Israel steps up harassment of prominent critics of anti-Palestinian and racialist agenda

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Airport officials at Ben-Gurion International Airport, Tel Aviv, Israel's main entry point for foreign visitors, have detained and interrogated a number of liberal Jews, including Israeli citizens, about their political activities and opposition to the occupation of Palestinian territory.

This targeting of Jewish critics is part of a broader crackdown on opposition to Israel's suppression of the Palestinians and the racialist agenda of the government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

In July 2011, the Knesset made it a civil offence to publicly call for a boycott of economic, cultural or academic links with the State of Israel, and last year amended the Entry into Israel Law, banning entry of anyone who made a "public call for boycotting Israel" or the Israeli settlements.

Earlier this year, Netanyahu's government banned members of 20 organisations from entering the country because of their support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel.

Now, it appears that any criticism of Israel is being characterised as "the de-legitimisation of Israel," a "threat to state security" or anti-Semitic, as evidenced by the vicious and fabricated campaign against Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn in Britain.

The crackdown is a violation of free speech, above all the right to criticise government policies and human rights violations and to advocate non-violent actions to address human rights abuses—as well as the right of free movement and travel.

It signals the stepping up of attacks not just on the Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories, but also on the social and democratic rights of all workers, in Israel and internationally.

Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security agency, interrogated Peter Beinart, a liberal American Jewish journalist, author and CNN contributor, who is well known for both his support for Israel and opposition to its illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. Beinart supports a boycott of products manufactured in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Beinart had travelled with his family to Israel to attend a family event. After his passport was scanned at immigration, he was taken to a separate room and questioned for about an hour about his political writing, affiliations and links to Israeli groups that oppose the settlements and the government's right-wing policies.

Beinart wrote about his experience, saying, "The session ended when my interrogator asked me, point blank, if I was planning to attend another protest. I answered truthfully: No. With that I was sent back to the holding room." Soon after, he called Gaby Lasky, an Israeli human rights attorney. Beinart was released, and he and his family were allowed to enter the country.

Such was the outcry that Netanyahu felt obliged to intervene, calling the detention an "administrative mistake." His office issued a shameless statement saying, "Israel is an open society which welcomes all—critics and supporters alike." Shin Bet issued a statement apologising for Beinart's interrogation. The spy agency said, "Mr. Beinart's detention was carried out as a result of an error of judgment by the professional official at the scene."

But this is not an isolated instance or an "administrative mistake." It is the deliberate escalation of the political persecution of those opposed to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories seized during the 1967 war, as other similar instances demonstrate. In effect, the security services—at the behest of the government—are now instituting a loyalty test as a condition of entry into Israel.

Last month, Meyer G. Koplow, the Jewish American chairman of Brandeis University and a pro-Israel philanthropist—who has donated millions to Israeli hospitals and schools—was interrogated on his way back to New York. This was because airport security had found a promotional booklet about Palestine, given to him during

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meetings with Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, in his checked suitcase.

Koplow said, “Whatever was intended by this questioning, I think it accomplished exactly the opposite.”

Shin Bet also detained Moriel Rothman-Zecher, a 28-year-old Israeli author who has been living in the US for the last 11 months. The security service held him for two hours before questioning him about his involvement in Breaking the Silence, an anti-occupation veterans’ NGO, and All That’s Left, an anti-occupation organisation. He was asked who the “main activists” in the latter group were, which he refused to divulge.

According to Rothman-Zecher, his interrogator told him, “I deal with what we call the extreme right and extreme left” and later said that he should think of it as a “cautionary conversation,” warning, “It's a slippery slope.” Rothman-Zecher said, “What happened to me happens to every Palestinian every day.”

He is the third Israeli to be detained for questioning at Ben-Gurion Airport in the last few months over involvement in leftist organisations. In June, Yehudit Ilana was stopped after covering the Gaza flotilla in May 2010 for “Social Television,” a leftist Hebrew-language online news site, even though she had no connection with the organisations behind the flotilla. In May, Tania Rothstein was detained when she returned home from a Swedish Foreign Ministry conference in Sweden.

Last week, two Jewish American activists, Abby Kirschbaum and Simone Zimmerman, were detained and questioned for three hours at the Taba border crossing between Israel and Egypt.

Zimmerman is one of the founding members of the Jewish anti-occupation group, IfNotNow. She lives in Israel and works for the NGO Gisha. IfNotNow is not on the list of 20 organisations banned from entering Israel.

Zimmerman worked briefly for Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign in the US before being fired over an old Facebook post which stated that Netanyahu had sanctioned murder. Last year, she published a video criticizing an Israeli law banning the entry of BDS supporters.

During their three-hour detention, Zimmerman wrote on Twitter that she and Kirschbaum were being questioned only about their political views and activities related to Palestinians. She was asked, “Why did you come here to work with Palestinians? Why not with Jews?” Kirschbaum was asked about her activities and links to other organisations in the Palestinian territories, whether she wanted to go to Gaza or had attended any violent demonstrations and her opinion of Netanyahu.

Daniel Sokatch, who heads the New Israel Fund, responded to Zimmerman’s interrogation, explaining, “It is now beyond doubt that the Netanyahu government has turned its border crossings into interrogation chambers.”

He added, “The government is demonstrating once again that the test for entering the country is a political one—either you agree with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s ultra-right-wing coalition or you’re subject to questioning, intimidation, or refusal. This may be legal, but it’s morally unacceptable and anti-democratic.”

Last May, security officers at Ben Gurion airport detained, questioned, denied entry to and then deported four members of an American human rights delegation to Israel and the West Bank, although the rest of the delegation were allowed through. One, Katherine Franke, a Professor of Law, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Columbia University, was accused of being affiliated to the BDS movement.

It appears that Israel has access to a blacklist of pro-Palestinian activists around the world that it is using as the basis for its airport detentions and interrogations.

Since 2015, Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs has targeted all those seeking to “delegitimise” Israel, including the BDS movement and anti-occupation groups. This “delegitimisation unit,” funded to the tune of $100 million, largely works through a secret network of NGOs that help it defend Israel abroad.

One such group is thought to be the Canary Mission, which is in direct contact with the leadership of Act.il, a pro-Israel propaganda app that is a part of the network. It carries thousands of profiles of pro-Palestinian students and professors, alongside a handful of profiles of prominent white supremacists that it says “promote hatred of the U.S.A., Israel and Jews on North American college campuses.” At least some of those questioned suspect the security officials were using information derived from Canary Mission and similar websites.

Professor Franke said that an Israeli border control officer showed her something on his phone that she says she is “80% sure” was her Canary Mission profile, before telling her she would be deported and permanently banned from the country.

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