

The Israeli Travel Ban

by Michael Curtis



Commenting on President Woodrow Wilson's "long overdue " decision to enter World War I, Winston Churchill wrote that if the president had acted earlier it would have meant abridgement of the slaughter, sparing of the agony, prevention of ruin and catastrophe. Even if the parallel is not exact, Israeli authorities are acting to prevent further harm to their country by imposing a travel ban blocking members of organizations supporting BDS, the Palestinian-led boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement from entering the country.

Mark Twain in his book *Innocents Abroad* wrote that travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow mindedness. Unfortunately, as Israel has found, hostile activists can also encourage those very qualities.

The travel ban implements the intention of the law passed in March 2017 that bars entry into the country of groups that actively promote anti-Israeli boycotts. The ban is virtual

recognition of the adage, "Oh, I have taken too little care of this." Israel has now taken the offense against those who are not simply rational critics of Israeli policies and actions, but who either implicitly or explicitly refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the State of Israel or seek its elimination.

By banning any foreign activist who has knowingly signed a public call to boycott Israel or pledged to take part in a boycott, Israel is preventing potential harm to its citizens.

On January 7, 2018 Israel issued a ban on 20 world wide organizations, including 11 European and six U.S. groups, that are involved and active in BDS activities. They include the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Code Pink, the U.S. based Jewish Voice for Peace, the UK based Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, of which Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is a patron, the British group War on Want, and BDS organizations in France, Italy, Norway, and the Netherlands.

It is worth looking, if only as illustration of hypocrisy, at War on Want, an organization founded in 1951 in London as an anti-poverty charity. It supported liberation movements in Africa; for a time the anti-Israeli George Galloway was its general secretary though during that time there were accounting irregularities, and reports were "materially misstated." In 2006, War on Want launched its Palestinian Rights movement and advocated BDS, calling for an embargo on arms to Israel.

One controversial incident resulting from this policy of banning had occurred in 2016 when Isabel Phiri, a Malawi citizen living in Switzerland, the assistant General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, WCC, in Geneva and former professor of African theology in South Africa, was refused a visa by Israel. Israeli authorities maintained she has been involved in BDS, and it was the first time a foreign national has been refused for that reason. Though the WCC has not formally called for an outright boycott against Israel, it

believes that the “Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories is a tragedy for the Palestinian occupied.”

Let us be straightforward on this controversial issue. The argument against the travel ban is that it violates freedom of expression, and of course to some extent this is true in a democratic country such as Israel. The problem with this is that not only does the freedom to call for a boycott exist everywhere, but that much of the expression on Israel is based on falsehood and misrepresentations and are based on the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood.

Taking two examples illustrates the point. The AFSC that won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1947, announced extravagantly on January 8, 2018 that “for 51 years Israel has denied Palestinians in the occupied territories their fundamental human rights in defiance of international law.” Or the absurdly disproportionate announcement issued on February 13, 2015 by over 100 British artists, including some well known personalities such as film directors Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, explaining their cultural boycott of Israel as based on the fact that “Palestinians have enjoyed no respite from Israel’s unrelenting attack on their land, their livelihood, their right to political existence.”

The BDS campaign calls for economic, cultural, and academic boycotts against the State of Israel and Israeli citizens. But its real intention is not to advocate measures to alleviate the condition of Palestinians but to implement the Palestinian campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel mainly founded by Omar Barghouti to refuse to recognize Israel as a legitimate state.

What is important is that boycott activity is counterproductive, against peace. It results in increasing hatred, and as Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has remarked it symbolizes all that stands in the way of dialogue, debate and progress. It is against cooperation towards a peaceful

solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A reminder of the past may be helpful in understanding the Israel travel ban. On November 9-10, 1938 Kristallnacht occurred in German cities, with a pogrom against Jews, involving murders, beatings, destruction of Jewish property, business, and synagogues. At the core and the call to German citizens was boycott of Jews in all forms.

Obviously, actions such as calling for Israel to be excluded from international organizations such as the world soccer governing body FIFA and the insistent commands by rock star Roger Waters to fellow performers not to perform in Tel Aviv are not on a par with the Nazi Holocaust, but it would be foolish to ignore the implications of BDS. Implicitly if not explicitly it promotes antisemitism as well as tolerating terrorist activity against Israel.

It does this by not criticizing the funds that the Palestinian Authority, PA, which by its Martyr's Fund gives to terrorists in Israeli prisons or to the families of those terrorists killed by Israel. It is encouraging that the U.S. Senate by the Taylor Force bill is considering the issue in an appropriate way. Named after the American citizen, a former U.S. army officer and a Vanderbilt University student, murdered in March 2016 by a Palestinian terrorist in the West Bank, the Taylor Force Act introduced in 2016 aims to stop all U.S. economic aid to the PA as long as it continues to pay those salaries to terrorists and families.

Israel is proposing to prevent foreign supporters of BDS from entering Israel, although ministers have the right to deny individuals entry on a case by case basis, as in the case of Omar Barghouti, one of the founders of BDS, who is married to an Israeli citizen of Palestinian origin. On January 7, 2018, Israel announced it plans to establish a taskforce to identify the hundreds of activists already in Israel and deport or deny entry to individuals who support the BDS.

The Israeli travel ban might be considered in the context of the continuing war on Jews. It is three years since Hyper Cache, the Jewish Paris supermarket was attacked by terrorists when four were killed. Coinciding with the Israeli travel ban, on January 9, 2018, an arson attack burnt down a French kosher grocery store in Creteil, suburb of Paris, and the store was completely gutted by fire. Already, six days earlier two stores in the area were targeted with paintings of swastikas. Hatred and antisemitism: this is the real essence of the boycott of Israel and Jews.