

## **Israel's Aviation Policy in the Coming Years**

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In this lecture I will review my perception of the civilian aviation infrastructure, and will also include the activities of the Ministry of Transportation in these fields during the past years. One of the central problems that the Ministry of Transportation has had to deal with in recent years is the disgraceful condition of Israel's national airport. The infrastructure of the Ben-Gurion airport is outdated, and the airport is too small to contain the number of passengers who pass through it. The capacity of the airport today is twice as high as it was intended for. Because of this situation, the Ministry of Transportation has in recent years initiated a project to expand Ben-Gurion Airport, and the project is called "Ben-Gurion Airport 2000" ("Nut-Bug 2000"). Despite that, the fate of the "Ben-Gurion Airport 2000" project is similar to the fates of the other large infrastructure projects in Israel.

One of Israel's foremost tragedies is that there are no major national projects. Israeli bureaucracy quells almost every ministerial action, and this is expressed in a number of areas. The most serious sphere is in the Budget Department, which is supposed to approve budgets, and afterwards, when the money is received, through the controller. The second sphere is the planning institutes, and the third sphere is the Ministry of Justice and the State Controller. These latter ones are always badgering the initiators and scrutinizing every minor issue, and there is always the possibility of the slightest suspicion of irregularity being found, such as the wrong number of copies when submitting the tender, or another problem with authorizations, and this will 'throw a spanner' in the entire project. During the last few decades, almost every national infrastructure project was objected to from the outset by the Budget Department, who claimed that it was not economical. I don't want to say that projects should not be examined from an economical viewpoint, or that we should initiate uneconomical projects, but there must also be additional considerations taken into account. If we won't do that, we will have to cancel Zionism entirely and shut down the Jewish country, because it is probably the most uneconomical project that I know of.

If the problems cited by the Budget Department aren't enough, the planning division of the country treats national projects as if they were just closing in a patio in a private house. These projects need to undergo the bureaucratic steamroller of the local committee, the district committee and the higher committee – this was also the fate of the Ben-Gurion Airport 2000 project, which, additionally, was frozen because of a variety of objections and legal procedures instigated against it. To be fair it must be said that the Ministry of Interior gave high priority to the project, holding frequent meetings about it and hearing the objections of the sub-committees as quickly as possible.

The "Ben-Gurion Airport 2000" project, which is supposed to be inaugurated during 2002, is intended to get Israel out of the difficulty in which it finds itself and solve the problems of aviation for the median-range. However, I do not see this as a visionary solution for the State of Israel, or a long-range solution for a modern country interested in a high-quality of civilian aviation for its inhabitants.

The field of intra-national aviation is also a subject of high priority for the Ministry of Transportation. The volume of intra-national aviation has grown sharply during the past few years. If two years ago 250,000 passengers came to Mahanaim and Kiryat Shmoneh, now 400,000 passengers come to the north. A similar increase exists in flights to the south. This field requires high priority, as first and foremost, it gets many people off the ground, thus easing road traffic. A flight with 100 passengers from Tel Aviv to Kiryat Shmoneh means that there are going to be 100 fewer cars on the roads. Secondly, air transport shortens the travel time and bring the suburbs closer to the center. Thirdly we are contributing to increased road safety.

Sde Dov (Tel Aviv Air Port) is perhaps the most overt example of bureaucratic complexity that exists in Israel. Sde Dov is located between northern Tel Aviv and Herzliya on some of the most expensive land in the country, both from the point of the land itself and also the air cone. At one time I presented the government with three proposals from companies with experience in constructing sea-based airports who requested franchises from the State of Israel to construct an airport off of the Israeli shoreline. This proposal contained a number of important advantages: freeing up valuable land-space and changing its usage, decreasing the nuisance to the inhabitants of the area, and improving the country's interior infrastructure. Locating the airport in the ocean improves the infrastructure immeasurably, as we would like the airport to be located in the center of Tel Aviv so that it will be possible to reach it from the suburbs without getting stuck afterwards in the traffic jams at the entrance to Tel Aviv. It should be emphasized that this proposal does not require a single cent of state budget or Israeli taxpayers' money. Notwithstanding, instead of operating immediately to construct the project, the Ministry of Transportation was forced to conduct frantic correspondence with the parties involved on everything related to the administrative matters connected with the subject of the tenders, such as the way the tenders had been submitted, who were the lawyers who handled them, which experts had been invited from abroad, etc. For an entire year the Ministry of Transportation just dealt with administrative bureaucracy; in the meantime, there was a change in government and things started all over again. The Israeli authorities work in such a way that every time a new Transportation Minister is appointed to the job, the importance of this or that subject is raised, and he is asked to authorize people within the Ministry to continue the work. But, the Minister is only available to discuss these matters a few months later on, since aviation is not at the top of the list of his priorities, and even in the field of aviation there are always more important matters. At this stage, with a change in Ministers, there is no way of knowing when the new Minister will get around to dealing with the matter, if at all. The project of moving Sde Dov - which I believe will be an ultimate and exclusive solution to the problem of intra-national aviation, is today in danger and, in my opinion, will be a source of distress for generations of Israelis. Whoever believes that it is possible to concentrate the intra-national aviation in Ben-Gurion Airport is deluding himself, because if we haven't saved the inhabitants of the suburbs time being stuck in traffic jams at the entrance to Tel Aviv, we've not accomplished anything.

