

# The Israeli links behind Palestinian refugee flights

3h ago

More than 150 Palestinian refugees landed at OR Tambo International Airport last week. Many did not know where they had landed.

- **The SA aviation operator Global Airways confirmed that it handled both flights.**
- **The previous group that arrived quietly on 20 October were arranged by the same intermediaries.**
- **The Palestinians on board booked their flights online, through the aid organisation Al-Majd Europe.**

The two charter flights that brought Palestinian refugees to South Africa over the past month may be just the tip of the iceberg.

City Press' sister publication Rapport has learnt that South African aviation operators had already received requests for a dozen such flights as far back as August.

The latest flight, which landed at OR Tambo International Airport in the past week, with 153 refugees on board, was arranged by a dubious "humanitarian aid organisation" with an address in Jerusalem.

The aviation operator that in turn paid for the South African charter flight has its head office in Tel Aviv.

**The flight departed from an Israeli Air Force base about a two-hour drive south of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, in the Negev Desert.**

The flights are believed to be linked to Israel's plan to remove as many Palestinians as possible from the Gaza Strip to other countries under so-called "voluntary migration".

Last week's flight was initially intended to arrive during the G20 summit in South Africa.

With the world's eyes on the country and large numbers of official delegations at the summit, the intention was reportedly to leave the authorities with no choice but to accommodate the group.

The organisers suspected the group might have problems with customs control, but also knew it would be embarrassing for South Africa to scramble to accommodate them.

It is unclear when the other planned flights might arrive, or whether they will still go ahead in light of the row that has now erupted.

Last week's group of refugees, as well as the previous group that arrived quietly on 20 October, were arranged by the same intermediaries.

**READ: [From Gaza to JHB: Palestinian says he boarded plane without knowing ultimate destination](#)**

The South African aviation operator Global Airways confirmed that it had handled both flights. The airline is regularly involved in the repatriation of refugees to and from South Africa and therefore ensures that the passenger manifests and other particulars are in order before a flight arrives in the country.

Both charter flights were coordinated from Nairobi by KT Air International. KT Air's head office is in Tel Aviv. The company did not respond to enquiries.

**The Palestinians on board booked their flights online through the aid organisation Al-Majd Europe, in an attempt to escape the war temporarily – not to seek refugee status in another country.**

Al-Majd arranged for the groups to be picked up by bus and taken across the border into Israel.

They were forbidden to take any luggage other than a small backpack. The Palestinians paid between \$1 000 and \$1 500 (R17 000 to R25 700) per person. These tickets included seven days' hotel accommodation.

According to Na'eem Jeenah, a senior researcher at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, the first group of refugees were housed in Johannesburg hotels on their arrival on 20 October.

After that, the organisers cut all contact with the Palestinians.

On its website, Al-Majd claims the organisation was established in Germany in 2010. However, the German address does not exist.

**Moreover, the group's website was only created this year – shortly after the Israeli government began openly referring to 'voluntary migration' as part of its plans in the Gaza Strip.**

The address and telephone number for Al-Majd on the website are in Jerusalem.

Throughout the process of arranging the flights, the Palestinians had only a single telephone number and contact person. Since leaving Israel, however, they have been unable to get hold of him.

He did, however, call Jeenah out of the blue at OR Tambo airport and asked what role within government Jeenah occupies.

He also wanted to know whether Jeenah and the relief organisation Gift of the Givers would smooth over the problems at the airport.

On the group's arrival, the Border Management Authority noted that none of them had exit stamps in their Palestinian passports, indicating that they had left Israel.

**The group did not know where they were going and could not provide an address for their stay in South Africa – all of this forms part of routine immigration-control questioning at the airport.**

Most of the group were not proficient in English either, which caused further confusion.

The group did not wish to apply for asylum, nor to seek refugee status.

Home Affairs Minister Dr Leon Schreiber said in a statement that the majority of the group were eventually admitted to the country as tourists.

As such, they have 90 days to decide where they want to go.

Over the course of the day, 23 had already departed on connecting flights to, among other places, Australia and Egypt.

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Global Aviation says the paperwork, passenger manifest and other documentation comply with all South African immigration requirements.

Online, however, there are warnings on various social media

platforms cautioning refugees against using Al-Majd, describing it as a “highly suspicious” organisation that probably has direct links to the Israeli authorities.

Online news outlets in Gaza have also warned prospective refugees that the organisation’s address and contact details cannot be verified.

Although the website provides for donations, there is no registration number as a relief organisation, and the photos on the website were generated by artificial intelligence.

Residents of Gaza are reportedly being targeted with offers to apply for resettlement in various countries in South-east Asia, especially Indonesia.

Al-Majd likewise did not respond to Rapport’s enquiries.

President Cyril Ramaphosa told News24 that the government was conducting an investigation to establish how the chaotic arrangements took place without South African authorities being informed in advance.

“Out of compassion, out of empathy, we must receive them [the Palestinian refugees] and address the situation they face,” he said.

The group includes at least one heavily pregnant woman and families with young children.