

Florida Governor DeSantis to ban pro-Palestinian student groups

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Florida Governor Ron DeSantis opened a new front in his war on academic freedom and democratic rights last week when he ordered the dissolution of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) clubs throughout the state university system.

Following the October 7 break-out attack by Hamas guerrillas against Israeli military bases and settler communities surrounding the long-besieged Gaza Strip, and the subsequent and ongoing massacre of the Palestinian masses by the Israel Defense Forces, the SJP—reflecting the sentiments of the majority of students in Florida and around the world—organized demonstrations against the US-backed genocide.

The mass demonstrations in support of the Palestinians have destabilized the ruling elites, who have sought and failed to proscribe opposition to the Israeli campaign by slandering all those opposed to Zionism as antisemitic. In spite of a concerted effort by the media, the large corporations and banks and the universities, millions of workers and students have already taken to the streets in protest, and as the slaughter continues the numbers will grow exponentially.

Enter Governor DeSantis, who in his effort to displace former President Trump as the standard bearer of the far-right in advance of the 2024 presidential elections has engineered a takeover of the state university system, appointing various cronies to leadership positions and censoring curriculums, while a compliant state legislature passed a raft of legislation restricting abortion, expanding the use of the death penalty and attacking public education.

Thus far, according to the latest polls, DeSantis has failed to dent Trump's support within the Republican electorate. Now the governor has seized upon Israel's new war to double down on his strategy, staking out a racist position on the conflict that mirrors that of the Netanyahu regime.

At a campaign stop in Iowa following the outbreak of war, DeSantis slandered the Palestinians and spoke in support of collective punishment, stating: "We cannot accept people from Gaza into this country as refugees," he said: "If you look how they behave ... not all of them are Hamas but they

are all antisemitic, none of them believe in Israel's right to exist."

In an interview on the CBS Sunday morning program "Face the Nation," DeSantis spoke in support of the siege of Gaza and the cutoff of water, food, and fuel to the population of 2.3 million, stating: "You have Israelis being held hostage, as well as Americans being held hostage, but I don't think they are under an obligation to be providing water and these utilities while those hostages are being held. Hamas should return those hostages before any discussions are had."

"The U.S. should not be absorbing any of those. I think the culture—so they elected Hamas, let's just be clear about that. Not everyone's a member of Hamas, most probably aren't. But they did elect Hamas."

DeSantis has invoked a federal law which prohibits offering "material support to terrorist organizations" to justify banning the SJP clubs, which have chapters at both the University of Florida and the University of South Florida. In a letter sent to state university presidents, Chancellor Ray Rodrigues attempts to conflate the Hamas organization with SJP students protesting the war:

In response, and leading up to a "Day of Resistance," the National Students for Justice in Palestine (National SJP) released a "toolkit" which refers to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as "the resistance" and unequivocally states: "Palestinian students in exile are PART of this movement, not in solidarity with this movement."

It is a felony under Florida law to "knowingly provide material support ... to a designated foreign terrorist organization..." § 775.33(3), Fla. Stat. (2019). Here, National SJP has affirmatively identified it is part of the Operation Al-Aqsa Flood—a terrorist-led attack.

The “toolkit” referenced by DeSantis and Rodrigues is a document that outlines the stance of the SJP in language virtually identical to that used by various left-wing and pacifist organizations who have opposed the apartheid state in Israel for decades. None of the actions advocated by the SJP, including holding meetings and teach-ins on campus and signing statements supporting Palestinian liberation, could be remotely construed as offering “material support” for terrorism.

Students for Justice in Palestine was founded in 1993 at the University of California, Berkeley, and has chapters at over 200 universities in the US and internationally. Since its inception it has staged protests and demonstrations aimed at raising public awareness of the plight of the Palestinians and ending the Apartheid conditions inside Israel. It has actively promoted the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (BDS), which aims, via the Zionist regime’s imperialist backers, to apply economic pressure on the Israeli regime to grant concessions to the Palestinians.

The governor’s ban was roundly denounced, with the ACLU releasing a statement which read: “The Governor’s actions are transparently unconstitutional... This directive does nothing to protect students and the Jewish community. Instead of keeping students and the Jewish community safe, he is simply silencing ideas he doesn’t like. This attack on free speech is dangerous and likely won’t be the last.”

Republican presidential candidates Niki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy, who both aim to displace DeSantis from his position as a distant second behind Trump in the Republican primaries, have denounced the ban as antithetical to “American Values.”

On Sunday DeSantis sought to defend himself against his Republican rivals, telling “Meet the Press” on NBC: “This is not cancel culture. This group, they themselves said, in the aftermath of the Hamas attack, that they don’t just stand in solidarity that they are part of this Hamas movement.”

He continued, “You have a right to go out and demonstrate, but you can’t provide material support to terrorism. They’ve linked themselves to Hamas. And so we absolutely decertified them. They should not get one red cent of taxpayer dollars.”

When asked by host Kristen Welker to provide evidence that the SJP has provided actual “material support” for Hamas beyond denouncing Israel, DeSantis evaded the question, stating: “Their own words are saying they’re part of this organization, that they don’t just stand in solidarity, that they don’t just support what they did, but that this is their movement too... So, once you hitch your wagon to a group like Hamas, that takes you out of the realm of normal activity, and that’s something that we’re going to take action against. So, we believe we’re totally justified within

the law.”

The attempt to ban the SJP has broad implications beyond the growing movement to end Israel’s war in Gaza. As the US and its allies expand their military operations across the planet, moving from Russia to Iran and ultimately to China to prolong their hegemonic rule and forestall socialist revolution, tens of millions of workers and young people in the US will be drawn into struggle. As the anti-war movement develops it will increasingly intertwine with the growing movement of the working class, which has already seen millions of workers across the world go out on strike against the decades-long assault on their wages and living conditions. The bourgeoisie cannot crush this struggle and support democratic rights at the same time.

With his instincts acutely attuned to the needs of his class, DeSantis has created a template that can be used to outlaw any group that opposes capitalist rule.

DeSantis was temporarily outflanked on his right by Florida state representative Randy Fine, the state’s only Jewish Republican, who withdrew his support for DeSantis’ 2024 presidential campaign in favor of Trump. Fine has accused DeSantis of insufficient frenzy in his support of Israel, and advocates the deportation of foreign students who oppose Israel’s war, while bluntly promoting the massacre of civilians in the Gaza Strip.

Ironically enough, Fine has also claimed that he has broken from DeSantis because he failed to denounce the recent demonstrations held by neo-Nazis in various cities throughout Florida. The governor relies upon the support of the extreme right and his political agenda, particularly since he began his presidential campaign, is shaped around appealing to these forces. He has not denounced the actual antisemites in Florida because they constitute a significant portion of his base of support.

As with his international counterparts, who have armed the Nazi-infested regime in Kiev to wage war against Russia while simultaneously denouncing the “antisemitism” of the oppressed Palestinian masses, Desantis’ “support of the Jewish people” only reaches as far as it supports his reactionary political ambitions.



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