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Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
Columbus, OH

Subject: Opposition to SB 297 – A Grave Threat to Free Speech and Advocacy

Dear Members of the Ohio State Senate Judiciary Committee,
As a Palestinian-American and a proud community member in Columbus, Ohio, who believes in free speech, equality, and justice, I am writing to express my strong opposition to SB 297, a bill that conflates anti-Zionism and legitimate criticism of the Israeli government with antisemitism. This dangerous conflation undermines the principles of free speech, erases the lived experiences of Palestinians, and violates the rights of advocates for justice.

How SB 297 Denies My Lived Experience as a Palestinian

As someone with deep personal ties to Palestine, this bill not only misrepresents criticism of Israel’s policies but also denies the reality of what I—and millions of Palestinians—have experienced under occupation. The Israeli occupation, recognized as illegal under international law by bodies such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), is not an abstract concept to me. It is a deeply personal reality that affects my community, my family, and my own sense of safety and identity. Under this bill, sharing my experiences of checkpoints, home demolitions, or systemic discrimination—recognized as apartheid by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and B’Tselem—could be labeled as antisemitic. How can I remain silent when the ICC itself has opened investigations into potential war crimes in the occupied territories? This bill attempts to erase my voice, my truth, and my right to advocate for justice. Criticizing occupation is not hatred. It is a call for freedom, dignity, and the fundamental human rights that every person deserves. Silencing me and others like me does not protect Jewish people from antisemitism—it weaponizes their pain to suppress dissent, shield a foreign government, and ignore the suffering of Palestinians.

The Distinction Between Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism

It is crucial to distinguish between antisemitism—a hatred of Jewish people—and anti-Zionism or criticism of Israeli policies. As historian Ilan Pappé notes, “To criticize the state of Israel is not to criticize Jewish people. To conflate the two is to betray those who are suffering under occupation.” Similarly, Holocaust scholar Norman Finkelstein warns that “equating criticism of Israel with antisemitism undermines the genuine fight against antisemitism.”

This bill not only harms Palestinians but also endangers Jewish scholars and activists like Noam Chomsky and Gabor Maté, who speak out against Israeli policies. As Gabor Maté,

himself a Holocaust survivor, states, “True antisemitism is hatred of Jews as a people, not criticism of Israel’s policies. Silencing dissent serves neither justice nor Jewish safety.”

Threats Posed by SB 297

1. **Violation of Free Speech:** This bill criminalizes protected speech under the First Amendment, suppressing the right to criticize foreign governments.
2. **Erosion of Academic Freedom:** Scholars discussing Israeli policies or Palestinian history may face censorship, stifling intellectual exploration.
3. **Silencing of Palestinian Voices:** The bill erases the voices of Palestinians like me who speak about our lived experiences under occupation.
4. **Undermining the Fight Against Antisemitism:** By conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism, this bill detracts from addressing real antisemitism.
5. **Chilling Effect on Advocacy:** Activists, nonprofits, and community groups will be deterred from advocating for justice, fearing vague accusations of antisemitism.

My Palestinian-American Perspective

I was raised to value justice, community, and the freedom to speak truthfully about my experiences. This bill attacks these core values. As a Palestinian-American, I’ve seen firsthand the devastating impact of Israel’s policies: the loss of homes, the separation of families, and the denial of basic freedoms. Yet, I’ve also seen the strength of my people—their resilience, their insistence on hope, and their belief in a future where justice prevails. SB 297 would criminalize my truth. It would strip me of my ability to share my story and advocate for a just resolution to a conflict that has defined my heritage. It would jeopardize my physical safety by branding me antisemitic simply for opposing policies that deny me and my community the right to live free from occupation.

Human Rights Context and Israel’s Violations

Reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and B’Tselem have labeled Israel’s treatment of Palestinians as apartheid. Illegal settlement expansion, systematic discrimination, and violence are daily realities for Palestinians. The ICC has opened investigations into potential war crimes, and the ICJ has declared the occupation illegal. To suppress criticism of these policies through SB 297 is to deny the overwhelming consensus of the international community.

As Palestinian-American scholar Rashid Khalidi notes in *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine*, “The denial of Palestinian rights has been a defining feature of the Zionist project since its inception.” This bill would ensure this denial continues by silencing any discourse that challenges it.

As Noam Chomsky, another antizionist jew, has said, “Suppression of speech is a tool of authoritarianism, not democracy.” SB 297 is an affront to the democratic principles of free speech and justice. It seeks to protect a foreign government from accountability while trampling on the rights of Ohioans to advocate for human rights.

I urge you to reject SB 297 and uphold the constitutional rights of all Ohioans. To conflate criticism of Israel with antisemitism is to betray the principles of justice, truth, and human dignity that we, as a society, hold dear.

Sincerely,
Sabreen Abu Obaid MD