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Israel bars entry to US politicians Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib

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Donald Trump had said letting in high-profile pair would ‘show great weakness’

Israel has announced it will block the US congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib from entering the country after public pressure from Donald Trump.

“It’s unacceptable to allow the entrance to the country of those who wish to harm the state of Israel,” the country’s interior ministry said.

Omar and Tlaib, who have been outspokenly critical of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, had planned to visit Palestine and Jerusalem next week.

There had been vigorous speculation in the past few weeks that the Israeli government might bar the two women, who are among the four Democrats who Trump said last month should go back to the countries they “originally came from”. Three were born in the US and one, Omar, moved there as a child.

Shortly before the Israeli announcement, Trump said allowing the women to enter “would show great weakness”. It was not immediately clear if the Israeli government made its final decision before or after Trump’s comments.

“They hate Israel & all Jewish people, & there is nothing that can be said or done to change their minds ... They are a disgrace!” Trump wrote on Twitter.

The ban prompted strong rebukes from Palestinian, Israeli and US politicians, civil society groups and former diplomats.

The Democratic presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren said before the announcement that barring elected officials for their political views would be a shameful and unprecedented move by Israel.

Bernie Sanders, another Democratic contender, said the ban was “a sign of enormous disrespect to these elected leaders, to the United States Congress and to the principles of democracy”.

Israel passed a law in 2017 that allows the government to deport people who support a boycott of Israel or Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank. The measure, widely condemned as anti-democratic and anti-free speech, was designed to combat the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.

Omar and Tlaib have said they support the use of boycotts to pressure governments, including Israel's, on rights abuses. They have sought to pass a resolution in the House of Representatives championing the right to participate in them.

'She went back with me': Ilhan Omar posts photos with Pelosi in Ghana

The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, accused the two women of aiming to use their trip to “strengthen the boycott against us and deny Israel's legitimacy”.

Israel has used the BDS legislation to block entry to students and activists but also foreign officials, including French parliamentarians and members of the European parliament. It is not clear if a US member of congress has ever been barred before.

Ayman Odeh, who runs an Arab party in Israel, said the ban exposed “the true face of Israel's occupation?”. Referring to Tlaib, who is of Palestinian descent, he wrote on Twitter?: “Israel has always banned Palestinians from their land and separated us from other Palestinians, but this time the Palestinian is a US congresswoman.”

The interior ministry said Tlaib could request a permit to enter on “humanitarian grounds for a personal visit with her family”, but approval was not guaranteed.

Omar and Tlaib were planning to see the Palestinian cities of Bethlehem, Hebron and Ramallah and to spend time in the disputed city of Jerusalem. They would have had to pass through Israeli security checks to enter both the West Bank and Jerusalem.

Alon Pinkas, formerly Israel's consul in New York, said the country should “engage Omar and Tlaib, [and] show them where they are wrong or have a partial and skewed perception of reality.”

Israel's ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer, said last month that Israel would not deny entry to US lawmakers “out of respect for the US Congress and the great alliance between Israel and America”.

Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, said the ban was “a sad reversal and is deeply disappointing”.

Trump, a close ally of Netanyahu, has sought to make political support for the Jewish state – long a consensus foreign policy for both major US parties – into a partisan issue, painting Democrats as anti-Israel. He has claimed, without evidence, that Omar and Tlaib “hate Israel, they hate our own country.”

David Brinn, the managing editor of the rightwing Jerusalem Post, wrote that a ban would be “shortsighted and deeply flawed”. He wrote: “A quashed trip is only going to further deepen the divide between Democrats and Israel – moving moderate Democrats away from a positive view of the country – and raise the spectre that Israel is behaving in something less than a democratic fashion.”

Omar and Tlaib make up half of a group of progressive minority ethnic congresswomen nicknamed the Squad, against whom Trump has lashed out with racist slurs. The other two members are Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley.

Tlaib was born in Michigan to Palestinian parents. Omar is naturalised US citizen who arrived as a child refugee from Somalia. The pair were the first Muslim women elected to congress.

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