

My name is Kayanaat Chaudhry and I am a student at The Ohio State University. As a student and as an individual, I was always told that the ability to use your voice is a non-negotiable right. I was told to speak for the truth, for the change that I want to see in the world, and for justice.

SB 297 is a dangerous bill aimed at silencing the voices speaking for liberation, justice, and freedom in both America and the Middle East. The same government that upholds “freedom” is actively destroying it as we speak through SB 297. Passing legislation that labels criticism of the Israeli government as anti-semitic only protects immoral political agendas and delegitimizes any form of accountability in Israel’s actions.

In the last year alone, Israel has violated international humanitarian law by committing war crime after war crime in their genocide of Palestinians. According to the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, “genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.” The article continues with “The following acts shall be punishable: (a) Genocide; (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide; (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide; (d) Attempt to commit genocide; [and] (e) Complicity in genocide.” Based on this definition, Amnesty International has determined that Israel has been committing and is still actively committing genocide in Palestine. Israel has directly and viciously murdered 40,000 Palestinians through direct carpet bombing and ground invasions while indirectly killing an additional estimated 300,000+ Palestinians. Within this genocide, Israel has bombed hospitals, schools, refugee camps, safe zones, and humanitarian aid to destroy any source of safety, healthcare, and rehabilitation in Gaza. Israel has blocked any form of food, water, or humanitarian aid from entering Gaza and has committed unspeakable acts of sexual violence toward Palestinians as well. These forms of collective punishment, destruction of societal infrastructure, and indiscriminate bombing and targeting of civilian men, women, and children are all illegal war crimes within the ruthless genocide being unleashed on Palestinians by the Israeli regime.

In response to the actions of the Israeli government, the International Criminal Court which tries individuals for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and aggression has released arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel, and Yoav Gallant, the former Israeli defense minister.

With this background, we can see that any barrier in the criticism of the Israeli government, including SB 297 is a form of complicity in the ongoing genocide of Palestinians. Any government actively engaging in genocide and war crimes should be the subject of criticism and should be actively punished through international law. Other governmental entities like the Ohio government must work to recognize this. As SB 297 works to silence criticism of Israeli actions, it delegitimizes any form of freedom, trust, and accountability in the Israeli, American, and Ohioan governments.

Not only does SB 297 silence legitimate criticism and pave the way for Israel to commit any form of systemic genocide and ethnic cleansing against Palestinians, but it also continues to delegitimize real forms of anti-semitism by convoluting hate for the Jewish people with criticism of genocide. In addition to this, SB 297 actively works towards dehumanizing Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims everywhere. By silencing the voices that are rising against genocide, you are allowing genocide and unspeakable crimes against humanity to be morally acceptable and normalized. How can we trust our governmental institutions if they are actively silencing any criticisms of other peoples' death and destruction?

With these words, I call on all of you to uphold the moral responsibility we share in our collective humanity. I urge you to uphold the Ohio Constitution which ensures our inalienable rights of enjoying and defending life and liberty, our right to assemble, in a peaceable manner, to consult for their common good, and our right to freedom of speech where every citizen may freely speak, write, and publish his sentiments on all subjects with no law being passed to restrain or abridge the liberty of speech, or of the press.