



BY BARRY SCHIFF

Big trouble

You think we have problems?

ISRAEL IS ONE OF THE MOST MODERN, technologically advanced countries in the world. Not surprisingly, it also has had significant and vibrant general aviation activity. But lightplane pilots there are now in trouble—big trouble.

Serious problems began in September 2000 when Jerusalem's only airport was temporarily shut down during the Second Intifada (uprising). This is when Palestinians began shooting at the control tower for target practice. They reportedly also shot at departing and arriving aircraft. Fifteen years later the airport is still closed, and likely will remain so.

Like many airports in the United States, many of Israel's airports are under pressure to close because of escalating real-estate values and urban sprawl that suffocates their boundaries.

Herzliya is Israel's busiest general aviation airport and serves Tel Aviv, the country's largest city. It is the keystone of Israeli general aviation and is where the vast majority of pilot training and aircraft maintenance is performed. It also is a base for agricultural aircraft.

It did not help the airport's cause when Herzliya's mayor began a loud drumbeat proclaiming that the airport is a clear and present danger to adjacent residential neighborhoods. It did not matter to him that no resident in the area had ever been injured by an airplane.

As a result of this rhetoric, and intense pressure from real estate developers, Israel's High Court of Justice (the equivalent of our Supreme Court) ruled that the Herzliya Airport may now be closed. According to a notam and effective immediately, private flights to and from the airport are forbidden. Training flights may continue for three months. Maintenance, agricultural, firefighting, and air-ambulance flights will be allowed for the next six months. That is when bulldozers will make a final and fatal assault on what has been Israel's most vital general aviation airport.

Closing Herzliya Airport is to Israel what destroying Van Nuys Airport would be to Los Angeles, only worse.

A number of outlying airports in Israel are barely surviving, and it can take days to get a clearance to land in some of these places. (You read that correctly.)

Sde Dov Airport is adjacent and parallel to a beautiful stretch of Mediterranean beach and provides almost instant access to downtown Tel Aviv. It is similar in many ways to what used to be Chicago's Meigs

Field. Sadly, Sde Dov soon will suffer a similar fate. This airport occupies prime real estate and is slated for shut-down to make room for 16,000 homes. Not only will general aviation lose a valuable airport—but so, too, will Israel's commuter airlines lose a hub from which service currently is provided to Eilat, a popular resort on the northern tip of the Red Sea, and to Haifa, the largest city in northern Israel.

The only available alternates for pilots flying out of Tel Aviv will be Megiddo, 40 nm north, and Teyman, 50 nm south. To the east is Masada Airfield, but getting there requires a long drive across the parched Judean Hills to the edge of the Dead Sea—and it gets hot there. At 1,240 feet below sea level, it is the world's lowest airport. Facilities are nonexistent.

The closures of Herzliya and Sde Dov are in addition to six other airports that have already been closed. Moti Shvimer, a member of AOPA-Israel, says, "We basically will have nowhere to go. Israel is surrounded by hostile nations, so that flying beyond our borders is not feasible." Some can leave Israel by flying to Cyprus, but landing fees there are truly prohibitive. An airplane with long legs, however, can make it to the Greek islands.

Not only is it becoming increasingly difficult for the thousands of Israeli pilots to gain access to the sky, but they also must endure other limitations and restrictions. Cross-country flights within Israel, for example, must remain within strictly enforced corridors.

Obtaining a private pilot certificate in Israel is a lengthy, arduous, and expensive process. Alon Smolarski, another member of AOPA-Israel, says that "an applicant for a private pilot certificate must take eight written examinations and pass two checkrides. And then there is the need to obtain a security clearance. The typical cost of learning to fly is about 20,000 U.S. dollars. Renting an airplane is also expensive. An antiquated, poorly maintained Cessna 172 goes for \$250 per hour (wet)."

It used to be that the Israeli government appreciated GA and fostered its development, but this is no longer so. The government now seems unconcerned about the decline of GA within its borders and content to allow GA to be thrown to the wolves. It certainly is comforting to know that such a thing never could happen here. **AOPA**

BARRY SCHIFF has been writing for *AOPA Pilot* for 52 years. This month marks his anniversary.

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