
Subject: Despite the longstanding supportive relationship between the American Evangelical Church and the State of Israel, there has been a disconnect between rhetoric and action. While Israel claims to be a democracy, supportive of religious freedom, American Christians are continually denied entry into the country based upon their beliefs and convictions. This overly discriminatory policy has resulted in harsh entry bans on Christians with no ill-intent towards the country.

According to the Ministry of Interior, “suspicion of missionary activity” is a viable reason for preventing entry into the State of Israel, despite the fact that **proselytization is legal** in the country (over the age of 18). These completely contradicting facts are not indicative of a first world democracy and strong ally of the American church. Further, the harshest penalty (10 year ban) is commonly reserved particularly for “Missionary Activity” or “involvement in BDS”. The equation of these two acts is simply unfathomable.

Purpose: A team of nine Overland staff were to start a base in Israel with the vision of partnering with local believers to share the Gospel and meet the needs of their communities. In order to do so, this team would register their organization as an International Aid Agency under Israeli Law.

Situation:

On 24 February 2019, Nick Amos and Jersey Hoffner boarded a flight in Chicago, IL to fly to Tel Aviv, IL and meet their fellow teammates. (Flight pattern: Chicago>Madrid>Tel Aviv) While in line to have her boarding pass printed in Madrid, Jersey Hoffner was approached by a security official and questioned about her intentions for coming to Israel. After being questioned, she received her ticket, proceeded to the gate where she rejoined with Nick Amos. Upon meeting him at the gate, both individuals were approached by security, separated, and interrogated by police for five hours. During this period, their bags were thoroughly searched, they were required to completely undress for searching, items were confiscated, and both missed their flight to Tel Aviv. They were subsequently informed that the airline (El Al) would not fly them to Israel and they would be transferred to Rome to travel with another airline.

Upon arriving in Rome, both individuals were again detained and interrogated for another two hours. They were told that the Israeli government had informed Italian police in advance of their arrival and that they should be detained.

After being questioned and forced to wait for the next-day flight, Jersey and Nick were flown from Rome to Tel-Aviv where they were detained upon arrival for nine hours. Again, they harshly and extensively interrogated and searched them. In addition, Israeli security confiscated Nick’s mobile device and read his texts, emails, etc. They took pictures and documented material found on the phone. Information obtained was mainly communications about Overland Missions logistics.

Throughout interrogation, Jersey and Nick were hesitant to explain any desire to practice their religion because of the harsh scrutiny this causes from Israel. Eventually, they were very transparent about Overland Missions and their intents, but it appears this was still not acceptable.

Nick and Jersey’s original intent was to enter on a tourist visa (for initial three months) while the team began the process of registering their organization in Israel, but they were never able to enter.

Conclusions:

- Both individuals were deported from Israel based on “public security/safety/order considerations”
- Both received a 10 year ban (Commonly reserved as harshest penalty for BDS or evangelism)
- Total time in custody: 14 hours in three different countries
- It took three days for them to arrive in Israel on a one layover itinerary because of interrogations.

Israeli Law on Religion and Evangelism:

“Proselytizing is legal, although it is illegal to proselytize to a person under 18 years of age without the consent of both parents. The law prohibits offering a material benefit in the course of proselytizing.” 2017 U.S. Dept. of State Report on International Freedom

“According to Supreme Court rulings, the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects freedom to practice or not practice religious beliefs, and worship, regardless of an individual’s religion. The law incorporates religious freedom provisions of international human rights covenants into the country’s body of domestic law.” 2017 U.S. Dept. of State Report on International Religious Freedom

Resources:

Cohen, Decker, Pex, & Brosh Law Office - Missionary Activity in Israel

<https://lawoffice.org.il/en/missionary-activity-in-israel/>

Times of Israel - Shin Bet has denied 250 people entry into the country this year

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/shin-bet-has-denied-250-people-entry-into-the-country-this-year-report/>

Times of Israel - Israel Turned Away a Record 19,000 visitors in 2018

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-turned-away-a-record-19000-visitors-in-2018/>

U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2017 - Israel

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280986>

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