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'I won't fly refugees to their deaths': The EI AI pilots resisting deportation

- To understand - Testimony -

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By Yael Marom |Published January 22, 2018 in +972 Blog.

At least three pilots for Israel's flag carrier publish declarations publicly refusing to take part in the forced deportation of asylum seekers should they be asked to. The Israeli government is giving tens of thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers a stark choice: deportation or indefinite imprisonment.



An El Al pilot hangs out the window of one of the carrier's planes. (Illustrative photo by Tomer Neuberger/Flash90)

At least three El Al pilots in recent days published public declarations of their refusal to take part in the deportation of asylum seekers to countries where their lives may be in danger.

Captain Yoel Piterberg, a pilot on Israel's national airline, wrote the following on Facebook (Hebrew):

«Israel is populated primarily by Jews who, in their near and distant pasts, were refugees in countries around the world. The vast majority became citizens and a small number remained refugees. Most went through the Holocaust, many were forcefully expelled from their countries, and many others emigrated out of a desire to improve their lives in better countries that agreed to accept them.

Out of all people we, the Jews, must be attentive, empathetic, moral, and leaders of public opinion in the world in how we treat the migration of refugees, who have suffered and continue to suffer in their countries of origin.

[...]

I will not fly deported refugees against their will for the legal reason (there is no other legal reason) that they are likely to endanger the safety of the flight.»

In another Facebook post, El Al pilot Shaul Betzer wrote (Hebrew):

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«As part of the Jewish people, as someone who was raised and educated with Zionist values that renewed the existence of our nation in the Land of Israel, who has lived here his entire life, who has taken part in missions behind enemy lines, which required no small amount of courage and belief in the justness of our path, recognition of Jewish morality and the sanctity of every human being whoever they may be, all in order to ensure ourselves and the generations to come that we will never again be refugees and reliant on the goodness of others.

There is no way that as part of the flight crew, I will take part in flying refugees/asylum seekers on their way to a destination, in which their chance of survival after arrival ("a third country") is close to zero.

Not much courage is required for such a mission, but I will not be able to do what is required of me in such a mission. As a pilot and as a human being.»

A third EI Al pilot, Iddo Elad, wrote on his Facebook page (Hebrew): "I have joined many of my good friends, in declaring that I will not fly refugees to their deaths. I won't take part in that barbarism."

More than 7,500 Israelis signed a [petition](#), published by "Zazim Community Action" earlier this month, calling on the Israel Airline Pilots Association and ground services staff at Ben Gurion Airport to "stand on the right side of history and refuse participate in this immoral deportation."

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The deportation cannot be carried out without the cooperation of pilots, the Zazim petition noted. (Full disclosure: My life partner works for Zazim.) In the first nine months of 2017, over 200 deportations of asylum seekers "failed" because German pilots for Lufthansa and its subsidiary, Eurowings, [refused to take off with them on board](#), declaring that flight safety could be compromised if someone says they do not want to take the flight. In the UK last summer, a Turkish Airlines pilot [refused to take off](#) upon learning that a refugee was being deported against his will to Afghanistan.

In recent weeks the Israeli government [approved the deportation of refugees to third countries](#). According to the plan, the Holot desert detention facility, where many asylum seekers are held, will shut down and those who refuse to leave "voluntarily" to Rwanda and Uganda (and perhaps other countries) will be imprisoned indefinitely. According to numerous reports, [which Rwanda and Uganda have denied](#), Israel will pay those countries \$5,000 for each refugee they take in from Israel. Additionally, Israel will pay \$3,500 to each asylum seeker who agrees to leave, although that sum will get smaller over time, thereby incentivizing them to leave sooner than later.

The agreements between Israel and those two African countries are not new. For years now Israel has paid asylum seekers to leave to Rwanda and Uganda. Despite Israel's promises that those who agree to leave won't be in danger, hundreds of [testimonies](#) demonstrate that they are not actually given any status or remain welcome in those countries. Instead, they are forced into yet another life-threatening journey. They are vulnerable to exploitation and humiliation, human trafficking, frequent arrests, demands for bribes, and threats. Some of them fall victim to kidnapping gangs, [some into the hands of ISIS](#), and many choose to risk their lives trying to make it to Europe by boat.

It appears that all of the previous flights taking asylum seekers from Israel to Rwanda and Uganda were operated by non-Israeli airlines, including Ethiopian Airlines, and other carriers that service both Tel Aviv and Rwanda or Uganda. (There are no direct flights from Israel to either of those two countries.) It is unclear whether EI Al pilots will be asked to fly asylum seekers out of Israel, but declarations like those published by these three pilots send a message of solidarity to the asylum seekers and can perhaps influence pilots flying for other airlines that are being asked to carry out Israel's dirty work.

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