



Policy Brief

Ramon Airport Controversy

September
2022

Introduction

Apparently for economic reasons and to demonstrate goodwill vis-à-vis the Palestinians at the time of US President Biden's visit to the region in July of this year, Israel recently announced that it would allow Palestinians from the occupied West Bank to travel abroad through Ramon Airport near Eilat. A first flight carrying 43 passengers left for Cyprus on 22 August 2022. So far, no further flights have taken place, although preparations are reportedly underway for regular flights for Palestinian passengers from Ramon Airport.

The news of Palestinian use of Ramon Airport has raised concerns in Jordan, with several politicians and commentators warning of economic implications for the Kingdom. Some have gone as far as calling for a ban on those Palestinians making use of the Ramon travel option – allegedly amounting to no normalization – to enter Jordan. The Palestinian leadership has tried to diffuse tensions with Jordan over the matter.

To explore the issue in greater detail, ARDD convened a roundtable at its offices in Amman on 28 August 2022 attended by several prominent experts on Jordanian and Palestinian affairs (see list of participants in the annex). The aim of the meeting was to develop recommendations to guide public opinion and decision-makers about measures and tools to respond to the decision to operate Ramon Airport for Palestinian travelers.

This note provides background information with respect to the issue (Section 2) and summarizes the main insights from the discussion (Section 3). The note ends with several policy recommendations (Section 4).

Background

The Israeli rationale to operate Ramon Airport for Palestinian travelers

The airport, located in the southern Negev desert, was first opened in January 2019, and cost an estimated \$600 million to construct. At the time, Israel sought to ease the pressure on its main Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv, especially during the summer. However, it failed to live up to expectations. Hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, the airport's distance from central cities and the climate in southern Israel also created further obstacles. According to Israeli media, the airport hosted just a very small number of passengers on no more than a dozen international flights during the first months of operations, and operations of the airport have remained below expectations since. Against this backdrop, the decision to operate the airport for Palestinian passengers from the occupied West Bank, and possibly from the occupied and blockaded Gaza Strip, appears triggered primarily by domestic Israeli economic considerations.

Reactions in Jordan

At the time of construction, in 2015, Jordan submitted an official complaint to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) over the construction of Ramon Airport, which is located near King Hussein Airport in Aqaba. Jordan raised both security concerns and economic considerations. Ramon Airport is located a mere 350 meters from the Jordanian border, making it prone to potential terrorist attacks from Jordanian territory. In addition, the Jordanian aviation sector feared that the Israeli airport would have a negative impact on the Kingdom's own economy. The complaint was eventually dismissed by ICAO.

Similar sentiments have been expressed following the news of operating Ramon Airport for Palestinian travelers from the occupied West Bank. Annually, about a million Palestinians cross the King Hussein Bridge and Pal-

estinian travelers reportedly spend tens of millions on transportation, fees, food, shopping, and gifts. Jordanian tourism companies and travel offices report that half of their clientele are Palestinians from the West Bank. However, only approximately 120,000 Palestinians from the West Bank use Queen Alia Airport, representing a mere 5% of its 3 million annual travelers.

Palestinian reactions

The official position of the Palestinian Authority appears to be a rejection of the project. But lacking sovereignty and with the occupied West Bank's economy deeply connected to Israel's, it would be unable to influence the outcome even if it wanted to. Officials have, however, urged Palestinians not to use the airport, with Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh saying, "should the occupation want to ease up for the Palestinians, let them open Jerusalem Airport," referring to the long-disused Kalandia airport near Ramallah.

The Palestinian popular response to the decision has reportedly been more positive. As soon as Israel announced the plan, several tourism offices in the occupied West Bank, especially in Bethlehem and Hebron, rushed to announce competitive offers for Palestinians to the airport via the Dhahiriya crossing south of Hebron. According to some travel and tourism offices in the West Bank, there has been a huge response from Palestinians to the announcement. This is generally attributed to the high cost of traveling through Jordan, especially due to Israel's limited opening times at the King Hussein Bridge crossing, which often leaves travelers stranded for hours and the high cost of traveling through Queen Alia Airport.

Observers and analysts reportedly believe that if the project succeeds in its pilot phase, residents of the blockaded Gaza Strip could in the future also be allowed access to Ramon Airport. Sources close to Hamas reportedly indicate that the movement would not object to the use of Ramon Airport if it would alleviate the suffering of those using the Rafah crossing.

Palestinian travel restrictions

The right to travel is enshrined in international human rights law, with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulating that “everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (art. 13.2) and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights asserting the same in its article 12. The right is not absolute and may be subjected to restrictions provided by law that are necessary to protect national security, public order, public health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others.

Palestinian residents in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip face great hardship in traveling abroad due to the absence of Palestinian airports¹ and severe restrictions on movement under Israel’s military occupation.

Palestinian residents of the occupied West Bank who wish to travel abroad have been forced to use Queen Alia International Airport near Amman, after passing through the King Hussein /Allenby Bridge crossing between the West Bank and Jordan. Palestinians must pass through three different security stations before being allowed to enter Jordan, with few Palestinians able to obtain the special permits required to travel via Israel’s Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv.

For residents of Gaza, these restrictions are even more convoluted. Palestinians hoping to leave the besieged coastal territory face arbitrary restrictions from Egyptian authorities and a large number often have to pay bribes to leave via the Rafah Crossing. Gazans are banned from leaving via Israel as part of Tel Aviv’s 15-year blockade, with travel through Egypt the only gateway to the world. The journey, however, is arduous. It takes at least seven hours to reach Cairo by land due to security measures adopted by the Egyptian government, with the total travel time from Gaza to Cairo often exceeding 18 hours. Costs can also be exorbitant, reaching \$300 often just for transportation from Rafah border to Cairo.

