

11 Students face criminal charges after interrupting Israeli Diplomat's speech

UCI Response viewed as one-sided & heavy-handed.

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(Irvine, CALIF.) –They came. They saw. They interrupted.

In doing so, they renewed the debate surrounding Israel's policies against Palestinian civilians and some believe challenged the status quo at the University of California, Irvine.

In a UC Irvine ballroom filled beyond capacity last month, student after student stood up and yelled phrases like "war criminal" and "murderer" at Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren.

Oren stopped his speech and left the hall after a few more activists interrupted him.

He later returned, and was disrupted again. Eventually he finished his speech.

"Oren's face sunk with every syllable [I] uttered," one of the protestors, Shaheen Nassar, told IFN. "I guess he never guessed someone would actually bring his past to light," added Nassar, who lost family members in the 2008 Israeli attack on Gaza.

Despite the protestors being warned by police and multiple administrators— including UCI Chancellor Michael Drake, who took the microphone and scolded the protestors as Oren left the stage and a political science professor who said "shame on you, shame on you" — the students pressed on. They were met with boos and jeers from several people, who supported Oren, in the crowd.

Later, a large group of attendees left the ballroom and continued protesting outside. Upon the group's exit, many in the crowd openly displayed their delight, and some made racist remarks, pushed and made threatening hand signals against the protestors.

One attendee, Gary Dalin of the Jerusalem Alliance, told the students "You will fail your exams" as they exited the lecture hall.

Others just displayed their middle fingers. Another said to a young Muslim woman who wore a headscarf, "Change your hairstyle."

But that wasn't the end.

Following their shocking yet nonviolent outbursts, the 11 protestors were peacefully escorted by UCI police to a nearby room, where they were cited, charged for "disturbing the peace" and released shortly thereafter.

The administration has yet to decide on how it will handle the situation, but the possibility of academic repercussions, including expulsion, are being raised by the university officials. The university has also forwarded the citations to the Orange County District Attorney's office for possibly criminal charges to be filed against the students.

Civil rights groups, like the Council on American-Islamic Relations and Muslim Public Affairs Council, are calling the administration's reaction overly harsh and one of "selective enforcement."

"Civil protest against government abuses is a time-honored tradition that has led to the end of apartheid and the birth of civil rights. ...The students voiced political views to shame the representative of a foreign government embroiled in controversy for its outrageous violations of international humanitarian and human rights law," wrote CAIR-LA Executive Director Hussam Ayloush and National Lawyers Guild Los Angeles Executive Director James Lafferty in a letter to Drake. Both further asked for all charges to be dropped.

MPAC Executive Director Salam Al-Marayati wrote in Huffington Post:

"Suppressing the voice of these students by threatening them with failure and arrest in order to prohibit them and future students from expressing their views on Palestine is tantamount to telling them not to be American." MPAC also released a statement asking the university to investigate the arrests of the students.

The Islamic Shura Council of Southern California and Muslim American Society have also supported the student protestors.

"Any comment on harshness or 'draconian' nature of discipline is premature, as no decisions have been rendered," UCI spokeswoman Cathy Lawhon told IFN on Mar. 11.

"If students feel the discipline is harsh once it is imposed, several options for appeal are available to them through the process. Any criminal charges would be filed by the Orange County District Attorney's office, not the campus. None have been filed at this time," she added.

However, off-campus groups are supposedly discussing with and influencing high-level University of California administrators about the students' charges with calls in support of "due process of law."

According to OC Jewish Experience, an online blog, UC President Mark Yudof met with Southern California Jewish leaders this month and apparently pledged support for criminal prosecution of the students "for violating the student code of conduct and breaking the law."

The blogger also wrote that Yudof said: "Pending an investigation with full due process, the Muslim Student Union (MSU) should be disciplined for their violations of campus codes of conduct."

A spokesman for Yudof confirmed the meeting, but denied those exact words, adding a couple legal formalities to the original quote. He also downplayed Yudof's authority, saying the decision will be UCI Administration's alone.

Yudof in the past said: "As you can imagine, it is difficult for me to separate my public role as President of a state university from my private life as a Jewish man who is active in Jewish causes and a strong defender of Israel."

