

## **Witness Testimony 12/11/2024**

My name is Dr. Shereen Naser. I am an associate professor of psychology, the daughter of forcibly displaced Palestinian immigrants, the mother of two young girls and a proud Ohioan. Today, I bring my story and my expertise as a psychologist specializing in youth mental health to share how SB297 is a harmful bill.

Like many immigrant families, my grandparents and my parents sacrificed so much for the promise of a better life in the United States. There is a picture of my dad and my uncle just arriving in the U.S. as teenagers, large smiles on their faces, the long hair that was the style of the time just touching their shoulders. This picture and their smiles stand out in my memory. How do I tell them that the discrimination that forced them from their homeland persists here, in the very place they sought freedom?

Senate Bill 297 is the manifestation of my family's nightmares, that they would flee for a better life in the U.S. only to be under the same boot that restricted their movement, their opportunities, and their freedoms under Israeli occupation.

Let me be incredibly clear, right here in Ohio the scourge of antisemitism, anti-Muslim hate, anti-Arab racism and anti-Palestinian racism have the same root- a desire to "other" people and to segregate our collective communities in a way that should not be tolerated.

However, criticizing a government is protected speech and an American value. How am I allowed to criticize my own government, but I am not allowed to criticize the Israeli government that is ruthlessly slaughtering Palestinians in Gaza and oppressing my family in the West Bank? At what point did we decide that American freedoms were an acceptable price to pay for a foreign government's political agenda?

The IHRA definition of antisemitism included in SB 297 is controversial, even among scholars of antisemitism. Alternative definitions exist that better support Jewish communities without marginalizing Palestinians such as the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism signed by 210 scholars and 370 signatories.

The use of the IHRA definition's in SB297 exemplifies anti-Palestinian racism and deeply scars my community by sending a clear message of favoritism of the Israeli government over Palestinian lives.

Ohio is home to one of the largest Palestinian populations in the United States who have been witnessing violence and discrimination nationwide including a 6-year-old Palestinian boy stabbed to death in Chicago, three college students shot for wearing Palestinian garb, and the attempted drowning of two Palestinian children in Texas. Instead of protection, we face silencing. We live here, we pay taxes here, we are integral and valuable members of our community, but our government does not treat us as such.

I have personally been harassed by an extremist supporter of Israel who has threatened my life and my children's lives multiple times over the last 4 years. Despite this, I have never filed a police report because I know I will not be treated equally as an American citizen. When traveling

to Tel Aviv in 2008, I was interrogated for eight hours and threatened by soldiers. This treatment did not happen to non-Palestinian Americans traveling with me, even though we shared the same citizenship and were born in the same country.

Research shows Arab Americans face unique mental health challenges, with 66% at risk for depression and mental health issues ranking among their top concerns (Baker et al., 2003; Wrobel & Paterson, 2014). Anti-Arab sentiment, like that enshrined in SB 297, has been linked to depression and decreased well-being (Abdulrahim et al., 2012; Padela & Heisler, 2010). In the past 14 months I've facilitated listening sessions with my community and have learned that the heartbreak, discrimination, and fear we face are compounded by the knowledge that our government values a foreign agenda over the rights of its own citizens. Palestinian youth describe feeling exhausted and anxious from witnessing violence against Palestinians abroad and at home, and also from seeing their own government dismiss their rights and humanity.

One source of support for Arab Americans is community spaces that affirm their dignity and culture. Bills like SB 297 threaten to dismantle these vital spaces, exacerbating our distress.

I think about the extremist harassing me. If he harms me or my children, would that be acceptable to you because I am Palestinian, and he supports Israel? Would his right to silence me matter more than my family's safety? That is what SB 297 represents: prioritizing extremist support for a foreign government over the rights of Palestinian Americans.

As a college educator, I've seen the power of open dialogue. Last semester, I co-taught a course with a Jewish faculty member that fostered conversations between Jewish and Palestinian students. This dialogue increased understanding and built connections. SB 297 would silence these crucial conversations.

Proponents of SB 297 have forgotten what makes America beautiful, our diversity and our collective voice. Today, I stand here in a Palestinian thobe, a traditional dress representing centuries of heritage. Is my thobe antisemitic? Is my existence antisemitic? If SB 297 passes, where does it stop?

No government can erase my story or my people's story—not Israel and not the Ohio Statehouse. I can only hope that you will hear me, hear my community, and reject this discriminatory bill.