

Two Toronto pro-Palestinian protesters arrested, charged with wearing COVID masks

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The Toronto Police Service (TPS) escalated their campaign to crackdown on and suppress protests against the Gaza genocide last week with the announcement of a second arrest in relation to a March 7 protest. In addition to mischief charges which could bring up to 10 years in prison, the two demonstrators are facing charges of “disguise with intent” for wearing medical masks which protect from COVID-19 and other infectious diseases during the protest. This latter “offence” also carries a maximum sentence of a decade in prison.

“While demonstrations may end, investigations into criminal activity continue and we pursue all leads to hold individuals accountable,” Toronto Police Chief Myron Demikw declared in a statement Tuesday on X. He then boasted, “Over the last year we have made 80 demonstration-related arrests and laid 124 charges. Arrests can happen at any time after an offence.”

Tens of thousands in Toronto and across Canada have turned out to protest week after week for more than a year as Israel, with the backing of American imperialism and Ottawa, has carried out its ethnic cleansing operation in Gaza launched in the aftermath of the October 7 uprising led by Hamas. Protesters’ demands that the trade union-backed Liberal Trudeau government press for a ceasefire and stop arming Israel have been rebuffed, with Trudeau and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly instead smearing protesters opposing genocide as “antisemites.”

Pro-Palestinian protest encampments erected by students, faculty and supporters on campuses across Canada have been broken up by court injunctions and police raids. The deployment of far-right Zionist vigilante groups on campus to provide “security” has been openly encouraged by the federal government, with a new law passed enabling private security firms

to access government funding. Groups in line to profit from this funding stream include Magen Herut, whose members must be Zionists and have experience in policing or military service, and Shomrim, an international vigilante group present in Hasidic communities. Magen Herut members have “patrolled” at anti-genocide protests, where they have surveilled and intimidated participants.

Immediately upon Israel’s launch of its genocidal onslaught on Gaza, Canada’s political establishment closed ranks to launch a vicious witchhunt against anyone who spoke out against the mass slaughter. The New Democrats, who were in a confidence-and-supply agreement with the Liberals at the time, threw Member of the Ontario Provincial Parliament Sarah Jama out of their parliamentary caucus because she issued a statement declaring her solidarity with the Palestinians and accusing Israel of apartheid, an accusation supported by the United Nations. Trudeau has repeatedly sought to intimidate protesters by repeating the lies of extreme Zionist forces, including in February when he accused demonstrators of being antisemites merely because they marched past Toronto’s Mount Sinai Hospital.

With the backing of the governments of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Tory Ontario Premier Doug Ford, Demikw and the TPS have launched a far reaching campaign of harassment and arrests of pro-Palestinian protesters under the title “Project Resolute.” *The Breach* published an investigation in June which revealed the extensive character of the secretive political policing operation, which has included early morning raids, trumped-up charges and efforts to turn protesters into informants.

The police operations have gone hand in hand with the efforts of the political establishment to smear

protesters as “antisemitic.” Eleven people were arrested last November in relation to a poster protest against the CEO of Indigo Books, who happens to be Jewish, over her campaign to support the Israel Defense Forces, with the police insinuating that their actions were “hate motivated.”

Demikw and TPS have been carrying out their crackdown in coordination with the RCMP’s Integrated National Security Enforcement Team and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), Canada’s premier spy agency.

Faisal Ibrahim, 38, was arrested and charged on October 19 with one count of mischief, interfering with property and a count of disguise with intent in relation to the March 7 protest. A research assistant and teaching assistant at the University of Toronto, Ibrahim had been targeted by Zionist social media pages for his pro-Palestinian activism before being charged by TPS.

Rachelle Friesen, 38, of the Student Christian Movement of Canada and Community Peacemaker Teams, was charged on October 1 with two counts of mischief that obstructs, interrupts or interferes with the lawful use, enjoyment or operation of property and one count of disguise with intent in relation to pro-Palestinian protests on November 13, 2023 and March 7, 2024.

After living in Israel for five years, including four as Peace Program Coordinator with the Mennonite Central Committee, Friesen was deported from the country in 2014 and banned for 10 years for her advocacy on behalf of the Palestinians.

Protesters interrupted the Scotiabank Giller Prize gala at the Four Seasons Hotel in Yorkville on November 13, 2023 to protest the bank’s complicity in the Gaza genocide. Evan Curle and Maysam Abu Khreibeh, both 25, and Fatima Hussain, 23, were charged at the time with obstructing, interrupting, or interfering with the lawful use, enjoyment or operation of property and using a forged document.

March 7, meanwhile, was a day of action by students and others protesting RBC and calling for the bank to divest from support for Israel, respect Indigenous sovereignty and end financing for the Trans Mountain Expansion and Coastal Gas Link pipelines.

The police claim that both Friesen and Ibrahim “wore medical masks to conceal their identity” during a March 7 protest in Midtown Toronto and that their

participation prevented an employee from entering her workplace and forced her to leave the area in fear of her safety.

In another recent effort to suppress the protests, the Trudeau government in coordination with the Biden administration in the United States banned the Samidoun Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network as a “terrorist entity” and placed sanctions on activist Khaled Barakat.

Samidoun has organized protests in opposition to the Gaza genocide across Canada. Its international coordinator Charlotte Kates was arrested in April in Vancouver following a speech in which she led the crowd in a chant of “Long live October 7th” and advocated for the delisting of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and other groups as terrorist organizations. The organization’s listing as a terrorist entity resulted in its bank accounts being frozen and make it difficult for members to travel internationally.

The unanimous endorsement of Israel’s genocide within the political establishment has introduced a climate of fear and censorship into Canadian cultural life. In the latest example of this, the Aurora Cultural Center north of Toronto closed down an exhibit titled Expressions of Critical Thought after one day this month due to complaints of “antisemitism” on social media because some of the works on display referenced Palestine. The Center told the artists in an October 4 email that the show was being censored due to “concerns raised by members of our community regarding the traumatic responses to some of the artworks.”

“I feel what they did contributes to the consistent dehumanization of Arabs in general,” Iraqi-Canadian artist Hala Alsalmi told *Hyperallergic*. “I’m the only Arab who was showing, but obviously it’s not just me, it’s all of us.” Chantal Hassard, a co-curator of the show and grandchild of a Holocaust survivor, noted that there was nothing antisemitic about the art on display and the claims were a “dangerous mischaracterization of the term.”



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