The protestors' attorney, Reem Salahi, remains skeptical as to why the University is taking a hard-line approach. Salahi and the Muslim leaders have also pointed to the intensely pro-Israel environment at UCI, contributing to the students' feeling of isolation and a perception that the university has not done enough to engage Muslim students on campus.

"The reality is that these students are being dealt a heavy hand because of the politics involved," Salahi told IFN. "To me, it's obvious. We have seen this time and again when it comes to individuals who criticize Israel," she added.

One of Salahi's many defenses for the protest includes the right to free speech, guaranteed by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

But some campus officials disagree, including Erwin Chemerinsky, the head of UCI's School of Law, which co-sponsored the event on Feb 8.

"Freedom of speech never has been regarded as an absolute right to speak out at any time and in any manner," Chemerinsky wrote in a Feb. 18 Op-Ed in the Los Angeles Times. "No speech ever should be stopped or punished because of the viewpoint expressed," he added.

Chancellor Drake shared views similar to Chemerinsky's in an email he sent to the UCI student body a few days after the event.

In the email he encouraged "civility" and condemned the protestors' actions.

The head of UCI's History Department, Mark LeVine, disagrees with Chemerinsky and Drake, and says the administration is mishandling the situation.

LeVine wrote that punishing the students "could have chilling effects on free speech." He also pointed to several examples where protestors disrupted speeches, even one at UC Berkeley, but they were peacefully removed, not arrested or charged.

"The protests by the students were clearly aimed to disrupt his speech, but it's just as clear that they were not trying to scuttle it. Each outburst seems to have lasted under one minute, after which the student left voluntarily..." LeVine wrote in a Huffington Post Op-Ed on Feb 23.

"Together these facts raise serious issues of equity in the application of already vague university regulations and laws," he wrote.

Associated student bodies at several college campuses have come out in support of the 11 students and condemned heavy-handed university actions. They include UC Davis, UC San Diego, UCLA, UC Berkeley and UC Irvine itself.

Throughout the hoopla and media coverage, Ambassador Oren has not sat idly by.

In a letter he penned to UCI students on Mar. 8, Oren wrote, "I came to UCI for the opportunity to exchange ideas — a reasonable intention that was hijacked by a minority of students." In the letter, Oren also reaches out to the protestors and requested a chance to engage with them in a "dialogue."

Salahi, who specializes in national security and civil rights, was not fond of Oren's choice of words.

"Generally, Oren's words are calculated and careful. He is definitely trying to emit the image of the eleven [protestors] as angry irrational Muslim terrorists by using phrases such as 'hijack'," she told IFN. "It is both racist and Islamophobic."

Responding to Oren's letter sharply, UCI students stated in a March 13 letter:

"Mr. Oren, you allude to democracy and peace. Perhaps in your Orwellian doublespeak, 'peace' equates apartheid."

Before accepting his invitation to "dialogue," the letter exposes Oren for his support of the Israeli-led

sanctions on Gaza, his support for the security wall, as well as the checkpoints and military occupation that West Bank residents endure.

"...We accept your offer to return to UCI to expose the 'Israeli perspective' for what it is. In consideration of your position as an academic and historian, it is only befitting that a scholar represent the perspective of the indigenous Palestinians which your state continues to humiliate, expunge and brutalize," it continues.

Oren has yet to respond to the students' request.

Some students disagree with how the protestors displayed their dissent, including Moran Cohen, the president of Anteaters for Israel, a UCI campus group that also co-sponsored the event and whose members regularly protest politically-motivated, MSU-sponsored events.

Cohen, a junior Business-Economics major, was on stage with Oren as the protestors interrupted his speech.

"I believe the students had every right to protest. However, they went about it the wrong way," Cohen told IFN. "By disrupting the event, the students prevented hundreds of listeners from hearing the Ambassador's perspective on Middle Eastern affairs," she added.

Nassar, a 20-year-old Biochemistry major at UC Riverside, still stands behind what he did.

"I wanted to send a loud and clear message to Oren about his country's record of human rights violations. I could have used other forms of protest but Oren has Palestinian blood on his hands, and the least I could do was to publicly shame him and humiliate him in a peaceful manner," he told IFN.

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