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BDS Ties Could Put Israel-based Australian Journalist in Hot Water

His accreditation has been called into question by right-wing media watchdog after exchange with Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid at press conference.

Allison Kaplan Sommer | Dec 26, 2016 8:18 PM

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Antony Loewenstein Credit: Screenshot

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Australian journalist Antony Loewenstein's ability to live and work in Israel has been thrown into question due to his support for the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement.

The Government Press Office, which issued Loewenstein a press card last March, confirmed to Haaretz that his status as an accredited journalist is "currently under review by the GPO." GPO director Nitzan Chen said that "As a rule, without a GPO card, and in the absence of a GPO recommendation to the Interior Ministry, a foreign correspondent cannot remain in Israel."

Doubt was cast on the journalist's credentials in the aftermath of a question he posed to Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid at a press conference for foreign correspondents on December 12.

Loewenstein identified himself as a freelance journalist writing for the Guardian, Newsweek and other outlets and challenged Lapid's statement that Palestinians were to blame for the stalled peace process.

“You talked before about the idea that since Oslo, Israel has done little or nothing wrong but the truth is that 2017 is the 50th anniversary of the occupation, there are now 600,00 to 800,000 settlers, all of whom are regarded by international law as illegal,” he said. He then asked, “Is there not a deluded idea here that many Israeli politicians, including yourself, continue to believe that one can talk to the world about democracy, freedom and human rights while denying those things to millions of Palestinians and will there not come a time soon where you and other politicians will be treated like South African politicians during apartheid?”

Lapid shot back that Loewenstein’s question was a “perfect example” of the belief that “we live in a post-truth, post-facts era” and that Loewenstein’s statements were “presumptions, not facts.”



Saying that Israel has accepted and the Palestinians have rejected the two-state solution, Lapid asserted that “the problem is that the Palestinians are encouraged by the Guardian and others saying we don’t need to do anything in order to work for our future because the international community will call Israel an apartheid country. Israel is not an apartheid country, it is a law-abiding democracy.”

The Loewenstein-Lapid exchange caught the eye of right-wing media watchdog and advocacy group, Honest Reporting, whose

managing editor Simon Plosker said he was “surprised” to see Loewenstein participating in the event as a journalist. The organization’s blog subsequently published a post “exposing” Loewenstein. It charged that the man who describes himself on his website as a “Middle East based, Australian independent freelance journalist, author, documentarian and blogger” is in fact “a prominent anti-Israel activist in his native Australia and a public supporter of the Boycott, Sanctions and Divestment (BDS) movement.”

The post linked and quoted a 2014 statement of support of BDS by Loewenstein, arguing that such views, stated publicly, as well as his other past activities, should disqualify him from possessing either a GPO card or membership in the Foreign Press Association. Honest Reporting also emailed the Prime Minister’s Office, which runs the GPO, challenging the decision made last March to grant Loewenstein press credentials that allow him to live and work in Israel for a year.

A few days later, a Jerusalem Post article reported that Loewenstein soon “may be forced” to leave the country. The Post article quoted Chen as saying, “We are leaning toward recommending that his work permit not be renewed due to suspected BDS activity. We are checking the incident because unfortunately, the journalist did not give enough information to our staff.”

Loewenstein vehemently disputes Chen’s charge that he provided insufficient information during his application process. He claims that when he obtained a GPO press card as a freelancer last March, he fully met the GPO criteria.

“It was a completely transparent process,” he says. “All of my work is online, I didn’t hide anything. I’m a freelance journalist, and all my work is available publicly.” Loewenstein’s articles (including two pieces in Haaretz) are listed and linked on his website.

“Attempts by far-right, extreme lobby groups to delegitimize me are deeply disappointing,” said Loewenstein, adding that they “reflect the increasingly restrictive space for critical voices in Israel and Palestine.”

