

Do You Want to Travel Around the Middle East? Think Twice!

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Featured image: empty Jordan – Syrian border post

Do you think it is that simple to travel around the Middle East? Think twice!

Ask Palestinians, about trying to get from a point A to a point B in their own nation.

Some time ago, sitting in an old Ottoman hotel in Bethlehem, I asked a waiter what it takes to travel from there to Gaza, where he said, several of his relatives were living. He looked at me as if I had fallen from the Moon:

“There is no way I could travel there. If my relatives get very sick or die, then, in theory, I could apply for an Israeli travel permit to go there, but there is absolutely no guarantee that they would approve, or that I could get to Gaza on time...”

I tried to appear naïve:

“And what if someone from an Arab country which does not recognize Israel, wants to come here, to Bethlehem? Like, a Lebanese pilgrim or just a tourist? Could he or she enter from Jordan?”

The waiter weighed for a while whether to reply at all, but then had mercy on me:

“West Bank... You know, it only appears on the maps as some sort of autonomous or independent territory. In reality, the borders and movement of the people have been fully controlled by the Israelis.”

My friend, a legendary left-wing Israeli human rights lawyer and a staunch Palestinian independence supporter, Linda Brayer, downed another cup of coffee and made several cynical remarks. She was actually illegally ‘smuggled’ by me into Bethlehem. As an Israeli citizen, she was not allowed to enter the West Bank at all, but since I was driving and she was with me, a foreigner, and on top of it she wore a headscarf (she converted to Islam several years earlier), the Israeli soldiers just let us pass without asking too many uncomfortable questions.

Bizarre, disgusting, and even mind-blowing? Not for us who live or operate in this part of the world! All this is by now considered as “business as usual”.

During the last Intifada, I hired a taxi in Jerusalem to the border with Gaza driven by a Russian-Israeli Jew, a student, who literally clashed with a border guard, demanding to be allowed to enter Gaza, in order to “see what my fxxxxing government is doing to the Palestinian people.”

They did not let him into Gaza. They detained him. As a foreigner, I entered. During my work in Gaza, an Israeli helicopter gunship fired at my hired car. It missed... But at least I was allowed to enter and work in Gaza. It is like Russian roulette: sometimes you get in, sometimes you don't, and no explanations are given.

That was the time when the new Gaza International Airport had just opened. After few days of fighting, the runway was bombed by the Israelis, all flights cancelled, and I had to, eventually make my way out through Egyptian Sinai.

Later, I also witnessed how brutal the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights has been; how it has divided countless families and communities. People are forced to shout at each other through the Israeli barbed-wire electric fences. The only way for the families to reunite, at least for a day or two, was to somehow get to Jordan.



Israeli tank being moved towards Golan Heights

The Syrian Golan Heights used to be famous for its delicious apples and ancient Druze community. It used to attract travelers from all over the world. Now it is occupied by Israel, and it is de-populated and monstrously militarized.

You want to travel there? You cannot; not anymore. It is off limits.

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For years and decades, this insanity of travel bans and restrictions, as well as barbed wire and watch towers, has been applying mainly (although not exclusively) to the territories occupied by Israel. However, now almost the entire Middle East is divided by conflicts, insane regulations and travel prohibitions.

Unless you are a war correspondent, a Western ‘advisor’, an intelligence agent or a ‘development worker’, don’t even think about going to Iraq. Almost like Afghanistan and

Libya, Iraq had been thoroughly wrecked by the Western coalition and its allies. On top of it, to get visa there is now close to impossible. In the recent past, the Westerners flooded Erbil and its surroundings; the main city of what was called, unofficially, 'Iraqi Kurdistan'. The place used to be governed by the independence-seeking and shamelessly pro-Western 'elites', and it used to have its own visa regime. Now even this area is more or less off limits to foreigners.

Syria is still a war zone, although its government, which is supported by the majority of the Syrian people, is clearly winning the brutal conflict ignited and fueled by the West and its 'client' states.

Syria used to be one of the safest, the most educated and advanced countries in the region, built on solid socialist principles. It used to have an impressive scientific base, as well as dozens of world-class tourist attractions. Therefore, applying Western imperialist logic, it had to be first smeared, and then attacked and destroyed.

Logically, Syria is not issuing tourist visas to the citizens of the countries that are trying to destroy it.

Next door, Lebanon is still suffering from the flood of refugees, from geographical isolation and from the various dormant and semi-active terrorist cells.

Travelling from Lebanon to Syria is now almost impossible, or at least very dangerous and difficult. Lebanese citizens can still enter, but 'at their own risk'.

In the not so distant past, people used to drive from Beirut to Europe and vice-versa, via Turkey and Syria. Now this option is just a sweet memory. But then again, in the very distant past, I am often reminded, it was not unusual for the Lebanese middle class to spend a weekend in Haifa, driving their own cars. Now the border between Lebanon and Israel is hermetically sealed. Both countries are technically at war. The U.N. patrols the so-called Blue Line. Apart from drones and Israeli war planes en-route to bombing Syria, nothing can cross.

All along the Turkish-Syrian border, both sides are suffering. Of course, the Syrian people are suffering much more, being victims of the direct Turkish military adventures. But also Turks are now paying a very high price for the war: they are suffering from terrorist attacks, as well as from the total collapse of trade between the two countries. Many villages around Hatay and Gaziantep are quickly turning into ghost towns.



