

Palestinian leader of campaign to boycott Israel denied entry to US

By Fred Mazelis
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The decision by US authorities to deny entry to Omar Barghouti, the prominent Palestinian political figure and co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, is a flagrant attack on democratic rights and yet another illustration of the extraordinary close policy coordination between the ultra-right regimes of President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The BDS movement, founded in 2005, is a protest and lobbying campaign aimed at leveraging sympathy or support in academic, official and business circles into pressuring Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank, along with granting full equality for Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel and acknowledgment of the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

Barghouti, who has permanent resident status in Israel, studied in the US during the 1980s. He was planning to speak at Harvard and New York University, as well as at meetings in Washington and Philadelphia. His denial of entry also means that he will be unable to attend the wedding of his daughter, who lives in the US.

The action against Barghouti was particularly noteworthy because he holds a US visa that is valid through 2021. In the past he has encountered problems leaving Israel, but on this occasion the ban came from Washington. When he arrived at Ben-Gurion International Airport outside of Tel Aviv last Wednesday, he was informed that he could not board his flight because of an “immigration matter,” even though he had all necessary travel documents. Authorities in Washington had instructed the US Consulate in Tel Aviv to take this action. A State Department official answered a media inquiry by declaring, “Visa records are confidential under US law; therefore, we cannot discuss the details of individual visa cases.”

Barghouti’s trip was arranged through the Arab American Institute (AAI), based in Washington. The organization’s president, James Zogby, declared in response to the ban, “It is clear this arbitrary political decision is motivated by this administration’s efforts to silence Palestinian voices.”

Speaking via Skype to a discussion in Washington on Thursday titled “A Candid Conversation about the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement,” moderated by US journalist Peter Beinart, Barghouti declared, as reported by *Mondoweiss*, that the travel ban was enforced “by Israel directly or by proxy by the United States” to “silence human rights defenders in the BDS movement... They are resorting to more McCarthyite, more repressive intimidation, bullying and violation of basic rights to silence us.

“By having US immigration ban me from entering the United States, this is really a blatant attempt to silence my voice and it’s taking the opposition to BDS in this right-wing, xenophobic administration to a higher level.”

Amnesty International had intervened in the past when Barghouti, who does not have Israeli citizenship, was denied travel documents by Tel Aviv. At one point the Israeli foreign minister had complained that Barghouti was “using his resident status to travel all over the world in order to operate against Israel in the most serious manner.” After an official complaint by Amnesty International a travel document was issued, only to be followed now by the travel ban imposed by the US.

The latest ban may have been the result of a request by Netanyahu, or perhaps it was simply another favor granted to the Israeli Prime Minister, who emerged victorious in last week’s Israeli elections, the most right-wing in its history.

The ban on Barghouti is one of a growing list of such actions. US authorities recently revoked the visa of the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, to which Washington does not belong. She has been attempting to investigate alleged war crimes in Afghanistan.

The extraordinary attack on free speech rights in the case of Barghouti has been met with widespread outrage, but not a single leading Democratic politician has uttered a word. Although the Democratic leadership is facing some resistance to its all-out backing for Israel, the support for the Zionist occupation and the far-right policies of Netanyahu is thoroughly bipartisan, with such leading Democrats as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and Congressman

Eliot Engel, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, at least as ardent as their Republican colleagues in their slavish support for the Zionist regime.

The BDS movement, despite its limited protest character, has driven the Zionist establishment into a frenzy. The Israeli regime is more and more regarded as a pariah state, including among broad layers of the population in the US and Western Europe, where it had previously enjoyed sympathy. A majority of young people in the US who identify as Jewish are clearly in opposition to Israeli policies. A growing number oppose the dogma of Israel as a Jewish state, officially enshrined by the Netanyahu government in the “Nation-State Law” adopted last July, which codifies the second-class citizenship of the one-fifth of the population that is Arab.

The authorities in Israel have responded with a redoubled campaign to smear all of their critics as anti-Semites. The Ministry of Strategic Affairs has devoted enormous resources to its campaign against BDS and has found its strongest supporters within the Trump administration, the US Congress and state governments.

The US government has opened the floodgates as far as fulfilling Netanyahu’s wish list of ultra-nationalist policies directed against the Palestinians and called for by the most extreme right-wing and outright fascist elements within Israel. Trump began by appointing his son-in-law Jared Kushner to come up with a “peace plan” for the region. He appointed David Friedman to be the US Ambassador to Israel. During the 2016 campaign, Friedman, who was one of Trump’s advisers, wrote that members of the liberal Zionist J Street lobby were “far worse than kapos—Jews who turned in their fellow Jews in the Nazi death camps...They are just smug advocates of Israel’s destruction delivered from the comfort of their secure American life.”

This was followed by the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem one year ago, in line with the Zionist claim to sovereignty over the entire city. More recently, Trump announced his support for Israel keeping the Syrian Golan Heights, captured more than 50 years ago in the Six-Day War of 1967.

More blatant attacks on free speech and other democratic rights have been forthcoming in the form of state and federal legislation in the US that targets the BDS campaign for special attack. Twenty-seven states have passed laws forbidding employees and contractors from supporting boycotts against Israel. These include such “blue states” as California, Minnesota, Illinois and New York. Last February the US Senate passed the Combating BDS Act of 2019, granting state and local governments the power to stop doing business with those who boycott Israel.

As *Palestine Legal* explains, some of the legislation

prohibits state or local government from entering into contracts with any individuals, non-profits or companies that support Palestinian rights, meaning that a church could be prevented from running soup kitchens, homeless shelters or youth programs with the help of government funding. All of this legislation is blatantly unconstitutional, but the fate it will face in the courts is far from clear.

The rationale for all of these policies was spelled out last week by Trump’s new special envoy for combatting anti-Semitism. Elan Carr, a failed Republican candidate for Congress in 2014, represents a President who notoriously claimed that there were “good people” among the white supremacists who rallied in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, a day that ended with the killing of a peaceful anti-racist protester who was run down by one of the fascist fanatics.

As reported in the *LA Times*, Carr equated any organized boycott of Israel with anti-Semitism. When asked about the incident with Barghouti, Carr replied that BDS was anti-Semitic because it attempts to “strangle” Israel. “We are going to focus relentlessly on eradicating this false distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism,” he said. This spells out the line of the most extreme Zionists, whose chauvinism more and more resembles that of classic fascist movements of the 20th century. The aim is to virtually criminalize criticism of Zionist crimes. Behind these moves, however, lies growing crisis and desperation, as the blind alley of the Zionist project becomes ever clearer.

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