

George Mason University students demand democratic rights for leaders of Students for Justice in Palestine

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George Mason University students in Northern Virginia have reacted with outrage and concern over the police and FBI's raid on the homes last month of two members of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at the campus.

On November 7, two leading members of the GMU chapter of the SJP had their doors kicked in by a joint Fairfax County Police Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation raid. The students had been under suspicion for a minor incident involving the spray painting of the words "stop the genocide" on a walkway at the university.

The students and their family were made to stand for hours as law enforcement turned their home upside down, removing electronic devices. No evidence of any crimes was uncovered, and no arrests were made. Despite this, the university issued a trespass notice against the two students, a decision which they weren't even made aware of, and suspended the campus SJP until further notice.

"To see two of my fellow students be suspended for nothing but their continued activism and resistance to the persecution and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people... feels like a backhanded slap to the face," said one GMU student. The student called the decision to ban the SJP an act of "collective punishment" against the club, most of whom were not suspected of involvement in the spray painting incident.

On Sunday, the *Washington Post* published an article revealing the county and federal prosecutors' claims against the two students.

"Court documents, which do not publicly indicate a reason for the search, allege that authorities found guns and magazines inside the home" belonging to the two students' brother and father, along with " Hamas and Hezbollah flags." Prosecutors responded by attempting to "temporarily prohibit the men from possessing or buying

firearms."

However, the *Post* article notes that a judge later threw out the prosecutors' demands and "no one has been charged with any crimes."

Abdel-Rahman Hamed, the family attorney, contended that the claims against his clients were "baseless and inflammatory." The attorney stated items found at the residence written in Arabic were mistranslated by police, and "cherry-picked out of a collection of hundreds and that no credible evidence of danger was ever presented."

"This decision not only infringes upon the rights of SJP members but also sets a dangerous precedent," said another student.

"The First Amendment protects freedom of speech, including the right to express controversial or unpopular viewpoints," they said. If the campus is allowed to attack groups based upon their political views, then it signals "to other student groups that dissenting opinions may be silenced, creating an environment of fear rather than one of open debate and intellectual exchange."

Others echoed these sentiments.

"It's a very scary sentiment that is on campus," one student said. The "students ... have not been proven guilty, they've been raided by the police force and George Mason has been behind this and has been working with the police."

The student demanded that the university uphold the right to due process. "I completely agree justice should be found," they said, referring to the allegations of graffiti vandalism, "but after trials have been set, after evidence has been thrown up against them, after they lose in court going through the regular trial process."

Another student stated that "It's very clearly an aggressive attack on democratic rights... They are targeting the students that are protesting the genocide." The student

noted that the campus's heavy handed response will likely be a "wake-up call for other students. We can see the oppression abroad coming back here at home."

"It's pretty scary how comfortable [the administration and the government] are with it, too," they said, noting how the GMU president Gregory Washington dodged a question about the raid and banning at a faculty senate meeting last week.

According to the meeting's minutes, the administration repeatedly stonewalled when asked by school faculty about the event, with Washington even claiming the ban on the students and the SJP was "justified based on the information available."

"This was a political witch-hunt from the very beginning," said another student from GMU. The student explained the context to the raids, adding that politicians have been "calling Palestinian protesters Hamas supporters that needed to be deported or killed by the police."

The student spoke about the university's culpability in supporting the Israel government's internationally recognized crimes, stating that school officials claim "protesters were supporting terrorism even though they [GMU] were supporting and funding Israeli-backed terrorism against the Palestinians in Gaza."

Students at GMU have endorsed the International Youth and Students for Social Equality's demands that students the university drop the ban against the SJP and allow the students to resume their education at GMU. "These students deserve to finish their education and a fair trial, and the Mason community at large deserves full transparency to the matters of this case," said the student.

The IYSSE calls on students and faculty who are looking to oppose these unjustified attacks on basic democratic rights to help build a movement in the working class opposed to war, genocide and the growth of authoritarianism.



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