

SSW Macro Student Union Statement on Palestine & Student Protests

May 15, 2024 The Macro Student Union



Statement from the Macro Student Union of the School of Social Work on Palestine, student protests, and our demands for the SSW/UMB.

Universities have long prided themselves as "liberal institutions," bastions of learning and progressivism that lead national discussions on political topics. They have lauded themselves as safe havens for expanding knowledge and critical thinking. Yet universities, including the University of Maryland, are mired in the same oppressive power structures that govern society at large, incentivizing profit over student well-being. Given their investments in and collaboration with companies and organizations involved in war, climate change, prisons, and other oppressive systems, they have limited bandwidth to cater to students and even faculty, especially when those people make demands that force them to reevaluate their political alignments.

The genocide in Palestine is a prime example of the University's loyalty to profit over people. Students have been left to their own devices to navigate this urgent matter of human rights, and faculty are walking on eggshells for fear of saying something wrong

or putting a toe out of line. Zionist beliefs, which are heavily upheld in this country as one of Israel's key allies, are automatically amplified when school administrators do not take steps to uplift pro-Palestinian positions. Students, faculty, and administrators alike who believe in Palestinian liberation and the right of the Palestinian people to their humanity and their land are threatened with claims of anti-Semitism if they dare to speak out. Last month, three Columbia University academics were targeted for refusing to stay quiet on Palestine.^[1] This is only a recent example in a long history of people facing personal and professional consequences for speaking up for Palestinian liberation. It is no wonder, then, that professors are wary of rocking the boat, for fear that they may jeopardize their economic and academic stability. Also, faculty have received little to no guidance from their educational institutions on how to lead informed discussions on the genocide. By espousing a seemingly liberal "both-sides" approach, equating the power of a stateless people with that of a U.S.-backed nuclear power, universities have put pro-Palestinian students and faculty at risk of being silenced and dismissed by their colleagues.

The University of Maryland Baltimore and the School of Social Work have put out multiple statements on the genocide in Palestine. All have failed to mention the history of U.S.-backed violence, occupation, and displacement wielded against Palestinians by the illegitimate settler state of Israel as well as the ongoing genocide itself. The statements have portrayed the genocide as a "conflict" between Israel and Hamas. This is a gross misrepresentation, which ignores the apartheid-like system enforced by Israel in historic Palestine, a reality in which Palestinians are severely restricted in their movement, routinely murdered, disappeared, and subjugated with impunity.^[2] The State of Israel is the largest recipient of foreign aid from the U.S., totaling 263 billion from 1946 to 2023.^[3] According to the Council on Foreign Relations, "since October 7, the Biden administration has reportedly made more than one hundred military aid transfers to Israel, although only two—totalling about \$250 million—have met the aforementioned congressional review threshold and been made public."^[4] The statements from Dean Postmus of the School of Social Work have called for peace in the region, yet glossed over Israel's long and well-documented history of war crimes and abuses of power. The school's silence is particularly disturbing given the systematic annihilation of the educational sector in Gaza, including its universities, which UN experts have called "scholasticide."^[5] Dean Postmus has maintained that the university cannot control happenings across the ocean, but has remained tight-lipped about the possibility that, like many other institutions of higher education, the UMB School of Social Work is being funded by various companies with ties to Israel, thus potentially materially contributing to the genocide as well. There is no such thing as neutrality in the face of oppression, and the School of Social Work's vague statements make it complicit in this ongoing genocide.

The School of Social Work specifically has a decade-long collaboration with the University of Haifa and Yezreel Valley College and offers opportunities to students to study and work there.[6] The University of Haifa maintains a strong collaborative relationship with the Israeli military, a reality that most recently led five Norwegian universities to suspend agreements with the institution.[7] One of the topics students can study in this program is LGBTQ+ advocacy, which furthers the pinkwashing of Israel.[8] This is hypocritical considering that, despite LGBTQ+ activists fighting Netanyahu's religious and nationalist government, same-sex marriage remains illegal.[9] Students can go all the way to Israel to study LGBTQ+ advocacy, yet are stifled from discussing the genocide at the very institution at which they are enrolled and are hesitant to speak out in support of Palestinian liberation.

Educational institutions have a duty to protect and properly educate their students, which the University of Maryland Baltimore has failed to do in distorting the history of the Palestinian genocide. Students who believe in a Free Palestine, thus, are forced to congregate outside school spaces to talk about the genocide, ironically having to separate themselves from the very institution that purports to support their learning and empower students of marginalized identities. Thus, even though the university purports to embrace the principles and practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), it is excluding students agitating for Palestinian liberation from campus discussions and life. It is startling to see as well that in Palestine, Israel has been destroying universities, denying the opportunity for Palestinian students to attain any education at all, much less an inadequate one. As of late January, Israel had bombed 12 universities as well as killed 4,327 students and 7,819 others, including 231 teachers and administrators. This is a huge loss to not only Palestinian culture and heritage but global academia, as Palestinians have one of the highest literacy rates in the world and consistently perform exceptionally well in many fields.[10]

