Israel asks US states to act against Airbnb delisting of rentals at settlements

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdan-asks-us-states-to-act-against-airbnbs-delisting-of-west-bank-rentals/>

Israel’s minister in charge of combating boycott efforts against the Jewish state is urging US states to take steps against booking website Airbnb, after it decided to de-list accommodations in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Airbnb’s [statement](https://press.airbnb.com/listings-in-disputed-regions/) on November 19 announcing the new policy noted that 200 Israeli-owned listings in the West Bank would be removed, after the company had concluded, “They are at the core of the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians.”

In a letter to the governors of Illinois, New York, Florida, Missouri, and California, where Airbnb is based, Erdan called the announcement an adoption of “the anti-Semitic practices and narrative of the boycott movement.”

He charged that the BDS movement “is not interested in peace or a better future for the Palestinians, but rather in demonizing and discriminating against Israel, the one true democracy, and America’s strongest ally in the Middle East.”

And he said the new company policy is “especially disturbing when one understands that it is a policy directed only toward Israel. Such a policy has not been applied by the company to any other country or region involved in a national dispute or conflict.

“This constitutes (one hopes unintentionally) the modern form of an anti-Semitic practice which applies a double standard to Israel in a way that is not expected or demanded of any other country.”

He urged the governors to “consider speaking out against the company’s decision, and taking any other relevant steps, including in relation to commercial dealings” between Airbnb and their states.

Erdan’s outreach is likely falling on receptive ears. Laws against state investment in companies that boycott Israel exist in 25 US states.

According to the Kan public broadcaster, Illinois governor Bruce Rauner has already asked the state’s investment board to consider divesting from Airbnb at its meeting next month. Florida’s governor-elect Ron DeSantis has promised to take similar steps once in office.

Erdan’s letter is part of an effort in the Israeli government to develop a coordinated response to the Airbnb decision. An interministerial committee composed of officials from Erdan’s Strategic Affairs Ministry, as well as the ministries of foreign affairs, tourism, justice and economy and the Finance Ministry’s Tax Authority are reportedly working on developing a government-wide response.

An Airbnb official told The Times of Israel on November 21 that the company was evaluating whether to drop its listings in the disputed territory of Western Sahara as well, brushing off Israeli complaints that it was only taking a stand in the Jewish state’s dispute with the Palestinians while ignoring similar disputes in places like Tibet, Northern Cyprus and Western Sahara.

“In the statement we issued on Monday [November 19], we noted that we have developed a framework for evaluating how we should treat listings in occupied territories around the world. Western Sahara is one example of a place where we will use this framework,” the official said.

As of November 21, there were [24 Airbnb listings](https://www.airbnb.com/s/Western-Sahara/homes?guests=1&refinement_paths%5B%5D=%2Fhomes&allow_override%5B%5D=&s_tag=ONqKAEUQ) in Western Sahara.

Israeli officials, including Tourism Minister Yariv Levin and Erdan, have lambasted the rental giant’s initial decision as “racist” and “anti-Semitic.”

The Airbnb official clarified that the delisting of Israeli-owned rentals would only be applied to Israeli settlements in the West Bank and not homes in East Jerusalem or the Golan Heights, which Israel officially considers part of the country’s sovereign territory.

The company said the decision to remove the listings came after “considerable time” was spent consulting experts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Airbnb said that, as an industry leader, it “must consider the impact we have and act responsibly.”

The announcement came a day before Human Rights Watch was set to publish a report detailing the company’s operations in Israeli settlements.

Amid an outcry from settler leaders as well as their allies in the government, Airbnb’s Global Head of Policy and Communications Chris Lehane issued a statement on November 20 saying, “Israel is a special place and our over 22,000 hosts are special people who have welcomed hundreds of thousands of guests to Israel. We understand that this is a hard and complicated issue and we appreciate everyone’s perspective.”

The following day, Erdan called on Israelis to [boycott Airbnb](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-may-look-to-punish-airbnb-with-special-tax-after-settlement-ban/) in light of the company’s decision, adding that the government was examining “numerous courses of action.”

Liberal pro-Israel groups have objected to the failure of most such orders and laws to distinguish between boycotts of Israel within its pre-1967 borders, which they reject, and boycotts of settlement businesses and goods that many progressive activists support.

Tourism Minister Levin also said last week that his office had reached out to the Finance Ministry with a request to “impose a special and high tax” on Airbnb’s activities.

Israel could find it difficult to take meaningful action against the company, as officials do not want to hurt the 22,000 Israeli homes outside the West Bank that benefit from the website’s services. The statement from Levin’s office said that the tax he is urging would not be imposed on the Israeli rental units or on the renters. It did not give any indication as to what other part of Airbnb’s business in Israel could be targeted.