

Libya/Isratine

Breaking The Ice Team Denied Entry To Libya^a

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No. Not going to happen. Never. That was the response the Breaking the Ice (BTI) team received upon their attempt to enter Libya on March 21.

The team, a conglomeration of Muslims, Christians and Jews trekking across the Middle Eastern desert in order to promote peace in the region, was disappointed by the Libyan government's decision to bar them entrance into the country.

The reason was simple: no Israelis allowed.

"Our government has said that because we do not recognize the state of Israel, we cannot allow Israeli citizens to enter Libya," a border guard told the group.

This was not surprising to the participants, three of whom hail from Israel.

"We knew coming here that it was unlikely to happen," said Gil Fogiel, an E1 Al pilot, who was a prisoner of Syria for two years. "No one in Tripoli was going to take credit for us at that late hour anyway," he continued.

Although the BTI participants were turned away by Libya, that day, much like the entire journey, had not been in vain. As they approached the Egyptian-Libyan border they interlocked arms and began singing, reminiscent of a civil rights demonstration in the United States. They sang familiar songs, including "we are the world".

BTI is a nonprofit nongovernmental organization seeking to build and promote peace across cultural lines.

The participants include, Latif Yehia, a former body double for Saddam Hussein's son Uday; Mohammed Azzam Al Arjah, a Palestinian man whose

cousin died in his arms after being shot by Israeli soldiers; Galit Oren, an Israeli woman whose mother was killed in a suicide attack; Neda Sarmast, an Iranian-American woman; Daniel Sheridan, New York City Fire Captain that witnessed the September 11 attack; Raymond Benson, a retired colonel in the US military; Yevgen Petrovich Kozhushko, a Ukrainian soldier in Iraq; Yehya Wardak, an Afghani man who now resides in Germany; and Fogiel.

The journey began in Israel in early March and was expected to end in Tripoli in early April at which point the group was to fly back to Tel Aviv for a reunion and a final farewell. Following the denial of entry into Libya, the organizers are going to have to think of an alternative plan.

"We can stay in Egypt and move around, see Siwa and continue to promote our goals, even if the Libyan government is not willing to comply with our efforts," Adam Rice, director of operations for BTI, said. "Our mission is to promote peace and we can't allow this to get the best of us," he told the participants as they returned to the Egyptian side of the border.

As the night drew on, various participants and organizers began to question their purpose and mission in the region. Heskell Nathaniel, an Israeli staff member with BTI, said that he believed that this obstacle should not deter them from continuing on.

"We at BTI are trying to promote the best methods of showing the world a better way," he said. "If we stop now, what will that mean to peace?" he asked.

Not all the participants, however, were ready to keep going.

"You know, this trip has given me a new sense of patriotism as an American," Sheridan noted. "I never truly understood how grateful I am to have been born American until I came on this trip," he continued. "But now, I really just want to go home; maybe see Cairo first, but I am getting homesick."

Sheridan came on the journey because he wanted to discover the roots of the hatred and animosity toward the US, which could culminate in a massive attack in New York.

"I want to show Arabs what Americans feel," Sheridan said. "I was just trying to help on September 11 and I want them to see this and believe in us," he continued. "But I also want to learn about them and have an exchange of ideas. I have seen so much on this trip and all the people are nice, but I won't sit by and say there aren't problems here, especially with how the government treats its citizens."

Like Sheridan, Wardak was also interested in understanding the continuing conflict between Islam and the West. "I came here to understand the relationship between the two cultures," he said. "As a Muslim, I knew that being here and seeing the conflict first hand would shed light upon my ideas,

but it would also help change the [misconceptions] I have of this region," he continued.

"I now understand the people so much more," Wardak noted. "I didn't know that Israelis were similar to Arabs in many ways, even though they are so Westernized," he said.

For most of the participants, March 21 marked a day in which the journey changed. It was no longer the fast paced, go-go-go trip of the previous two weeks. The group was ready to slow down and think about what the mission at hand was supposed to be about.

"You know it is disappointing that there isn't much coverage here in the Arab media," Benson commented. "Now that we have the time, maybe we should concentrate on doing something physically here, instead of continually moving," he said.

Nevertheless, the refusal of entry into Libya did not change the group's belief that what they were doing was good, no matter how little media coverage they were getting.

"This is a good thing because it is for a good cause and if we can promote peace then I am happy," Benson said, ending a frustrating day that left Libya once again in the spotlight of an unrelenting Arab world.

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