

After Hundreds of Gazans Arrive on Mystery Flights, South Africa Asks How

A little-known group sold passage to desperate Palestinians who didn't know their destination, catching the South African government by surprise.

By [John Eligon](#) and Zimasa Matiwane

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A Palestinian man, one of those granted entry to South Africa, with his child at an undisclosed location in Johannesburg, on Friday. Credit...Siphiwe Sibeko/Reuters

The circumstances seemed shady.

The man on the phone said he worked for a humanitarian organization that could arrange to fly Ahmed Shehada and his family out of war-ravaged Gaza if he paid \$1,600 per person to a crypto account. He demanded the money upfront.

Mr. Shehada thought it was a scam and declined. But after he learned of a friend who escaped Gaza through the same group, he decided to take a chance.

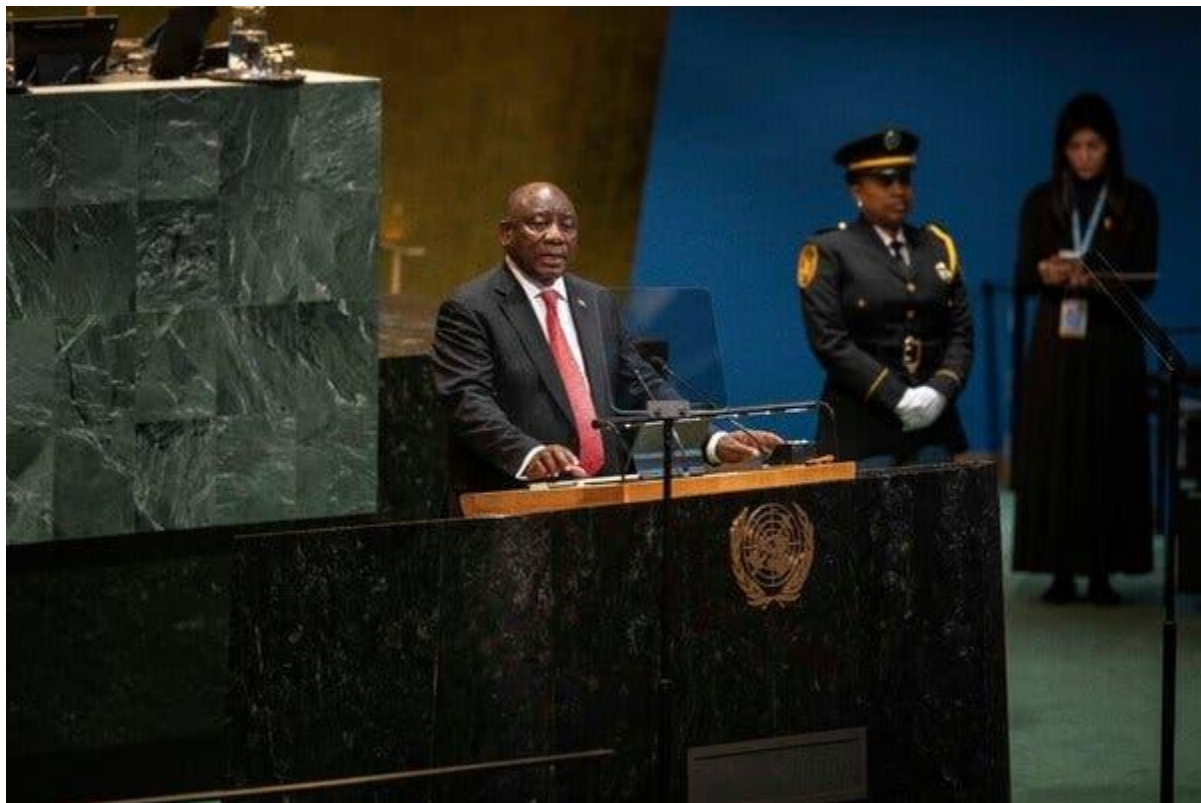
That decision led Mr. Shehada, 37, his wife and their two young children on a jittery 24-hour journey in two separate bus convoys, through tense Israeli checkpoints, onto a flight with an unknown destination and eventually to South Africa, a country to which he had never been.

