

Testimony of Opposition to Adoption of SB 297 – Wednesday December 11th, 2024 9:30AM

My name is Walaa Kanan, and I stand before you today as a Palestinian activist who deeply understands the human cost of oppression and silence. My heart is heavy with the weight of what SB 297 represents; I refuse to stay silent while injustice continues to destroy lives—both in Gaza and here, in the heart of our community in Ohio. For the past 14 months, I have worked tirelessly with my team to stand up for the people of Gaza during a genocide that has whipped entire lineages off the face of the Earth. My advocacy work is not something I do for personal enjoyment, it's exhausting, it's heartbreaking, and in some ways, even dehumanizing, but we continue to show up everyday because our advocacy is a matter of life and death for countless families, including my own and that of my friends and colleagues.

To be transparent, I hate having to do this. I hate having to parade my trauma and the trauma of my comrades in front of elected officials and the media just to get a response. We shouldn't have to put our pain on display to prove that injustice is happening—but we've been simply left with no other choice. Several members of my team—people I organize with, people I care about—have had to bear witness the brutal murder of their family members throughout this past year due to bombings in Gaza. They've watched, helplessly, as their loved ones were buried beneath rubble. And yet, despite this unimaginable grief, they find the strength to show up and fight for justice. If this bill passes, our voices could be labeled as discriminatory or hateful simply for telling our truth and advocating for Palestinian human rights. Do you want to be a part of a society that punishes those who speak out for justice, who are already carrying the weight of such trauma?

This bill threatens to make our advocacy even harder. It takes our grief, our pain, and our fight for justice and labels it as hate. By conflating criticism of Israeli policies with hate speech, it criminalizes dissent and silences voices like mine—voices that are advocating for basic human rights. The use of the IHRA definition of antisemitism blurs the lines between legitimate political discourse and discrimination, undermining free speech and setting a dangerous precedent. It sends a clear message: our voices do not matter, and our lives do not matter. It tells me that my experiences, and the experiences of so many others, are less important than political convenience.

As an activist, I have already faced harassment for my advocacy for Palestine—people have called me hateful things, I've been targeted and silenced, and this bill will only exacerbate these realities. This bill's redefinition of "ethnic intimidation" would make it even easier for those who oppose our fight to label our advocacy as something criminal. Classifying peaceful demonstrations, as small as 5 people, as "riots" gives law enforcement more power to surveil and intimidate marginalized communities, including Muslim and Arab organizers like myself. It sends a clear message that your opinion doesn't count and your pain doesn't matter. It legitimizes structural inequity under the guise of protecting public order. This is not just overreach—it's systematic discrimination.

I also want to bring to light that this is not just about Palestine—this is about all of us. Every time we allow free speech to be chipped away, we lose a piece of what makes this country a place where people can hope for something better.

As a therapist, social worker, and advocate for those affected by sexual violence, I have seen what happens when people are silenced, when they're told their pain doesn't matter, when they're stripped of their power to speak up. It breaks them. It destroys their ability to believe that change is possible. This bill will do exactly that on an even larger scale.

In my own community Toledo, Ohio, members of our Palestinian community have collectively lost over 200 family members at the hands of the Israeli military this past year. Over 200 lives, gone forever. And that's just one story among countless others. How can it be acceptable to criminalize people for sharing that reality? Why is it a crime for me to share that my mother's brother was murdered by Israel prior to even having the opportunity to reach adulthood. How can we live in a society that seeks to suppress the voices of those who are fighting to shed light on such staggering, incomprehensible loss?

If it passes, what comes next? Whose voices will be labeled as "dangerous" or "discriminatory" next? Whose fight for justice will be crushed under the weight of legislation designed to protect the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable?

I am asking you today—pleading with you—not to let that happen. Reject this bill, because it is not just a bill. It is a weapon. A weapon aimed at silencing those of us who are already fighting against unimaginable odds. Do not make our fight harder than it already is. Do not take away the little bit of hope we are clinging to in the face of so much loss.