

RELEASE IN FULL

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American VIP humiliated at airport

Prof. Donna Shalala, Clinton's secretary of health, arrives in Israel in order to fight academic boycott against Israel, claims she was held at Ben-Gurion Airport just because she has Arab last name

Itamar Eichner

This is not how she imagined her visit to Israel. Prof. Donna Shalala, who served as the US Secretary of Health and Human Services for eight years under Clinton and is currently the president of the University of Miami, was held for two-and-a-half hours at Ben Gurion Airport during which she underwent a humiliating security debriefing because of her Arab last name – all this despite the fact that her hosts notified the airport ahead of time that she is a VIP.

The fact that Shalala arrived in Israel as part of an official delegation of the heads of universities fighting against the academic boycott against the Jewish State also seemed not to help her.

Shalala, 69, was born in the US to Lebanese immigrant parents. She is considered a true friend of Israel and has visited the country many times in the past.

She recently arrived in Israel as a guest of the American Jewish Congress with the objective of increasing collaboration among universities in Israel, the US, and the Palestinian Authority. During their visit, members of the delegation met with President Shimon Peres, Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, and Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

The official visit ended on July 12, but Shalala stayed on for another two days for a private visit.

The AJC claims that it notified the Israel Airports Authority of Shalala's VIP status as is customary prior to her departure. However, the IAA claims that it has no record on file for Shalala prior to her arrival.

When Shalala arrived at the airport, she was not recognized as a VIP and was even afforded what she claims to be "special" treatment because of her Arab last name. She claims she was held for two-and-a-half hours during which she was asked invasive and humiliating personal questions. Despite the delay, she managed to board the flight to the US. Officials who spoke with her said she was deeply offended by the treatment she received.

An IAA spokesperson reported in response: "This incident is unknown to us. We performed a thorough check. There was no contact made with us or any other body. No unusual events were registered at Ben Gurion Airport, and we have no idea about this incident, which, from our perspective, never happened."

IAA officials said that root of the problem is that the host organizations don't bother accompanying their guests to the airport.

The incident was raised Wednesday during a discussion convened by Deputy Foreign Ministry Ayalon to discuss treatment of VIPs at Ben Gurion Airport. During the discussion, it was agreed that a new protocol will be drafted that will keep incidents to a minimum.

Shalala preferred not to comment on the article.