Another subject is the civilian use of military airfields. We have to be thankful, in Israel, to two entities who had controlled this area. One is the British, who constructed the airfields, and the second is the Turkish, who laid the train tracks. Since then, not one airfield has been built, nor one train-track laid down. For this reason there is no choice but to make the existing airfields serviceable. The Ministry of Transportation asked the Israel Air Force to make one of the military airfields serviceable and to turn it into a civilian airfield. In exchange, we offered

to give the Israel Air Force the area of the Herzliya airfield, that is also located on some of the most valuable land in the country and which - from the viewpoint of civilian aviation – is without any logical significance. We invested time in preparing a file with a number of alternatives to the Herzliya airfield, with the preference being the airfield at Ein Shemer. But during the discussions that were held with the Prime Minister, the Israel Air Force Commander claimed that the alternatives offered by us would not allow the Israel Air Force to protect Israel's airspace. The meeting ended without any decision being reached, and at the moment, the file is somewhere in the archives of the Ministry of Transportation, like an unturned stone. Although I don't want to disparage protection of Israeli airspace – a most important mission by all opinions – but anyone who sees the developing needs of civilian aviation realises that there is no escaping an immediate solution to this question, which will increasingly damage the quality of life of the country's inhabitants.

Another subject on our agenda is the Aqaba-Eilat airfield. The Eilat airfield, in its present location, is devoid of any logic. It is located on the most valuable land in Eilat, creates a real nuisance for residents at the hotels, and is also a problem from the viewpoint of the air cone since the construction in Eilat is disorganized and too close to the airfield – something which could result in disaster. Because of the problematic nature of the airfield, the proposal was to move it 14 kilometers northwards to Ein Evrona. However, in the meantime the joint Aqaba-Eilat project was initiated, and the previous tender was cancelled. The Aqaba-Eilat project has a number of advantages: firstly, joint economic/infrastructure projects are an excellent method of maintaining peace and stability in the area. Secondly, there is an excellent runway in Aqaba and it is possible to take advantage of the existing infrastructure in exchange for payment of levies and landing fees. All that remains is the construction of a terminal on the Israeli side, and on the Jordanian side. But for the past 18 months the project has been delayed and is being deliberated on in the Supreme Court, as the Green Movement submitted their protest objecting to construction of a terminal at Ein Evrona, claiming that it would harm the periphery of the nature reserve there. I believe that Aqaba-Eilat is the best and most proper infrastructure. We have already signed a joint agreement with the Jordanians, we have reached an understanding on the financial matters and have done successful trial landings of our planes at Aqaba. I hope that the matter will be decided soon at the Supreme Court and that there will be some progress on the subject.

Another subject connected with the aviation infrastructure is an airfield in Haifa. I think there is considerable importance to having an airfield in Haifa. In order to make the one-hour flight to Cyprus, residents of the north have to waste three hours travelling to Ben Gurion Airport, and waiting two hours to get onto the flight. Operating an airfield in Haifa will enable them to get to the airport nearest to their residence, alight the airplane with a shorter procedure and fly directly from Haifa to Cyprus. An airfield in Haifa could also be an important focus for regional flights, but for this purpose a private entity would be required to make repairs at the airfield and operate cheap flights from it.

In the Israeli reality, the Airport Authority is a monopolistic entity that dominates the airfields, isn't given to competition, and there is no degree of supervision on the degree of efficiency or the level of the charges that it makes. Opening this field to competition is necessitated by reality. In general, it is important to open the skies to competition. It is enough to look at the prices of flights to those destinations that are not open to charter flights, and we'll see that the prices of flights have decreased by as much as half, while the volume of passengers has

increased tremendously. But it is not possible to open really competitive aviation in Israel as long as the ground infrastructure is so backward. And if we've touched on the subject of opening the sky to competition, I'd like to say that I don't see anything to prevent us from privatizing the Israel national airline – El Al.

I'm sure that the subject of flights on Shabbat is an excuse for El Al to maintain its monopoly, and I'll not commit any sin by saying that – to the same degree as El Al has kept Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept El-Al. In my opinion, El Al has no option but to fly on Shabbat, otherwise the non-religious population will object, and they are not open to competition or increased efficiency. They should of course be concerned about religious employees, as part of the protection of the social rights of minorities, but apart from that I don't see any reason why El Al needs to avoid operating flights on Shabbat.

I would not be true to my work if I wouldn't mention the question of cargo. Goods come primarily from the south and are transported towards the center by trucks, and handled at the airport by the Maman Company who also not long ago gave up a monopoly in the field of conveyance. Transporting goods to the center creates a burden on the roads. I suggested establishing an alternate terminal at the military airport at the south of Beer Sheva and thus saving the heavy transportation of cargo to the center of the country. Most of the goods leave at night so there would be almost no disturbance of the Israel Air Force activities. But, apart from a declaration on the subject, nothing has yet actually been done about it. Yet, I have no doubt in my mind that this is the simplest, cheapest and most effective solution. What has been done in the cargo market is the development of a competitive market. The CAL Company received a licence to operate, and they are now fully operative as cargo transporters. A year after they have entered the market, we are witnessing a decrease in the prices of cargo transportation. It is surprising that the competition has also been good for El Al, and they showed a profit in the last quarterly balance sheet. Our job at the Ministry of Transportation is to concern ourselves with the welfare of the citizens of the State of Israel, and to improve their quality of life.

For this reason we are standing here and protesting that the existing infrastructure of aviation is retarded 50 years behind the needs of Israel, and is making every attempt to bring this subject higher on the public agenda. We anticipate battles ahead and a lot of bureaucratic difficulties, but we hope that awareness will start to penetrate and that we will start to make some significant advances in this field.