of making it easier for Palestinians to travel abroad through Ramon Airport was not a solution for the suffering the travelers endured. They had to undergo a large number of procedures and could only travel to a limited number of destinations, but more important was to prevent Israel from exploiting the suffering of the Palestinians to operate their failing airport. He claimed Israel could not be allowed to drive a wedge between the Palestinians and the Jordanians, a trap they should not fall into (*al-Hayat al-Jadeeda*, August 30, 2022).

Hamas-affiliated commentators

► **Fayiz Abu Shamala, a political commentator from Khan Yunis**, wrote that every Palestinian civilian had the right to a Palestinian airport through which he could fly far from

the agony of the crossings. However, the Palestinian leadership had not made the dream come true, and the Jordanian leadership did not provide an easy, cheap crossing for Palestinians wanting to use its airport. According to Abu Shamala, operating Ramon Airport was a way to circumvent the Palestinian airport at Qalandiya, and was one of the "lies of goodwill gestures" for the residents of the West Bank. It was also, he claimed, a step on the way to sending the residents of the Gaza Strip to the outside world through the same Ramon Airport in order to put an end to the Palestinian demand for an airport in the Gaza Strip. All of the above required the Palestinian and Jordanian leaderships to examine their political actions and return to the source of the conflict, which was the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and the denial of Palestinian rights (Filastin al-Yawm, August 25, 2022).

► **Assam Shavar, a political commentator from Qalqilya**, wrote in the newspaper *Felesteen* that there was no difference between Ramon Airport and Ben-Gurion Airport, as there was no difference between the settlements in the West Bank and the Jewish cities inside the Green Line, they were all constructed illegally on occupied Palestinian lands. Even if the PA lasted a thousand years it would never convince the Palestinians that there was a difference, he claimed. Ordinary Palestinians would never believe that flying from Ben-Gurion Airport was unpatriotic, while for senior Palestinian figures and important civilians to fly from the airport was normal. They would also never believe that boycotting work and goods made in the settlements was patriotic, while on the other hand they were encouraged to find work inside the Green Line and use products made in Israel (Palestine Online, August 29, 2022).

► According to a posting to the **Hamas-affiliated alresala.net website**, the PA claims it opposes Palestinians flying from Ramon Airport because it undermines the project of establishing a Palestinian state. However, the PA's proclaimed public position contradicts its actions: senior PA figures and diplomats fly from "occupation" airports on "occupation" airlines, and it is amazingly easy for them to pass back and forth through the border crossings to and from Israel and Jordan. If Palestinians become convinced to fly from Ramon Airport instead of going through Jordan, the PA will lose an important part of its control over Palestinian journeys and Israel ("the occupation") will benefit and reap economic and political fruits. It will also have a negative influence on the PA's strong relations with Jordan, its main regional ally (alresala.net, August 27, 2022).