

## **Alaa Tartir** **‘Prisoners’ of Israeli airspace**

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## ‘Prisoners’ of Israeli airspace

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[Alaa Tartir](#) [1] 12 September 2011

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Two uncomfortable flights pose some difficult questions.

I never imagined you could be imprisoned in airspace. I always assumed prisons would be on the ground, rooted to the ground. I was wrong. Unfortunately, on returning from Ramallah to London, flying via the obligatory Amman as a Palestinian living in the West Bank, I encountered a new form of incarceration as we went through Israeli airspace which I might call, ‘plane arrest’. The ‘passenger/prisoner’ is denied certain small but basic human rights such as the opportunity to use the toilet, being served with food and drinks, or moving between the seats to chat with friends.

I am fully aware that the ‘denial’ of these human needs while flying in Israeli airspace is paltry in comparison with the everyday violations of human rights that the Palestinians suffer on the ground as a result of Israeli occupation and also trivial in comparison with other violations of human rights in the region. It may seem silly to raise such issues now, while the Middle East is re-birthing itself, while civilians are being killed in Syria and elsewhere in the revolutions for rights in the Arab world, and also while thousands of Israelis are protesting in Israel and demanding ‘social justice’ from their own unjust system. However, I would like to know how many people from all over the world are imprisoned like this on any given day in Israeli airspace?

In late June it was around 45 minutes to landing in my Easyjet to Amman when the pilot asked all the passengers to remain seated with their seat belt on. We were not allowed to move. I happily thought we might be arriving early, but was soon disabused of this notion when the crew manager started shouting angrily: ‘Sit down.... sit down now... you are not allowed to move...sit down’. My next thought was that we had a potential ‘terrorist’ on board who was trying to hijack our flight. But that potential ‘terrorist’ soon turned out to be a four year old boy with an urgent need to use the toilet, accompanied by his mother. She said: ‘we are so far from landing... you didn’t announce that we are landing shortly and this boy needs to go to the toilet now’. Further remonstrations on her part, however, joined by those of the boy’s father, proved equally futile: the rule was absolute. As a result, the remaining hour that we had to wait was smelly and unpleasant for all involved.

I left the plane thinking, what was all that about? However, a month later I discovered part of the answer. On the way back to London from Amman, during this house/plane arrest, I was sitting in the front seats opposite the crew manager, and within chatting distance. The pilot announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, we are now entering Israeli airspace and due to security requirements, all passengers must remain seated with their seatbelts fastened until further notice after crossing Israeli airspace”. This time I was in the embarrassing position of a junior school pupil, but was able at least to lean over to the crew manager and ask discreetly: “I am in urgent need of using the toilet. Can I please use it?” In return, she confided: “Sorry sir, this is not allowed at the moment, please wait and

hold it". I tried again, and was again refused. I asked: "Why?", and was told, "Due to the rules and regulations". I asked which rules and regulations? After some hesitation, she said, "I truly don't know, but we have been told that if any passenger moves, this will be a threat to Israeli security".

I asked her, calmly, to tell me more: how would I be a threat to Israeli security if I used the toilet on the plane? Wasn't a passenger who wished to understand this prohibition owed some kind of explanation? She promised to ask the pilot for more information but she never got back to me on the question. I asked her how she felt about this 'house/plane arrest' for herself and for the passengers that she flies with to Amman? While she blushed uncomfortably, the passenger next to me, introducing himself as an American Jew who "believed in Israel as a Jewish state" said: "... Aha, so if you are to be believed, the government of Israel is also arresting us, the Jewish people!" I decided to leave him to draw his own conclusions on this score.

What concerns me here is how these different airlines who cross Israeli airspace seem to accept this role of 'arresting' their own passengers? What kind of rationale is behind the set of rules that allow this every day imprisonment? How can global civil aviation regulations allow Israel to get away with it? Why does the 'international community' allow Israel to do this without question? And what would happen if every country on this globe decided to imitate Israel's authoritarian measures for their own 'security' reasons? Well, just imagine one short flight from Amman to London if passengers couldn't use the toilets. If only for hygienic reasons, I decided that one ought to raise this issue right now before there is any further deterioration in the way we air passengers can expect to be treated.

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 About the author

Alaa Tartir is a Palestinian PhD candidate in Development Studies and Global Governance at the London School of Economics, researching the role of good governance in state formation in Palestine. His research areas include international aid and development, non-governmental organizations, public policies, and politics. He is also a research fellow at the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute-MAS.



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