Recognizing the contradiction between universities' claims that they fully support and use DEI and the suppression of pro-Palestinian positions, students across the nation and the world have organized to protest, setting up encampments on university grounds to take up space and make demands of their schools. They have drawn on the skills and knowledge learned in school and in community with each other to organize together. The students at the nearby Johns Hopkins encampment called on the school to divest from companies arming the genocide, disclose their complicity, demilitarize, and denounce the genocide. They demanded that Hopkins cease all partnerships with the Israeli educational military-industrial complex. Active encampments all over are appointing research teams to disseminate knowledge and political education about the genocide to the people in attendance and even bringing in organizers and groups to teach workshops and programs. In return, however, students have been met with pushback and threats of repercussions. Marginalized students, especially

undocumented and international students are facing even more repercussions, as some universities have gone to great lengths to tamp down protests. Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida) has even called for international students participating in the genocide to be deported.^[11] In this present moment then, students are forced to not only take their learning into their own hands because the classes offered do not provide a robust enough environment for gaining historically grounded knowledge, but also put their own academic and even personal lives on the line to speak up and do the right thing. The violent response from university administrators, politicians, and others to these encampments exposes the faults of Zionism as a justification of the Palestinian genocide. That their reaction is based out of fear instead of facts gestures to their inability to defend Israel and their deference to aggression when confronted with valid critique.^[12]

As social work students in the macro concentration, we as the leaders of the Macro Student Union reiterate that the profession calls on social workers to "promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally" as well as "ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully," according to the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).^[13] Palestinians are not being given the chance to lead fulfilled lives or even survive, and we believe that we must stand up for their liberation. We believe that with its focus on advocacy, solidarity, and activism, macro social work is the heart of the profession and has a very important part to play in pushing for the end to the occupation in Palestine. As social workers, it is our professional duty to engage in this work, both macro and clinical students and practioners, for the liberation of Palestinians, and through that, our own.

The Macro Student Union leadership stands in solidarity with Palestine, the student encampments, and people all over the globe calling for a Free Palestine. Using our learning and ethical stance as macro social work students, we demand that the University of Maryland Baltimore School of Social Work disclose its holdings in companies that are contributing to the Palestinian genocide, divest from those partnerships, and use its influence and resources to call for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation. In our professional opinion, we are being asked to violate not only our personal code of ethics but also the official NASW Code by giving our money to the School of Social Work, which has been silent about its stake in the genocide. This parallels the way our government leverages the tax dollars of its constituents to fund the genocide. We as students no longer wish to be dragged into this complicity and are outraged at the way the university robs us of our autonomy in how our money gets used. We demand that it be transparent with its investments. We also call on the university to issue a formal statement recognizing the genocide in Gaza, as well as the

scholasticide perpetrated throughout historic Palestine. Additionally, we oppose the decision of the university in the face of significant student feedback to appoint Senator Ben Cardin to be the 2024 commencement speaker, as he has publicly and openly espoused pro-Israel and pro-war sentiments that do not align with Palestinian liberation, the NASW Code of Ethics, or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We maintain these demands as they relate to other genocides across the world, such as in Congo and Sudan. We recognize our work as honoring and following the long lineage of student movements worldwide that have organized and continue to organize for better futures for ourselves as well as for peoples around the globe. Such student movements include the Tiananmen Square protests, the movements for Black lives, and more. We call on the School of Social Work to do so as well.

We release this statement today, May 15, to commemorate the 76th anniversary of the al-Nakba ("the Catastrophe"), the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during the 1948 war that was the culmination of decades-long settler colonialist policy initiated by the British in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised to establish Palestine as a national home for the Jewish people. Today, there are 7 million Palestinian refugees scattered across Palestine itself, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.[15]

The Macro Student Union

THE DELUGE AND THE TREE, by Fadwa Tuqan

When the hurricane swirled and spread its deluge

Of dark evil

Onto the good green land

"They" gloated. The Western skies

Reverberated with joyous accounts:

"The Tree has fallen!

The great trunk is smashed! The hurricane

Leaves no life in the tree!"

Has the Tree really fallen?

Never! Not with our red streams flowing

forever

Not while the wine of our thorn limbs
Fed the thirsty roots,
Arab roots alive
Tunnelling deep, deep, into the land!
When the Tree rises up, the branches
Shall flourish green and fresh in the sun
The laughter of the Tree shall leaf
Beneath the sun
And birds shall return
Undoubtedly, the birds shall return.

[1]<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/outrage-columbia-university-over-censure-pro-palestine-professor-mohamed-abdou>

[2]<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>

[3]<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/11/how-big-is-israels-military-and-how-much-funding-does-it-get-from-the-us>

[4]<https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts>

[5]<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza>

[6]<https://elm.umaryland.edu/elm-stories/2023/UMB-School-of-Social-Work-Transformative-Partnership-in-Israel.php>

[7]<https://bdsmovement.net/news/five-norwegian-universities-cut-ties-with-israel-over-gaza-genocide>

[8]<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2024/02/05/israel-palestine-gaza-genocide-queer>

[9]<https://theconversation.com/israeli-protesters-fear-for-the-future-of-their-countrys-precarious-lgbtq-rights-revolution-205915>

[10]<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/24/how-israel-has-destroyed-gazas-schools-and-universities>

[11]<https://truthout.org/articles/rubio-calls-for-deportation-of-international-students-over-campus-protests/>

[12]<https://www.jphilll.com/p/student-protests-are-exposing-our?s=09>

[13]<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English/Social-Workers-Ethical-Responsibilities-to-the-Broader-Society>

[15]<https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/JVP-Nakba-Fact-Sheet.pdf> PDF

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