

George Washington University apologizes for censorship of Palestinian flag

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Earlier this month, six weeks after receiving a “Warning Letter” for hanging a Palestinian flag out his dormitory window, George Washington University (GWU) student Ramie Abounaja obtained a formal apology from university president Steven Knapp for the attack on his free speech rights. The apology came after an implied threat of legal action against the university.

On October 26, Abounaja, a pre-med student at GWU—located in Washington, D.C.—was ordered by campus police to take down the flag. The order came despite the fact that many students at the university regularly display national flags without incident.

The following week, Abounaja received the formal warning from the administration, informing him that he had to be “respectful” and “aware” of his behavior. The letter indicated that the warning would be officially noted and that Abounaja faced disciplinary action in the future if there were any other complaints.

Despite repeated attempts by the student to contact the GWU administration, the school refused to inform him of what rule he had broken. On December 7, Palestine Legal—an organization devoted to defending the civil and constitutional rights of Palestinian solidarity activists—sent a letter to GWU demanding that the university rescind the warning letter and apologize to Abounaja.

After several days in which the administration continued to claim that it was simply enforcing a rule prohibiting the hanging of flags outside the dorms, President Knapp finally called Abounaja to apologize. The warning letter was also removed from his file.

Abounaja later told the *Intercept*, “My flag was taken down not because it broke university policy, but because of the numerous complaints people have sent to the department.”

The attempt to censor the Palestinian flag at GWU is

part of a trend in the US in which university administrations, often under pressure from the Zionist lobby and alumni, seek to suppress any criticism of Israel and intimidate pro-Palestinian activists.

A joint report entitled “The Palestine Exception to Free Speech,” issued earlier this year by Palestine Legal and the Center for Constitutional Rights, noted that in 2014 Palestine Legal “responded to 152 incidents of censorship, punishment, or other burdening advocacy for Palestinian rights,” and in the first six months of 2015, “responded to 140 incidents and 33 requests for assistance in anticipation of potential suppression.”

The vast majority of these cases took place on college campuses, with 89 percent in 2014 and 80 percent in the first six months of 2015 involving students and scholars, according to the report.

This included the University of Illinois administration’s decision in 2014 to reject the appointment of Professor Steven Salaita to the American Indian Studies department because of his criticism of the Israeli government’s policies, which he posted on social media. The administration maintained its decision against Salaita, despite protests by University of Illinois students and faculty urging his appointment.

Last November the University of Illinois, while not admitting to any wrongdoing, agreed to pay a \$875,000 settlement to Salaita in exchange for his dropping of two lawsuits against the school.

The report also noted the establishment of a web site known as Canary Mission, which seeks to expose students that are critical of Israel, seeking to harm their job prospects after graduation. This website has currently posted over 140 profiles of pro-Palestinian activists, which often include detailed personal

information, such as the student's name, photograph, the university he or she attends and alleged organizational affiliation. Many profiles also include links to the student's Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn pages.

The profiles frequently describe students involved in Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, or the Muslim Students' Association (MSA)—a religious group on college campuses—as belonging to violent organizations with connections to Islamic extremist groups in the Middle East.

While Canary Mission has kept its staff members, financial backers and affiliated organizations anonymous, statements from the web site have used Daniel Pipes—best known for his right-wing think tank Middle East Forum—as a go-between. Pipes stated in an interview with *AlterNet* that the web site's goal of, “collecting information on students has particular value because it signals [to] them that calumniating [sic] Israel is serious business, not some inconsequential collegiate prank; and that their actions can damage both Israel and their future careers.”

In a separate report, Palestine Legal documented at least 35 attempts to suppress pro-Palestinian activists within a four-week period beginning last September. These included a member of SJP at University of California Santa Barbara being assaulted during a protest, and a student at University of Illinois Chicago receiving a death threat, in an attempt to intimidate SJP members from organizing demonstrations.

Last November, a petition was filed on the website change.org demanding that SJP be banned from all City University of New York (CUNY) campuses. The CUNY system is the third largest in the United States. The *New York Daily News* later reiterated the scurrilous charge made in the petition that the SJP was anti-Semitic.

The WSWs has sharp political differences with the SJP and the BDS campaign, which is based on applying pressure on the Israeli regime and its imperialist backers with the aim of establishing an unviable mini-state for Palestinians as part of a “two-state” solution. This is a bankrupt outlook that rejects the fight to unite Arab and Jewish workers against the Zionist occupation.

Despite these differences, however, it is necessary to

oppose the attempted censorship and intimidation of Palestinian students and all those who defend Palestinian rights. These attacks are a threat to basic democratic rights on campus and elsewhere. They aim to set a precedent that will be used against any future left-wing movement of students.



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