

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful,  
Bismillahi-Il Rahmanil Raheem,  
As-Salaamu Alaikum. May peace be upon you.

My name is Faten Odeh, and I'm an Executive Director of CAIR-Ohio.

As an American, I have always been committed to defending the Constitution, which has protected our freedoms for over two centuries. My commitment to this cause led me to become a social studies teacher and, later, a civil rights leader, standing on the frontlines to defend the principles of democracy and liberty that make this country unique.

But today, those principles are under direct threat at the Ohio Statehouse in the form of Senate Bill 297. While the bill claims to protect against bigotry, a cause we all support, it instead dangerously undermines our fundamental rights to free speech and political dissent.

This bill conflates legitimate criticism of Israeli government policies with hatred. We all support reducing bigotry, but this bill misses that worthy target and instead advances a dangerous practice: Recategorizing criticism of genocide and apartheid under the guise of combating bigotry. This is not an abstract concern—it's a matter of principle. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's "Working Definition of Antisemitism" expands antisemitism to include criticism of Israeli policies, such as its occupation of Palestine and its apartheid practices. However, this broad definition has been used to wrongly label nonviolent protest and political speech against Israel as antisemitic, chilling free expression and activism.

In 2023, the American Bar Association and the American Association of University Professors both rejected this definition for its potential to suppress speech. The original drafter of the definition warned the U.S. Congress that enshrining it into law would stifle political speech and harm academic freedom.

The bill before us silences dissent, places the government in the role of silencing political opposition and restricts the very freedoms that are the foundation of our democracy.

We must remember that the First Amendment guarantees our right to speak truth to power. It is un-American to allow any government or institution to silence those who stand up for justice, especially when it involves Muslims, Christians, Jews, Arabs, Asian Americans, African Americans and all others all joined in criticism of Israel's human rights violations.

I urge each of you to recognize that this bill is not a step forward in the fight against hate —it is a dangerous precedent that threatens our democracy, our freedoms, and our ability to speak out against injustice. It is your duty to protect the Constitution and the rights of every American citizen, especially the right to dissent.

Thank you.