

Palestinian-Australian under police investigation for protests against Gaza genocide

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Hash Tayeh, a Palestinian-Australian businessman, is reportedly under police investigation for his involvement in mass demonstrations opposing Israel's genocide in Gaza. The Melbourne *Age* reported on Thursday that Tayeh will be formally arrested by Victoria Police in Melbourne next week and interviewed over allegations that he has breached the state's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act.

From what has been reported, the investigation is a serious assault on democratic rights. It is an escalation of longstanding attempts by the political establishment and state apparatus to curtail and even suppress mass protests against Israel's war crimes, under conditions where the federal and state Labor governments actively support the Zionist regime.

The *Age* stated that Victoria Police "is investigating whether Tayeh broke the law by reciting chants such as 'all Zionists are terrorists' and other statements equating Zionism with terrorism, and whether Tayeh's involvement in organising the protest movement amounts to a crime."

That is, Tayeh is facing the prospect of serious criminal charges for political speech and for exercising his right to engage in political activities such as public protests.

In addition to the stigma of being found to have breached the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act, essentially hate crime legislation, a successful prosecution could result in a prison term of six months or a fine of more than \$11,500.

The accusations against Tayeh are based on the conflation of Zionism and Israel's war crimes with the Jewish people. In Australia, as internationally, supporters of Israel's onslaught, including in governments and the media, have asserted that opposition to the Israeli state is tantamount to antisemitism. Victoria Police confirmed to

the *Age* that its investigation was prompted by a complaint over "potential antisemitic comments made by an individual."

There is nothing antisemitic, however, about Tayeh's alleged statements, including those linking Zionists to terrorism. Zionism is not a religious or "racial" identity, but a right-wing nationalist ideology and political movement that is opposed by growing numbers of Jewish people in Australia and internationally.

It is an indisputable historical fact that Zionist paramilitaries, aided by the imperialist powers, especially the US, established Israel in 1948 through a campaign of violence and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population. That included acts of terrorism, such as massacres of entire villages and the bombing of prominent buildings.

Millions of people around the world today correctly view the actions of Israel as a form of state terrorism. Its onslaught on Gaza has included a campaign of indiscriminate bombing, and open calls by Israeli leaders for the ethnic cleansing of the entire strip. *The Lancet* medical journal estimated last week that the resulting death toll may already be a massive 186,000.

The fraudulent identification of all Jewish people and of Judaism with the militarist state perpetrating these atrocities is itself antisemitic. Significant layers of the Jewish population have participated in the global protests against the genocide. Tayeh has spoken alongside such Jewish activists and has repeatedly stated his solidarity with ordinary Jewish people, against the Israeli regime and its Zionist promoters.

The investigation of Tayeh raises a broader danger. If strident condemnation of Zionism can be deemed a breach of "tolerance" laws, will sharp denunciations of other political movements, such as the Labor and Liberal

parties, similarly be deemed impermissible? That has increasingly become the tenor of the political establishment, including Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who has condemned mass opposition to the genocide as a threat to “social cohesion” within Australia.

The Albanese government and the state Labor administrations have, since the Israeli assault began, reacted with intense hostility to the mass protests that are now the most sustained anti-war movement in Australian history.

In the days after the October 7 Hamas military operation, as Israeli bombs were already raining down on Gaza, Albanese together with the Labor leaders of New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, condemned protests in defence of the Palestinians as “inappropriate.” The NSW Labor administration of Premier Chris Minns threatened to ban all such rallies indefinitely, and authorised “extraordinary” police powers that could have been used to identify and search any participants.

While these governments did not proceed with full-scale bans, for fear of inciting mass opposition further, they have never dispensed with that perspective either.

Albanese personally led a venomous campaign against small university encampments protesting the genocide, branding them in May as “divisive” displays of “hatred and ignorance” that did not “have a place” in Australian society.

He made those comments under conditions where far-right and Zionist vigilantes were physically attacking the encampments, and university administrators were moving to forcefully shut them down. Months after the end of most of the encampments, students involved are still being targeted, including dozens at the University of Melbourne who currently face disciplinary charges carrying the threat of expulsion.

Those punitive actions by one of the most prestigious universities in the country form part of a stepped-up campaign against opposition to the Israeli war crimes that is again being overseen by the Labor government.

Earlier this month, Albanese compelled the “resignation” from Labor of Fatima Payman, a 29-year-old senator who had voted for a Greens motion recognising Palestine. Alongside a witch hunt of Payman, Albanese and other Labor leaders have whipped-up an Islamophobic campaign, including assertions that anger over Israel’s actions is primarily motivated by Muslim religious sectarianism.

Then last week the government appointed businesswoman Jillian Segal to the newly-created position

of “Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism in Australia.” Segal is a Zionist lobbyist who has explicitly defended Israel’s bombing of hospitals in Gaza, has publicly demanded the repression of pro-Palestinian protesters and pledged to combat “anti-Zionism.”

In Victoria, the state Labor administration has presided over a more aggressive approach to weekly mass pro-Palestinian protests. That has included at least two occasions on which police deployed capsicum spray, and repeated attempts to obstruct a truck that has been used as the rally platform for the past nine months.

It is within this context that the investigation of Tayeh has been launched. As a prominent and outspoken Palestinian-Australian, he has been a particular target of the most vociferous supporters of Israel.

In November, his Burgertory restaurant in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield was subject to an arson attack. Tayeh and his supporters noted that the outlet’s staff had over the previous weeks been harassed and menaced by young Israeli supporters. Victoria Police nevertheless immediately declared that the arson was not a hate crime.

Two men were arrested over the blaze in January and have since been charged. Their African ancestry was crudely trumpeted by the media and Victoria Police as proof that the arson had nothing to do with Tayeh’s Palestinian activities. The men, however, have since stated they were paid \$20,000 to carry out the attack by unnamed parties. Victoria Police and the official press have displayed a complete incuriosity as to who those parties may be.

Tayeh claims to be the victim of an ongoing campaign of intimidation, with his personal residence also having been firebombed earlier this year.

Workers and young people should demand an end to the police investigation of Tayeh, as a politically-motivated assault on democratic rights. The attacks on basic democratic rights must be answered by the development of a mass movement of the working class directed against the Labor governments, the entire political establishment and the capitalist system they defend, which is responsible for authoritarianism, the genocide and imperialist war.



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