Turkish involvement?

According to media reports, different Turkish airlines may be the ones that will organize flights for Palestinian passengers from Ramon Airport to different international destinations via Istanbul and Antalya. If this indeed materializes, it will enhance the Turkish political role as a supporter of the Palestinian cause and an intermediary between Israel and the Palestinians.

Discussion's Highlights

There was broad agreement among participants that the controversy surrounding the operation of Ramon Airport is primarily, if not exclusively, about economic competition between Jordan and Israel. Apart from possibly contributing to containing the volatile situation in the occupied West Bank, Israel seems first and foremost concerned about the economic viability of Ramon Airport. And if the airport would appeal to Palestinian travelers to the point that they start making use of it in significant numbers, this would come in direct competition with Queen Alia Airport, for which travel by West Bank Palestinians is a significant source of revenue (which however should not be overstated – see above).

Palestinians should not be blamed – and not be accused of normalization – for using Ramon Airport, especially in a situation where VIP business and political officials are authorized by Israel to use Lod (Ben Gurion) Airport. They are fully entitled to avail themselves from any measures that alleviate the personal and financial hardship of travel. However, it was observed that, unlike Queen Alia Airport, Ramon Airport is not a major transport hub which means that those traveling other than to Turkey or Cyprus (on a vacation package using chartered flights) will have to buy an onward ticket which would increase the overall cost of the travel.

Participants also asserted that Jordan has little leverage with respect to Ramon Airport, including its use by Palestinian passengers. Jordan unsuccessfully protested the construction of the airport on several occasions, highlighting both security and economic considerations, and raising concerns anew seems unlikely to yield results (though it might wish to remind Israel of the security implications of the airport being located a mere 350 meters from the Jordanian border).

Participants referred to the hardships to which West Bank Palestinians are exposed when traveling through the King Hussein crossing. Whilst these are partly due to the constraints of Palestinian travel operators in Jericho as well as humiliating controls and delays on the Israeli side, Jordan can do more to facilitate Palestinian traffic through the crossing, including by lowering/canceling fees such as the 10 JD collected from every individual using the crossing. Concerns were also expressed that the so-called VIP service at the Bridge has become corrupted and highly expensive. It was mentioned that Jordan has included in its current budget 150 million JD to upgrade the King Hussein crossing. In this context, it was mentioned that it is apparently in Jordan’s power to allow residents of East Jerusalem to cross the bridge by car.

Recommendations

Resilience against disinformation

- Making sure that discussion of new developments – such as that with respect to Ramon Airport – and the development of policy thereon, is based on an accurate and comprehensive assessment of the facts, rather than rumors.
- In the sphere of Jordanian Palestinian relations and Jordanian Israeli relations, pertinent knowledge must be institutionalized – through think tanks or otherwise – so that it can be tapped into when the need arises.

Political and security levels

Jordan may wish to

- Politicize the issue with respect to Ramon Airport in its relationship with Israel and the Palestinians, as one affecting the Kingdom both economically and in view of its intimate connection with the Palestinian people, using all diplomatic, legal, and political means at its disposal.
- Solicit the support of Jordanian public opinion to advance Jordan’s interest in the subject. The recent workshop served as the first step toward this aim, and it is recommended that further dialogue on the subject and related issues continue.
- Relaxing security restrictions that prevent the entry of some travelers who wish to transit Jordan through the King Hussein Bridge. This could be combined with the establishment of a ‘transit corridor’ between the Bridge and Queen Alia Airport to be used by those not provided with regular entry to Jordan.
- Remind Israel of the security risks represented by the fact that the airport is only 350 meters away from the Jordanian border.

Economically and logistically

- As the issue is primarily a case of commercial competition, Jordan should do what is in its power to facilitate the crossing of Palestinian passengers across the King Hussein Bridge, including upgrading the terminal building, tighter control over transport providers, etc.
- Allowing Palestinians from Israel as well as residents of East Jerusalem to cross the King Hussein Bridge with their car, issuing special number plates to them as is the case with those entering Jordan from Israel using the Sheikh Hussein Bridge in the North.
- Stimulating travel through King Hussein Airport in Aqaba, including by Palestinian travelers.

Annex – Participants to the roundtable on 28 August 2022

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| • Oraib Al-Rantawi | • Manen Hattab | • Hassan Al Husaini |
| • Dr. Anis Al Qasem | • Murad Al-Adayleh | • Awad Al-Malahemeh |
| • Zuhdi Janbek | • Duraid Mahasneh | • Tawfiq Al-Muhaibin |
| • Daoud Kuttab | • Jamal Lattouf | • Michel Nazzal |
| • Dr. Ghaida Abu Ruman | • Dr. Raad Al-Tal | • Marwan Shehadeh |
| | • Suhair Jaradat | • Samar Muhareb |

¹ Kalandia airport, currently known as Atarot Airport, located in the West Bank between Jerusalem and Ramallah has been non-accessible for Palestinian passengers almost since the start of the Israeli occupation in 1967. Gaza International Airport was opened in 1998 and was bombed into ruins by Israel in 2000.

The Question of Palestine Program

Given the centrality of the Question of Palestine to the renaissance of the Arab world and taking into account the alarming developments related to Jerusalem and Palestinian refugees in 2018, ARDD launched its Question of Palestine Program with the aim of establishing a platform in the Arab world for critical reflection with respect to these unresolved problems.

As an integral part of the program, ARDD established the Global Network for the Question of Palestine (GNQP), under the patronage of HRH Prince Hassan. The network comprises an expanding group of Palestinian, regional, and international experts, senior and youth leaders, and organizations concerned with the Question of Palestine.

The program focuses on three main themes: Palestinian Refugees; Decolonizing Palestine; Accountability and Reparations.