

Israel's Welcome now Reserved only for Jews who Back Netanyahu

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Dustin Pfundheller, 30, an American dentist living in Singapore, was set to become the youngest person to visit every country in the world while in a full-time job. His globetrotting has taken him to 192 of the 193 recognised states, bringing his medical skills to the world's remotest places. But in January he was barred for the second time from Israel, the only country left on his list, having previously been refused entry last year.

Despite an invitation to a dental conference in Tel Aviv, and Israelis who vouched for him, border officials banned Pfundheller for 10 years. No reason was given, but lawyers suspect visits to Iran and the Arab states sealed his fate. There could hardly be starker evidence that Israel stubbornly refuses to become a normal country.

Paradoxically, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Singapore last month to promote Israel as a tolerant country, one "committed to a better world, a world of diversity."

The reality could not be more different. Arabs and Muslims have always struggled to gain entry to Israel. Palestinians are routinely abused at the borders, and thousands, especially from Jerusalem, have been stripped of the right to return home after living abroad.

But new figures show Israel is excluding other groups too. Entry denials have increased nine-fold in the past five years, topping 16,000 people last year. Among those increasingly turned away are political activists. Israel controls all access to the occupied Palestinian territories, and has been regularly denying entry to solidarity activists and those who support the boycott movement.

Legislation passed by the Israeli parliament on Monday night will only intensify the exclusionary trend. The new law forbids entry to anyone who supports a boycott, even if it is only of the settlements. As one legislator pointed out, that means Israel may quickly find itself bound to refuse entry to all officials from the United Nations and Europe.

In a sign of the new direction, Israel denied a tourist visa last week to Human Rights Watch's new director for Israel and Palestine, having earlier refused him a work permit. One of the most prominent human rights organisations in the world was dismissed as an outlet for "Palestinian propaganda".

Weeks earlier, Israel subjected Jennifer Gorovitz, an American Jewish vice-president of the New Israel Fund, to a humiliating interrogation at airport arrivals. NIF is one of the largest funders of Israeli organisations supporting human rights and social justice. That includes assistance to groups that monitor military abuses in the occupied territories.

This presumably explains why Gorovitz's interrogators suggested she posed a "security threat". She finally gained admittance only after Talia Sasson, the Israeli head of NIF and an adviser to former prime ministers, pulled strings.

Gorovitz wrote of her experience: "My privilege as a Jew means I never imagined that Israel could or would deny me entrance."

Such an assumption was justified. Israel's Law of Return is supposed to guarantee Jews around the world the right to almost instant citizenship in Israel.

For that reason, the law is grossly unjust. It privileges Jewish access to Israel at the expense of the native Palestinian population, most of whom were expelled in 1948.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Israel, a state that invested itself with the historical mission of offering sanctuary to Jews worldwide, is increasingly applying a political test to those who arrive at its borders.

Israel is denying entry not only to Arabs and would-be record breakers. And it is deporting not just those such as migrant workers and African asylum seekers who might pollute the Jewish state with non-Jewish genes. Now it is openly targeting Jews whose politics do not align with the far-right government of Netanyahu.

It should be noted that many of the solidarity and boycott activists turned away are Jewish. Famous Jewish critics of Israel such as Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein have been barred too.

On Monday, Rebecca Vilkomerson, the US executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, observed that, despite her husband and children being Israeli citizens, and her grandparents buried there, under the new anti-boycott legislation she was now denied the right to visit.

In Israel's eyes, it seems some Jews are more equal than others.

The pulling up of the drawbridge comes as Israel's leadership has remained largely silent in the face of a rising tide of anti-semitism in the US, fuelled by Donald Trump's election as president. Dozens of Jewish centres have received bomb threats, and Jewish cemeteries have been vandalised.

There are growing rumblings among American Jews that their interests are being overlooked by the Netanyahu government to avoid damaging relations with the new US administration. But another reason for the lack of response should be considered.

The principle of the "ingathering of the exiles", according to Israel's official ideology, Zionism, assumes that Israel is the rightful home of Jews everywhere. And the largest Jewish population outside Israel resides in the US.

In November, Yaron London, a popular TV host, welcomed Trump's election, pointing out that "a worldview which supports white supremacy matches our [Israeli] government's interests."

Last week opposition leader Isaac Herzog urged Israel to prepare for an influx of US Jews fleeing persecution.

But will Israel's arms really be open to all Jews equally, or only to those willing to contribute enthusiastically to the tribal project?

And can Jews of conscience ignore the true cost of their migration? They can leave behind anti-Jewish bigotry in the US, but only if they bolster the Jewish bigots of Israel who lord it over the native Palestinian population.

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Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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