

“This hideous crime did not happen in a vacuum”

Palestinian student Hisham Awartani issues powerful statement following Vermont shooting

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At a vigil held in his honor Monday at Brown University, Hisham Awartani, one of three students of Palestinian descent shot this past Saturday in Burlington, Vermont, issued a statement, read out by a professor, placing the hate-fueled attack against him and his fellow students within the context of the global struggle for democratic rights.

The Brown University junior, described by the *Brown Daily Herald* as a “witty polyglot with a talent for archaeology and math who is intensely focused on others,” was shot along with Kinnan Abdalhamid and Tahseen Ali Ahmad on Saturday night shortly before 6:30 p.m. near the University of Vermont campus. Two of the three students were wearing black and white keffiyehs, the traditional scarves of Palestinian resistance, and were speaking a mix of Arabic and English.

In his statement, which was read aloud by Beshara Doumani, the Mahmoud Darwish professor of Palestinian studies at Brown, Awartani said: “It’s important to recognize that this is part of the larger story. This hideous crime did not happen in a vacuum. As much as I appreciate and love every single one of you here today, I am but one casualty in this much wider conflict.”

He continued, “Had I been shot in the West Bank, where I grew up, the medical services that saved my life here would likely have been withheld by the Israeli army. The soldier who shot me would go home and never be convicted. I understand that the pain is so much more real and immediate because many of you know me, but any attack like this is horrific, be it here

or in Palestine.

“This is why when you say your wishes and light your candles today, your mind should not just be focused on me as an individual, but rather as a proud member of a people being oppressed.”

After sharing Awartani’s statement, Doumani, according to the *Brown Daily Herald*, reiterated students’ demands for Brown to divest its investments in arms producers, while a friend of Awartani added, “One of our classmates was shot. What will it take for Brown to respond?”

Awartani’s powerful statement has already resonated with hundreds of thousands of people who have shared it on social media. It is a refutation of all the politicians, media talking heads and university presidents who have issued warmongering statements since October 7 backing Israel’s “right to defend itself,” which has led not only to some 20,000 deaths in Gaza, but also to a wave of violent attacks against Muslims and Arabs in America and throughout the world, including the murder of six-year-old Wadea al-Fayoume in the Chicago suburb of Plainfield, Illinois.

While Abdalhamid was released from the hospital on Tuesday and Ahmad is expected to recover, Awartani has suffered a life-altering injury. In an interview with CNN, Awartani’s mother, Elizabeth Price, said her son has an “incomplete spinal injury,” meaning he can feel his legs, but cannot walk. “The last I knew,” Price told CNN, “he was still in the ICU, immobilized, to try and get the swelling down.”

In addition to the bullet currently lodged in his spine, Awartani suffered a broken clavicle and fractured

thumb. Price added that Awartani will spend up to four weeks in spinal trauma care and that the spinal injury is hampering his body's efforts to regulate his body temperature.

The suspected shooter, James J. Eaton, 48, was arrested on Sunday evening and is currently being held without bond on three attempted murder charges. If convicted on the murder charges, Eaton, whose mother described him in a *Daily Beast* interview as a "deeply religious man," faces between 20 years to life in prison. While police have yet to establish a motive, on his social media accounts Eaton glorified guns and the American flag and described himself as a libertarian.

Police say that in a search of Eaton's apartment, which is located across the street from the site of the shooting and less than two miles from the home of a relative of the students, they recovered the .380 Ruger semi-automatic pistol used in the crime, along with two shotguns and a .22 rifle.

On his LinkedIn account, Eaton shared Bible quotes and dozens of anti-COVID vaccination images while touting the benefits of "natural immunity." He spent several years working in the financial sector and was fired from CUSO Financial Services in Williston, Vermont, on November 8, less than three weeks before the shooting.

Saturday's tragic shooting has fueled the outrage of broad layers of the population over the ongoing genocide in Gaza and against the entire political establishment that is backing it.

Prior to the reading of Awartani's statement on Monday, Brown University President Paxson attempted to read out her own mealy-mouthed and noncommittal statement, which angered many of the hundreds of students in attendance.

For weeks, students at Brown have been protesting against the mass killing in Gaza and the complicit role of the university. Paxson, like many college presidents, is attempting to "thread the needle" by supporting Israel's "right to defend itself" while refusing to condemn the Zionist genocide or Washington's full support for it.

University administrations have suspended student organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace and called in the police to arrest student demonstrators. At a peaceful protest organized earlier this month by BrownU Jews for

Ceasefire Now, Paxson refused to publicly commit Brown to divestment or to supporting a ceasefire. Instead, she called in the police, who arrested 20 Jewish students on trespassing charges.

The charges against the students were only dropped by the university on Monday, just prior to the vigil.

Speaking to students Monday night, Paxson, oozing complacency, said, "Sadly we can't control what happens around the world and across the country. We are powerless to do everything we would like to do..."

Students interrupted Paxson's speech, shouting "Shame!" The president responded by reprimanding the students, saying, "We are trying to have a vigil for *your* friend. Our student."

Students continued to boo Paxson and chant "Divest Brown," "Protect your students!" and "Shame!"

To this, the president replied petulantly, "This is how you want to honor your friend?" "Yes!" students shouted, as chants of "Brown Divest!" echoed throughout the campus. As Paxson left the podium, students again broke out into chants of "shame!"



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