

No BDS activists barred from Israel since Lara Alqasem, minister says

Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan told Knesset that after Supreme Court allowed American student to enter in October, no one meeting the set criteria has tried to enter

Noa Landau | Dec. 17, 2018 | 5:49 PM | 1

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said on Monday that Israel has not barred any activists of the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement trying to enter the country since the Supreme Court permitted the entry of American student Lara Alqasem into the country in October.

During a session of the Knesset Transparency Committee, headed by Zionist Union MK Stav Shaffir, Erdan, who also serves as Strategic Affairs Minister, said that no activists meeting the criteria set by the Supreme Court for deportation two months ago have tried to enter Israel.

Still, the minister did not disclose whether activists meeting the criteria for deportation had tried to enter the country before the ruling. The Strategic Affairs Ministry, which only has the authority to prevent the entry of major BDS figures, has indeed not announced the prevention of any entries into Israel since the court decision.

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Former head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Media and Public Affairs Division, Arthur Cole, told the Knesset committee that "the state has allocated hundreds of millions (of shekels) to the Strategic Affairs Ministry, but there hasn't been any visible change. We should check whether this isn't a waste of public resources."

Erdan commented on his ministry's relations with the Foreign Ministry, saying "ambassadors are instructed not to work directly with the Strategic Affairs Ministry. The Foreign Ministry doesn't really like our existence."

During the discussion, MK Shaffir blasted Erdan for concealing information concerning the ministry's activities. Since its creation in 2006, the ministry, receiving a yearly budget of 300 million shekels (\$80 million), has requested to be exempted from the Freedom of Information Law, which all other government ministries are subjected to.

Erdan's ministry often seeks to hide contacts with external organizations, claiming that exposing them would make its activities abroad more difficult. However, according to Shaffir, it "sends off a message saying it has something to hide, and harms not once the important fight against the boycott and Israel haters."

The Supreme Court justices in October overturned the District Court ruling upholding the government decision to bar Alqasem, arguing that it was unreasonable. Alqasem, a 22-year-old U.S. resident, sought to enter Israel after being accepted to a master's degree program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Strategic Affairs Ministry officials sought to prevent her entry because she had once been a member of an organization called National Students for Justice in Palestine. She was held in a detention facility at Ben-Gurion International Airport based on an amendment to the Law of Entry preventing anyone who issued a call for a boycott of Israel from receiving an entry permit.

The justices accepted Alqasem's argument that she never did this. They wrote in their ruling that the state should only prevent a person from entering into Israel if and only if the person seeking entry concurrently supports a BDS organization. The justices wrote further that if it is clear that the person seeking entry had stopped his support just for show, that the person should be considered a boycott supporter.

The justices also criticized the decision to rescind Alqasem's entry permit. Justice Anat Brown wrote that the attempt to ban Alqasem constituted "an extreme and dangerous step, which could lead to the crumbling of the pillars upon which democracy in Israel stands."

Justice Neal Hendel addressed Alqasem's desire to study at Hebrew University. He said, "This conduct is not in keeping, in an understatement, with the thesis that she's an undercover boycott activist."

Erdan called the ruling a "great victory for BDS" and that the High Court "emptied of content the law for preventing the entry of boycott activists into Israel."