

PayPal closes pro-Palestinian group's account in collusion with Israeli government

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PayPal has closed the account of the French web site *Agence Media Palestine* in response to a global campaign by Israel to organise a crackdown on Palestinian supporters and critics of Israel, using fabricated claims of anti-Semitism.

The closure of the account by the American payment-processing corporation poses difficulties for Palestinians and Palestinian journalists, as there are few other international payment mechanisms. It marks a dangerous new stage in the ongoing campaign to isolate the Palestinians, criminalise political expression and censor freedom of speech on the Internet.

Agence Media Palestine, a Palestine solidarity organisation, publishes articles on Palestine in French, translating many from sources published elsewhere. It lists as its supporters prominent figures in France, such as the late author and concentration camp survivor Stéphane Hessel, Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan and human rights activist Mireille Fanon-Mendès France.

Within hours of *Agence Media Palestine* receiving notification from PayPal that it had closed its account, without citing any reason or violations of the terms of agreement, the web site received an email from Benjamin Weinthal, saying, "Your organisation lists PayPal as a donation method, but the payment is blocked."

He asked, "Did PayPal close your account? If so, what was the reason for the closure?"

"Is your account in violation of France's anti-discrimination law?"

Weinthal was gloating. He is a Berlin-based journalist and research fellow for the American neo-conservative group, the Foundation for the Defence of Democracies (FDD). The FDD works closely with the Israeli government and has sought to discredit the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian rights by linking it with terrorism, Hamas and Iran. The *Jerusalem Post*, along with a host of right-wing media organisations, regularly publish his articles.

According to the *Electronic Intifada* web site, Weinthal described the smear tactics he uses to engineer crackdowns

on individuals and organisations that he claims are anti-Semitic because of their criticisms of Israel at a meeting of Israel lobbyists in Europe in 2016.

Outlining a playbook that will be familiar to the thousands of workers and young people in the UK now seeing Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn slandered, he said, "You have to exaggerate to get these ideas across, because they don't understand what contemporary anti-Semitism is, many of them."

He admitted to using smear tactics as an essential component of his work and boasted of getting the journalists Max Blumenthal and David Sheen banned from the German parliament in 2014. He explained how he had compared Blumenthal, who is Jewish, to Horst Mahler, a former left-wing activist who became a Nazi.

Weinthal also described how he had tried to put pressure on PayPal and banks to close the accounts of human rights and civil society groups, focusing on groups across France, Germany and Austria.

The FDD functions as a front for the Israeli government, as Sima Vaknin-Gil, Israel's director-general of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, admitted.

Speaking on an *Al-Jazeera* undercover investigation into the Israel lobby in the US that has yet to be aired--due to pressure by Israel on the Qatari government which funds the news channel--Vaknin-Gil stated that the FDD was "working on" projects for Israel including "data gathering, information analysis, working on activist organisations, money trail."

"We have FDD," and "We have others working on this."

According to the documentary, the FDD operates as an agent of the Israeli government, despite not being registered as such in accordance with US law.

The day after PayPal closed *Agence Media Palestine's* account, Weinthal authored an article falsely claiming that organisations supporting the BDS campaign are "in violation of the Lellouche Law, which makes it illegal to target Israelis based on their national origin." This is the same claim he used in January after PayPal closed the account of

another campaign group, Association France Palestine Solidarité.

Agence Media Palestine accused Paypal of an “arbitrary act,” saying it was impossible to “ignore the links between PayPal and the extreme right-wing propagandist Benjamin Weinthal.”

It added that unless PayPal justified its action, it “reserves the right to take legal action.”

The web site said that it might launch an “information campaign about this discriminatory act for the benefit of a state that has just passed an apartheid law,” a reference to Israel’s recent nation-state law that privileges the rights of Jews above Israel’s other citizens.

PayPal has yet to reply substantively to *Agence Media Palestine*’s letters.

PayPal processes more than \$300 million in sales transactions every day, around 18 percent of the world’s e-commerce sales, and has a market capitalisation of some \$100 billion. It has a long record of using its position to conduct political censorship on behalf of the US state and its allies.

Recently, the corporate giant blocked sales of the *World Socialist Web Site* pamphlet, *The Struggle Against Imperialism and for Workers’ Power in Iran*.

PayPal, along with MasterCard, VISA, American Express, Western Union and Bank of America, also collaborated with the Obama administration in 2010 by imposing a more than seven-year-long financial blockade on the anti-secrecy organisation WikiLeaks, preventing it from receiving donations.

PayPal has also blocked the sale of publications and the use of its services by organisations linked with Iran, under the pretext of abiding by the US-led sanctions regime, imposed by the US and European powers to cripple Iran’s economy and destabilise its government.

PayPal’s action is part of a broader censorship drive by the US technology and social media giants, including Facebook, Google, Amazon and Twitter, that work closely with US intelligence agencies as well as Israel and its military intelligence organisations. In effect, they have given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government the power to censor criticism by removing it from the Internet.

Last January, the *New York Times* confirmed an earlier report from *Al-Jazeera* that said, “Israel submitted 158 requests for Facebook over the past few months to remove what Israel deemed as ‘inciting content,’ and the company complied with 95 percent of those requests.”

The *Times*’s chief White House correspondent Peter Baker wrote, “Israeli security agencies monitor Facebook and send the company posts they consider incitement,” and “Facebook has responded by removing most of them.”

Palestinian and international human rights groups have challenged Facebook over its role in censoring Palestinian voices online and sharing information with the Israeli government, which has arrested hundreds of Palestinians over Facebook posts.

In September 2016, Facebook executives met Israel’s Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, who heads the campaign against the BDS movement, to improve “cooperation against incitement to terror and murder.” Since then, it has worked closely with Israel to silence Palestinian criticism of Israel.

Israel’s Ministry of Justice published a report a year later, stating that its cyber unit handled 2,241 cases of online content and succeeded in getting 70 percent of it removed.

Jordana Cutler, Facebook’s head of policy and communications in Israel, admitted that the social media company works “very closely with the cyber departments in the justice ministry and the police and with other elements in the army and the Shin Bet [Israel’s internal security service].” She was previously a senior adviser to Netanyahu.

Unit 8200, the Israel Defence Forces’ cyber spy agency, monitors social media and other forms of electronic communication. It employs Israeli soldiers and students as well as “scouring Jewish communities abroad for young computer prodigies willing to join its ranks” to spread propaganda online and try to get content inimical to Israeli interests banned. Many such individuals work voluntarily and independently.

In addition, the government funds or sponsors projects that seek to place pro-Israel content throughout the Internet and remove information Israel does not want people to see.

Last December, an Israeli report stated that the Strategic Affairs Ministry had a budget of some \$70 million to “stand at the forefront of the battle against delegitimation, adopting methods from the fields of intelligence and technology.”



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