

Former IDF soldiers attack pro-Palestinian student protesters at Columbia University

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At a large pro-Palestinian student and faculty protest at Columbia University in New York City on Friday, two Zionists sprayed students with something resembling a chemical weapon called “Skunk.” Both individuals, who were wearing fake keffiyehs, have been identified as Columbia General Studies students and former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers.

The attack took place during an event—“Hands off Yemen and Gaza! No more tuition for the war machine”—that was organized by the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) chapters at Columbia University outside the Low Library. Despite freezing temperatures and a systematic campaign of intimidation targeting opponents of the state policy of genocide in Gaza, the protest drew around 300 participants.

Victims of the attack reported on social media that they were unable to rid themselves of the stench on their clothes and bodies two days after the attack and after visiting Urgent Care. The Columbia SJP has demanded that Columbia initiate an investigation into the attack, saying the action is illegal under US law and constitutes a hate crime.

A Columbia student present at the protest told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “The people who did this were Columbia students who served in the IDF. This was premeditated and done with the aim to hurt students. Columbia needs to take immediate action. This behavior is unacceptable on a college campus.”

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemns in the strongest possible terms Friday’s attack on students opposing the Israeli genocide in Gaza. We support the demand by the SJP for an investigation and call on students and workers at Columbia University, in New York City and across the US to rally in defense of the student protesters. The IYSSE also condemns the media blackout of the attack and encourages students to share this article on social media and at other campuses and workplaces throughout the city, nationally and internationally.

Skunk is a malodorous crowd-control weapon used by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It was first deployed in 2008 against Palestinian protesters on the West Bank. The military-grade chemical leaves a strong, lingering smell on its targets,

which has been likened to that of a “rotting corpse from a stagnant sewer.”

While it is marketed as a “non-lethal” form of crowd control, many human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, B’Tselem, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Physicians for Human Rights, and the International Network of Civil Liberties Organizations, have denounced its use, describing it as a form of “collective punishment” with torturous and humiliating after-effects that severely impact victims. The manufacturing company, Odortec, sells a special soap to counteract the effects of the chemical, but it is only available to police authorities.

One comment on X/Twitter directed to the Columbia University administration stated, “This is a direct result of the incitement by your unhinged & now clearly dangerous professor Shai Davidai, terming everyone protesting Israel’s war in Gaza ‘terrorist sympathizers.’”

Davidai is a Columbia Business School assistant professor and prominent Zionist who has called for the “eradication” of pro-Palestinian student organizations at US universities. This fascistic rant has been shared by the official X/Twitter account of the Israeli government and a large number of far-right accounts.

A Palestinian Columbia University student, Robin, who has lost 14 family members in the Gaza genocide, spoke to the WSWs about the role of Davidai. Robin said:

He’s been harassing us for months, calling us pro-terror, all kinds of stuff, and he doesn’t face any kind of consequences. The school has done nothing... Columbia lets people like that teach, and if there’s no consequences, frankly, it’s just really disappointing. I am taking out student loans to be called a terrorist every day.

The physical attack on protestors at Friday’s event marks a new stage in the sweeping, bipartisan assault on pro-Palestinian speech and assembly, orchestrated at the highest levels by the US and Israeli states and their economic, political and military

establishments.

As the IYSSE wrote in its December statement, “Oppose the state-organized witch hunt of opponents of genocide on US campuses!”:

The message is clear: Anyone who dares voice opposition to or even question the policies of the Israeli state is to be silenced, driven from the campuses, blacklisted and attacked and hounded by far-right mobs on social media and at campuses and workplaces. The central aims of this witch hunt are twofold: First, the destruction of free speech on the campuses and beyond, and, second, the complete subordination of schools and universities to the interests of the state, the military and the aims of US foreign policy.

Columbia University was one of the first institutions in the country to ban the SJP and JVP in the fall semester. Both organizations have played a prominent role in organizing protests against the genocide in Gaza that have drawn hundreds of thousands of participants.

Other universities, including George Washington University in Washington D.C. and Rutgers University in nearby New Jersey, quickly followed suit.

The opening salvo of this campaign of repression targeting the SJP and JVP came in late October, when fascistic Republican Governor Ron DeSantis ordered the organizations to cease their activities within the entire Florida State University system.

Then, in early December, University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill resigned amid a McCarthyite-style witch hunt led by the fascistic, Trump-supporting New York Republican Congresswoman Elise Stefanik against her as well as against Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) presidents Claudine Gay and Sally Kornbluth respectively. Stefanik, herself an adherent of the antisemitic “Great Replacement Theory,” ludicrously claimed that the university presidents supported calls “for the genocide of Jews.”

In early January, after initially resisting the calls by Stefanik for her to step down from her position, Gay resigned in the wake of a smear campaign that enjoyed crucial support from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, and involved far-right figures like Christopher F. Rufo, an adviser to DeSantis.

The campaign to eliminate freedom of speech on US campuses is led by the American financial oligarchy, the Democratic Biden administration, the military and the Israeli state. In a phenomenon called “donor revolt,” wealthy contributors to US academic institutions have withdrawn their funding from institutions which fail to sufficiently crack down

on anti-Zionist and anti-genocide speech and assembly.

In early November, billionaire Bill Ackman called for the doxxing of all students who participate in pro-Palestinian activity, so that companies could blackball them from employment. At Columbia University, students as well as faculty who have spoken out against the genocide—and the attack on freedom of speech—have been doxxed.

In late-November, Ynet.com, an outlet of *Yedioth Ahronoth*, one of Israel’s foremost newspapers, published an account of the creation of an “antisemitism” task force by the Israeli Foreign Ministry, led by Foreign Minister Eli Cohen, working with the Diaspora Affairs Ministry. Falsely equating pro-Palestinian assemblies with antisemitism, the article details the task force’s avowed aims.

They include “shaming and pressuring donors” to “withdraw their investments from campuses where antisemitism is not addressed and promote economic sanctions against universities receiving federal or state public funding.” The goals of the task force include “inflicting economic and employment consequences on antisemitic students” and “[p]ublicizing the names of those generating antisemitism on campuses – both students and faculty.”

The encouragement of fascist forces in the US as part of the campaign to justify the Gaza genocide has already resulted in the murder of a 6-year-old boy in Chicago and the shooting of three Palestinian-American students in Vermont.

The physical attack at Columbia University marks a dangerous new stage in the assault on the democratic rights of the working class more broadly. The fact that former IDF soldiers appear to have deployed the same weapons against student protesters in the US that they previously deployed against Palestinians under military occupation underscores the intrinsic link between the crimes of US imperialism and its allies abroad and the attack on democratic rights at home.

We therefore call for the broadest possible support for the students under attack at Columbia University by workers and youth across New York City and beyond. They must demand that the Columbia University administration investigate and punish those responsible for the attack—including those who have incited violence against opponents of the genocide. The club status for the SJP and JVP must be immediately reinstated, with no conditions attached, and their right—and that of the entire student body and faculty and staff—to freedom of speech must be ensured.



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