

**Malaysia bans pilgrimages to Israel over security**  
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**By Elizabeth Zachariah**

Malaysia has banned pilgrimages to Israel and Palestine over security concerns in the Middle East, including the Gaza conflict and the threat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Isis).

Deputy Home Minister Datuk Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar told The Malaysian Insider the ministry has frozen all approvals for Christians to travel to the region because of the unrest due to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

When asked if the ban was also because of the threat of terror group Isis, the deputy minister said it was because of all aspects of threats in the region.

"We are concerned about all threats to security there," he added.

"We decided to freeze travel to Israel and Jerusalem for the sake of the safety of Malaysians who want to go there.

"This is because of the war and the unpredictable situation there that could jeopardise the safety of travellers."

Isis loyalists in Libya had recently released a video showing the mass beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians, who were kidnapped weeks before.

In early February, the terrorist group also beheaded Japanese journalist Kenji Goto and burnt a Jordanian pilot alive, as seen in videos it released proclaiming the killings.

Last week, Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi revealed that intelligence reports showed that the radical Islamist group was plotting to kidnap wealthy Malaysians.

Although Malaysia has banned travel to Israel, the government had allowed Christian pilgrims to visit the historic city which is regarded holy to Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

However, a church in Kuala Lumpur revealed that the applications for some of its members to travel to Israel for pilgrimage and a Christian conference were rejected.

A Home Ministry official had told the church that approvals to enter the Holy Land have been frozen until further notice. The church has since cancelled the trip.

Thousands of Christians travel each year to the Holy Land, which also includes Jerusalem and Palestine, to perform pilgrimages although Malaysia has no diplomatic

ties with Israel.

Muslims also travel to Jerusalem to pray at the revered Al-Aqsa mosque, Islam's third-holiest site and where Prophet Muhammad's first followers prayed towards. It was only later that they turned towards east to Mecca for their prayers.

However, the war between Israel and Hamas militants in Gaza in July-August 2014, during which more than 2,100 Palestinians and 73 Israelis were killed, had posed security concerns for travellers.

Following that, countries such as the United States – Israel's main ally – as well as the United Kingdom have issued travel warnings for its citizens against travel to Jerusalem and Gaza.

Wan Junaidi said the government made the decision to impose the travel ban as it "knew better" of the situation in the region.

"The ministry is still studying and monitoring the current situation there and will make further decisions when necessary."

Prior to 2010, Christians from Muslim-majority Malaysia were free to perform pilgrimages in the Holy Land but Putrajaya banned such trips in January 2010 because of the security risks posed by the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

A year later, the ban was lifted but the government tightened the rules regarding Christian pilgrimages to the region, including quotas and other restrictions.

Then, only 20 pilgrims per church group were allowed, there was an 18-year-old minimum age requirement and the government also restricted where Christians could go in Israel as well as limited their stay there to a week.

Following an outcry, the government rescinded the quotas, minimum age requirement and all other travel limits on Malaysian Christians who wanted to perform their pilgrimages in Jerusalem in December 2012.

But Christians still had to obtain permission from the ministry prior to their travel.

Council of Churches of Malaysia general-secretary Dr Hermen Shastri said travel groups have been calling on Putrajaya to lift the "temporary suspension" of pilgrimages to Palestine and Israel.

"Travel groups have been calling on the authorities to lift the suspension as many are being denied a pilgrimage. It is hoped that the PM (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak) will act on this matter as soon as possible," he told The Malaysian Insider. – February 18, 2015.

Source:

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