

US student critical of Israel detained at Tel Aviv airport for more than a week

Jean Shaoul**12 October 2018**

Israel has now detained American graduate student Lara Alqasem at Ben Gurion International Airport for more than a week. They are threatening to deport her unless she renounces her support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.

Alqasem, 22, had a valid student visa to study at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. She was targeted because she was president of the University of Florida's chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine that supports the BDS campaign against Israel and its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories.

Israel's strategic affairs minister, Gilad Erdan, who is in charge of the anti-BDS programme, said Israel would not let Alqasem into the country because "Lara served as president of a chapter of one of the most extreme and hate-filled anti-Israel BDS groups in the US" and the Israeli government "will not allow entry to those who work to harm the country, whatever their excuse."

Israel has decided to determine who will be allowed to enter Israel and the occupied territories based on the political ideology. Under last year's amendment to the Entry into Israel Law, it bars entry to anyone who made a "public call for boycotting Israel" or the Israeli settlements.

Alqasem's detention follows the government's naming, earlier this year, of 20 organisations whose "central activists" are banned from entering the country because of their support for BDS. At least 15 people have been stopped from entering Israel this year, according to Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs. Israel revoked the work permit of Omar Shakir, Human Rights Watch's Israel and Palestine director, giving him two weeks to leave the country over his alleged support for BDS.

Alqasem has been held in a cell with little access to a

telephone, no Internet and a bug-infested bed since her arrival on October 2. Her mother, Karen Alqasem, speaking from Florida, told the Associated Press, "She is being treated like a criminal but she is not a criminal.

"Studying and getting to know the country was Lara's dream for as long as I can remember," she added. "She may have been critical of some of Israel's policies in the past but she respects Israeli society and culture. To her, this isn't a contradiction."

On Monday, the Tel Aviv district court ordered Alqasem's continued detention in an immigration facility, pending her appeal, making her detention the longest anyone has been held in a boycott-related case.

Her lawyer, Yotam Ben-Hillel, argued that the student was part of a five-member chapter, and as such was not a "central activist" in BDS: "We're talking about someone who simply wants to study in Israel, who is not boycotting anything. She's not even part of the student organisation anymore."

Alqasem, whose grandparents are Palestinian, stated in her testimony to the court, "I don't support BDS. If I supported it, I wouldn't be able to come to Israel as a student." She said she had never actively participated in boycott campaigns and promised not to promote them in the future.

With utmost cynicism, Sabine Haddad, a spokesperson for the immigration authority, denied that Alqasem was being detained against her will, saying, "She can fly back to the United States whenever she likes. ... She decided to appeal and is being held in the facility for those refused entry."

On Tuesday, Erdan told Israel's Army Radio—in an appeal to his right-wing support base—that he would reconsider his decision if Alqasem denounced the boycott of Israel: "If Alqasem comes forward tomorrow morning with her own voice, not with all

sorts of lawyers' wisecracking and statements that could be construed this way or another—and declares that supporting BDS, she thinks today is illegitimate and she regrets what she did on this matter, we will consider our stance."

Erdan lambasted the Hebrew University for supporting Alqasem's legal appeal against deportation, as well as Meretz party legislators who visited Alqasem at the airport's immigration cell at the same time as the funerals of the two settlers killed by a Palestinian attacker were being held, saying, "The Hebrew University is working together with the extreme left here."

The US student's appeal was brought forward to yesterday to allow her to start her course on Sunday, October 14, the beginning of the academic year, if the court rules in her favour. The ruling has still to be released.

More than 450 academics from around the world have signed a letter published in the *Guardian* calling for her to be allowed to enter Israel and pursue her studies. But the US authorities have refused to lift a finger in support of the right of one of their own citizens to study in Israel. US State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said that the US was aware of Alqasem's case, was providing consular access and "valued freedom of expression," but "Ultimately it is up to the government of Israel to decide who it wants to allow into the country."

Not one of the major powers have spoken out against Israel's refusal to allow the American student to take a one-semester law course on human rights at the Hebrew University, signalling their tacit consent to this gross violation of academic freedom.

Israel's move is an indication of the extent to which they have abandoned all pretence of supporting free speech, including the right to criticise government policies and human rights violations and to advocate nonviolent actions to address human rights abuses—as well as the right of free movement and travel. It marks an escalation of attacks on the social and democratic rights of all workers and students, in Israel and internationally.

It is noteworthy that Erdan and the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, which has \$100 million in funding for its "delegitimisation unit," based their decision on information derived from the website Canary Mission.

This is a shadowy organisation that compiles a blacklist of pro-Palestinian activists around the world that is used as the basis for detaining and interrogating visitors at Tel Aviv airport, Israel's main entry point.

Canary Mission collects information about thousands of pro-Palestinian students and professors, alongside a handful of profiles of prominent white supremacists that it says "promote hatred of the USA, Israel and Jews on North American college campuses." It uses social media to suppress pro-Palestine activism on campus and elsewhere.

According to *Ha'aretz*, in response to Alqasem's legal appeal, Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs released documents confirming that it had used information compiled by Canary Mission "to bar political activists from entering Israel," including Alqasem herself. According to the *Forward*, a New York-based Jewish magazine, Canary Mission is funded by Zionist organisations in the US, including the Jewish Community Federation that channelled funds through the Diller Foundation via the Central Fund of Israel, which in turn funds the settler movement.



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