He has heard nothing from the Government Press Office directly

regarding clarification of his application or future status, and says he doesn't know whether he will be informed of his fate before he attempts to renew his credentials in March, or if they will attempt to take them away earlier.

The press card he received in March essentially qualifies foreign journalists for a B-1 work visa. According to the GPO website, in order to obtain credentials, journalists must prove that their "main profession was in the news media" in the year preceding their application and that they "work for an approved media organization."

Freelancers, the GPO rules say, "must prove that they arrived in Israel at the request of the media organization, for the performance of services in the field of news media for a period of at least one year and an express and binding work order/contract requesting these services" must be presented to the office.

Loewenstein says the charge that he cannot legitimately call himself a journalist worthy of GPO accreditation is absurd. "I am a journalist, I have been a freelance journalist for over 10 years. I work around the world," he says.

He is rallying forces behind him to back his case to remain in Israel. A recent statement by the London-based Centre for Investigative Journalism supported Loewenstein, saying that the group was "deeply concerned with media reports from Israel that Antony Loewenstein's work visa and freelance press credentials will not be renewed when they expire in March next year. In a democracy, critical voices are essential and should be encouraged, it is unacceptable that he may be forced to leave Israel because of his past statements. This is a free speech issue and we remind the Israeli government and its supporters that free speech is a cornerstone of any democracy; threatening to remove it is a slippery slope towards authoritarianism."

(EMBED Tweet:

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A letter on his behalf from the Australian Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) union was sent to the Australian ambassador in Israel, the Israeli ambassador in Australia, and the GPO.

Loewenstein said he approached the Australian embassy himself, but reported that he was told by an official there that Australia couldn't interfere in internal Israeli affairs and would not assist him.



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Plosker of Honest Reporting insists that his group's campaign is not intended to quell free speech in the press and is unrelated to the exchange at the Lapid press conference. He contends that his organization has no issue with "journalists asking difficult questions of Israeli politicians." It does, however "bother us that a known BDS activist was able to have access to press conferences as a member of the FPA and an accredited journalist with a GPO card."

He differentiated between Loewenstein from "genuine journalists" who write critically about Israel for foreign outlets like the Guardian and suggested that the GPO's requirements need to be reexamined.

"We wouldn't want to see genuine journalists thrown out of the country ... but we draw the line at BDS activism. That - BDS - isn't aimed against government policies, that is something aimed against the state itself." The BDS movement, he said, represents "an ultimate desire to see the end of Israel." As such, he said "Israel authorities are under no obligation to actively assist" Loewenstein by giving him "what is effectively a work permit, giving him special access to official events, briefings, field tours."

Plosker said he regretted the fact that the GPO's public statement allowed Loewenstein to paint himself as a "martyr" and that it would have been preferable for them to remain quiet until March, and then refuse to renew his credentials.

Meanwhile, the Guardian was rapped by the far-left advocacy website Mondoweiss for "cowardly" distancing itself from

Loewenstein. The newspaper's Head of International News Jamie Wilson told Honest Reporting that "Loewenstein was contracted to write comment pieces for Guardian Australia and remains an occasional comment contributor" but that he 'is not a news correspondent for the Guardian in Israel.'" Honest Reporting also claimed that it was informed that "Loewenstein has now been told to in future make sure he does not reference The Guardian at press conferences unless he is working on a direct commission."

Loewenstein responded that he had never claimed to be a Guardian correspondent, but pointed out: "I've been a regular contributor to the Guardian since 2013, including as a columnist between 2013 and 2016, and have written more than 90 news and opinion pieces for them from Australia, Haiti, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Papua New Guinea and many other locations."

When asked whether he regretted asking the question at the Lapid press conference that triggered the backlash, Loewenstein said. "I don't regret asking the question, but I am disappointed with the response. It is deeply revealing about present-day Israel that increasingly discourages dissent ... Real democracies don't just tolerate dissent, they encourage it."



Allison Kaplan Sommer

Haaretz Correspondent

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