Australian government revokes Palestinian activist's visa

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The Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull last week revoked the visa of Bassem Tamimi, a well-known Palestinian activist, in a flagrant attack on democratic rights aimed at preventing him from addressing public meetings in Australia.

Tamimi was granted a visa on April 4, but it was cancelled by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) within hours. He was about to begin a speaking tour at the end of this week, organised by the Friends of Palestine, the Social Research Institute, the Palestine Action Group and Socialist Alternative.

In its decision, the DIBP explicitly confirmed that Tamimi had been blocked from entering Australia because of his political views. It stated: "The department has recently been made aware of information that indicates there is a risk that members of the public will react adversely to Mr Tamimi's presence in Australia regarding his views of the ongoing political tensions in the Middle East."

When questioned by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) about the specific grounds for withdrawing the visa, the DIBP refused to provide any details of the "information" it had "been made aware of."

Instead, the DIBP elaborated on a deeply anti-democratic rationale for the ruling. Invoking draconian provisions of the Migration Act, it asserted: "The exercise of this freedom [of speech] does involve a responsibility to avoid vilification of, inciting discord in, or representing a danger to, the Australian community."

In other words, voicing opposition to Israel's oppression of the Palestinians is illegitimate, as it could "incite discord."

The decision underscores the reactionary character of immigration laws set in place by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments.

The ruling, however, has broader implications. The logic of the government's position is the suppression of dissenting and anti-war views, whether voiced by foreign nationals or Australian citizens. The grounds for the exclusion of Tamimi could be used against any opponents of Australia's central role in the US wars in Syria and Iraq, Washington's military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, or virtually any other government policy.

In comments to the *Guardian* on Saturday, Tamimi denounced the government ban, stating that it was an attack on freedom of speech. He pointed to the support of the Australian political establishment for Israel's attacks on the Palestinians, and the influence of the pro-Israel lobby in Australian politics. "The decision is disappointing, [it] means that the Israeli occupation and the Zionist lobby succeed and their allies dominate the decision in all the world countries," Tamimi said.

Petitions have been launched opposing Tamimi's exclusion, with a number of Palestinian, Jewish and other political and civil liberties organisations opposing the ban.

Tamimi and the organisations that sponsored his tour, including the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, are proponents of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. The nationalist BDS perspective is for a boycott of Israeli companies and citizens to pressure Israel to recognise the unviable capitalist mini-state in the Palestinian territories, which has proven to be incapable of resolving any of the social or democratic issues facing the Palestinian masses. The BDS campaign cuts across the fight to unify the Jewish, Palestinian and Arab working class in a common struggle against imperialist domination and the ruling classes of the Middle East.

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Tamimi has been particularly targeted for persecution by Israeli and US authorities for opposing Israel's ongoing illegal expansions of Jewish settlements on Palestinian territory.

The activist has been arrested over a dozen times by Israeli authorities for his role in organising demonstrations, including in Nabi Saleh, a small West Bank village that has been subjected to years of Israeli police raids and attacks because of its residents' opposition to the expansion of settlements.

In 2011, Tamimi was arrested by Israeli authorities and charged with "crimes" including "holding a march without a permit" and "incitement." Detained for 13 months, he was labelled a "prisoner of conscience" by Amnesty International, which said he was being held solely for "organising peaceful protests." Tamimi was again arrested for protesting in 2012 and detained for a number of months.

In March 2016, US authorities cancelled a visa for Tamimi, preventing him from addressing audiences there.

The attacks on Tamimi by the US and Israeli governments raise a number of questions about the Australian government's revocation of his visa. The most obvious is whether US or Israeli authorities, or the intelligence agencies of the two countries, were involved in the backroom machinations that led to the rapid cancellation of Tamimi's travel rights.

The government decision coincided with a marked escalation of the war drive in the Middle East by the US and its allies, including Australia.

Since being inaugurated in January, the US administration of Donald Trump has called into question the previous framework for the ongoing oppression of the Palestinians, the so-called "two-state solution." The Trump administration's move, accompanied by ever-closer ties between the US and Israel, was a signal of Washington's unalloyed support for stepped-up attacks on the democratic rights of the Palestinians, including through the expansion of illegal settlements.

At the same time, the US has escalated its criminal wars in Iraq and Syria. Just days after the ruling against Tamimi, Washington launched airstrikes on a Syrian air base, in a reckless act of aggression that was also directed at Russia, Syria's closest ally in the Middle East.

The Australian political establishment unanimously endorsed the US attack, with Turnbull declaring his "strong support" for the strikes and his government's backing of plans for "regime-change" in Syria. Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten likewise labelled the missile attack as "appropriate and proportionate."

The response was in line with Australia's role as a central partner in all American imperialism's wars and military preparations around the world, including in the Middle East, and in the Asia-Pacific region, against North Korea and China.

Tamimi's exclusion is part of a broader attempt to suppress anti-war sentiment. Tim Anderson, an academic at the University of Sydney, is being subjected to a vicious witch-hunt by the Turnbull government and the Murdoch media for pointing to the fraudulent character of the official pretext for the US attack on Syria.

Anderson, a supporter of the nationalist Syrian regime, referred to the highly dubious character of claims that the Syrian government was responsible for chemical weapons attacks in Idlib last Tuesday. He suggested it was the Al Qaeda linked opposition forces, backed by the US, who had the most to gain from the attack, and the capabilities to orchestrate it.

Today, the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* published a front-page article attacking Anderson, while the federal government's education minister, Simon Birmingham, called for the University of Sydney to "investigate" his posts—a signal that opposition to the predatory US operations in the Middle East will come under ever greater persecution.

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