Turkey building new huge wall on Syrian border

For instance, cities like Adana in Turkey and Aleppo in Syria used to be connected by motorways, enjoying constant flows of people from both ends. There was bustling trade, as well as tourism, and social visits. Now, Ankara has been building an enormous concrete wall between the two countries. No traffic can pass through the border, except Turkish military convoys.

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For years and decades, it has been impossible to enter Saudi Arabia as a tourist. This fundamentalist Wahabbi 'client' state of the West simply does not recognize the existence of tourism, or leisure travel. To enter the KSA, it has to be either for business or religious pilgrimage.

With its huge territory, the KSA effectively divides the entire Gulf region, when it comes to transportation and the movement of people. There are some loopholes, and 'transit visas' can be obtained (with some luck, difficulties and expense), for instance, for those people driving their own vehicles or taking a bus from Jordan to Bahrain, or to Oman.

Traveling to culturally the most exciting country in the Gulf – Yemen – is now absolutely impossible. Yemen used to be one of the jewels of historic architecture and civilization, counting such cities as Sanaa, Zabid and Shibani. Now the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is occupying the city of Aden and the coast, while Saudi forces are brutally bombing the rest of the country, which is controlled by the rebels.

Then, there is a bizarre conflict which brewing between Qatar (the richest country in the Gulf with the substantial U.S. military presence as well as huge local business-controlled media conglomerate *Al-Jazeera*), and several other Arab allies of the West, including Saudi Arabia. Borders are presently closed and insults are flying. There is the growing possibility of a military confrontation. Qatar is being accused, cynically, of 'supporting terrorism', as if the

KSA was not doing precisely the same.

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Flying around the region has become a Kafkaesque experience.

All Middle Eastern and Gulf airlines are avoiding Israel. Some fly over Syria but most of them, don't. The once mighty and now deteriorating Qatar Airways is clearly forbidden to enter the airspace of Saudi Arabia as well as of the United Arab Emirates.

Recently I travelled with *Qatar* from Beirut to Nairobi, Kenya. It used to be a simple, comfortable commute, which has recently turned into a terrible nightmare. Unable to fly over Syrian and Saudi airspace, a plane has to first fly in totally the opposite direction, northwest, over Turkish airspace, then over Iran, making a huge, almost 90 minutes detour. On the second leg, a trip of less than 4 hours now takes more than 5 hours and 30 minutes! The plane flies directly away from Africa, towards Iran, and then makes a huge loop, avoiding both the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Lebanese MEA (*Middle Eastern Airlines*) is one of the few airlines that ignores all this, flying directly over Syria, and towards the Gulf states. Most of the others don't dare. But MEA has to avoid Israeli airspace, making often interesting final approaches to Rafik Hariri Int'l Airport.

The exception is Turkish Airlines which basically flies over everything and into everywhere, including Israel itself.

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This essay is not only about the politics and what has led to the present situation, although it is clear that we are talking here, above all, about the neo-colonialist arrangement of the world.

Political nightmare unleashed by the 'traditional' Western colonialist powers and their 'client states', has led to the geographical divisions; to a perverse state of affairs in this part of the world. Increasingly, the people are losing control over their own nations and the entire region. They have already lost the ability to move about freely through it.

Of course, something similar exists in many other places, including the South Pacific. There, I described the situation in my book *Oceania*. An entire huge part of the world has been literally cut to pieces by the neo-colonialist powers and their geo-political interests and designs: the U.S., France, Australia and New Zealand have plainly overrun and shackled Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. A once proud and unique part of the world has been fragmented internally: people are brutally separated and forced to depend almost exclusively on the West.

In the Middle East, divisions, walls and barbed wire, are now everywhere; they are visible to the naked eye, but they are also 'inside' peoples' minds, damaging the human psyche, making dreams of unity and a common future look very unlikely, and sometimes even impossible.

This used to be one of the cradles of our civilization - a deep, sane and stunningly beautiful part of the world. Now everything is fragmented. The West rules, mainly through its 'client'

states, such as Israel, the KSA and Turkey. It controls everything. It governs almost the entire Middle East; nothing moves without its knowledge and permission.

Yes, nothing and no one moves here, unless it suits the West. We don't read about it often. It is not discussed. But that is how it is. This bizarre concept of 'freedom' implanted from the outside. The rulers who were injected into the Gulf and various other occupied nations. The result is horrid: the electric wires, walls and travel restrictions everywhere; the old pathological British 'divide and rule' concept.

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As I am working on this essay, my plane which is supposed to be flying south-west, is actually hovering north-east, in order to avoid the air spaces of the various so-called hostile states.

Local people may be getting used to the fact that their part of the world has already been 're-arranged'. Or perhaps they have already stopped noticing.

The computer, however, keeps showing the absurd flying path of the airliner. Computers can be programmed and re-programmed, but they cannot be indoctrinated. Without judging, they are simply demonstrating the absurdity that is unrolling around them, on their screens.

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Andre Vltchek is a philosopher, novelist, filmmaker and investigative journalist. He has covered wars and conflicts in dozens of countries. Three of his latest books are his tribute to ["The Great October Socialist Revolution"](#) a revolutionary novel ["Aurora"](#) and a bestselling work of political non-fiction: ["Exposing Lies Of The Empire"](#). View his other books [here](#). Watch [Rwanda Gambit](#), his groundbreaking documentary about Rwanda and DR Congo and his film/dialogue with Noam Chomsky ["On Western Terrorism"](#). Vltchek presently resides in East Asia and the Middle East, and continues to work around the world. He can be reached through his [website](#) and his [Twitter](#).

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