“The situation in Gaza is so dreadful, you would take such a risk,” he said.

Mr. Shehada, a doctor, arrived in South Africa with his family last month, among the hundreds of Palestinians who have landed there recently aboard two flights, under conditions that the South African government has deemed suspicious.

The flights were arranged by Al-Majd Europe, a group with a scant public profile that South African officials said they knew little about. South Africa’s foreign minister, Ronald Lamola, suggested on Monday that Israel was behind what he called “a clear agenda to cleanse the Palestinians out of Gaza and the West Bank” — an accusation Israel has denied.

“It does seem like they were being, you know, flushed out,” said President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, adding that his government had a duty to accept Palestinians because they are “a different and special case of a people that we have supported as a country.”



President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times

The Israeli military said it received approval from a third country to send the Palestinian families there, but it did not name the country.

Scrutiny of the flights, and South Africa's handling of them, comes as the country faces a high-stakes week on the international stage, hosting the first Group of 20 Summit on African soil.

Officials in South Africa, which has been among the most vocal supporters of Palestinians, have faced criticism from local activists who believe the government mishandled the arrival last week of the second plane, carrying 153 Palestinians who were forced to wait on board for at least 10 hours while their immigration status was sorted out.

"The border authorities were unwilling to consider the factors that these people came from Gaza, that there's a humanitarian crisis," said Na'eem Jeenah, a South African activist who has assisted the Palestinians. "They were looking at it very narrowly."

Mr. Shehada, who has worked for a U.N. agency since 2014, said when his flight arrived on Oct. 28, passengers were allowed to get off the plane and go through immigration just like any other international arrival.

He said he and his family were displaced 12 times during the war. He contacted Al-Majd in March after a colleague sent him a link to the website over WhatsApp. He filled out a form there, and in April someone from the organization called him.

When he decided to leave months later, Mr. Shehada said he paid \$6,400 and got a call shortly before midnight on Oct. 26. The family needed to get to Khan Younis to leave in four hours, an Al-Majd representative told him.

There, they boarded a bus and were told to close the blinds and refrain from using their phones before entering Rafah, he said. Al-Majd instructed them to tell anyone who asked what they were doing that they were part of the French Embassy evacuation.

"We said to ourselves, 'What if they have no connection with the Israeli army and we go into Rafah and they start shooting at the buses?'" Mr. Shehada said.

They made it to the Kerem Shalom border post, where Israeli troops told them to leave all their belongings behind. They walked through several security checks and onto new buses that took them to Ramon Airport in southern Israel to board a charter flight, he said. They were not told until midflight that they were going to Nairobi, Kenya.



Aid trucks at the Israeli side of the Kerem Shalom border crossing, last month. Credit...Hannah McKay/Reuters

From there, they flew to South Africa, he said, where he received his last message from Al-Majd, telling him of a guesthouse booked for his family — but for only a week, though the group had promised a month.

A message on Al-Majd's website on Monday said it was operating as normal and continuing to provide services, and warned of online scams using the organization's name. Calls and messages to phone numbers listed went unanswered.

Luay Abu Saif was on the flight that arrived last week.

Al-Majd had kept them in the dark about how they ended up in South Africa, Mr. Saif said: "We didn't even know where we were going."

After a local aid organization offered accommodation for the entire group, they were allowed into the country on a 90-day visa exemption that South Africa grants Palestinians.

For Mr. Shehada, what resonates most is how his 4-year-old daughter seems to be discovering life after knowing only war. She marvels at being able to walk into a store to buy food or plug a cellphone into a wall to charge it — luxuries she'd seen only in online videos.

“The other day she was telling me, ‘Dad, we are living like the YouTube life,’” he said.

Abu Bakr Bashir contributed reporting from London.

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