

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF FLORIDA
GAINESVILLE DIVISION**

**STUDENTS FOR JUSTICE IN
PALESTINE AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH
FLORIDA,**

Plaintiff,

v.

RONALD DESANTIS, Governor of
Florida, in his official capacity;

RAYMOND RODRIGUES,
Chancellor of the State University
System of Florida, in his official
capacity;

RHEA LAW, President of the
University of South Florida, in her
official capacity;

WILL WEATHERFORD, Chair of
the University of South Florida Board
of Trustees, in his official capacity;

**MICHAEL GRIFFIN, SANDRA
CALLAHAN, MICHAEL
CARRERE, N. ROGAN DONELLY,
CESAR ESMERALDI, OSCAR
HORTON, JENIFER SCHNEIDER,
LAURAN MONBARREN, SHILEN
PATEL, FREDERICK PICCOLO,
MELISSA SEIXAS**, as members of
the University of Southern Florida's
Board of Trustees;

Case No. 1:23-cv-281

Hon.

Magistrate

**COMPLAINT FOR INJUNCTIVE
AND DECLARATORY RELIEF FOR
VIOLATIONS OF THE FIRST
AMENDMENT**

BRIAN LAMB, Chair of State University System of Florida’s Board of Governors, in his official capacity;

and

TIMOTHY CERIO, MANNY DIAZ, JR., AUBREY EDGE, PATRICIA FROST, EDWARD HADDOCK, JACK HITCHCOCK, KEN JONES, DARLENE LUCCIO JORDAN, ALAN LEVINE, CHARLES LYDECKER, CRAIG MATEER, JOSE OLIVIA, AMANDA PHALIN, ERIC SILAGY, as members of the State University System of Florida’s Board of Governors, in their official capacities

Defendants.

COMPLAINT

Plaintiff, **STUDENTS FOR JUSTICE IN PALESTINE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA** (“USF SJP”), by and through its attorneys, CAIR Legal Defense Fund (“CAIR”), CAIR Florida, Mehri & Skalet, PLLC, and Erchid Law Firm, brings this complaint for injunctive relief and declaratory relief against Defendants **RONALD DESANTIS, RAYMOND RODRIGUES, RHEA LAW, WILL WEATHERFORD, MICHAEL GRIFFIN, SANDRA CALLAHAN, MICHAEL CARRERE, N. ROGAN DONELLY, CESAR**

ESMERALDI, OSCAR HORTON, JENIFER SCHNEIDER, LAURAN MONBARREN, SHILEN PATEL, FREDERICK PILLOLO, MELISSA SEIXAS, BRIAN LAMB, TIMOTHY CERIO, MANNY DIAZ JR., AUBREY EDGE, PATRICIA FROST, EDWARD HADDOCK, JACK HITCHCOCK, KEN JONES, DARLENE LUCCIO JORDAN, ALAN LEVINE, CHARLES LYDECKER, CRAIG MATEER, JOSE OLIVIA, AMANDA PHALIN, and ERIC SILAGY under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, for violating its First Amendment right. In support of its right to relief, Plaintiff states as follows:

Introduction

1. Governors cannot shut down lawful and peaceful student groups because of the views they express. The First Amendment forbids it.

2. Neither the state of Florida nor its state colleges and universities are enclaves immune from the requirements and protections of the First Amendment. But once again events suggest that Defendants either don't know that or reject it. "Recently, Florida has seemed like a First Amendment upside down." *Honeyfund.com, Inc. v. DeSantis*, 622 F. Supp. 3d 1159 (N.D. Fla. 2022).¹

¹ See also *HM Fla.-Orl, LLC v. Griffin*, No. 6:23-cv-950-GAP-LHP, 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 134665, at *1 (M.D. Fla. June 24, 2023) (enjoining Florida Statute § 827.11, an unconstitutional facially content-based regulation); *Pernell v. Fla. Bd. of Governors of the State Univ. Sys.*, 641 F. Supp. 3d 1218, 1229 (N.D. Fla. 2022) (enjoining enforcement of Florida's "Individual Freedom" or "Stop W.O.K.E." Act).

3. On October 24, 2023, Defendant Ray Rodrigues, Chancellor of the State University City of Florida, acting in consultation or at the direction of Defendant Governor Ronald DeSantis, issued a memorandum (the “Deactivation Order” or “Order”), which purported to “deactivate” chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine on campuses in Florida’s state university system. There are several such chapters in Florida; Plaintiff’s chapter, at the University of South Florida, in Tampa, is one.

4. The Deactivation Order, which is Exhibit 1 to this complaint, flouts the First Amendment and the Supreme Court’s decision in *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 159 (1972). In *Healy*, the Supreme Court made clear that, under the First Amendment, state actors may not refuse to recognize student groups because they disagree with the groups’ politics or concerns about alleged relationships between a group and an affiliated (or unaffiliated) national organization, which they disdain or even abhor. Indeed, as the Court emphasized in *Healy*, “the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.”

5. To enforce the First Amendment and *Healy v. James*, this complaint therefore seeks expedited preliminary and permanent relief declaring the Deactivation Order unconstitutional and restraining all Defendants from enforcing it. That Order is unconstitutional because:

(A) Violating the First Amendment and defying *Healy v. James*, the Order singles out and punishes USF SJP solely because USF SJP's name overlaps with, or because of an alleged affiliation with, another organization, National Students for Justice in Palestine (National SJP). National SJP holds views that Defendants disapprove of. But USF SJP has no formal relationship with National SJP. USF SJP has no financial relationship with National SJP, neither receiving funding from nor providing funding to that organization, through dues or otherwise. USF SJP is fully autonomous from National SJP. Defendants may not restrict speech, assembly, or association for any group, under any circumstances, simply because they disagree with (or even if they are repulsed by) that group's actual (or imputed) views. Restrictions on speech must always be viewpoint neutral. But a viewpoint-based restriction is being imposed here;

(B) The Deactivation Order does not even purport to rely on USF SJP's advocacy. It singles out and punishes USF SJP solely for Defendants' disagreements with National SJP's philosophy or actions. National SJP's views and actions are immaterial to USF SJP's First Amendment rights to associate and to speak; and

(C) Defendants have offered no evidence, and there is none, that USF SJP has ever provided any illegal "material support" to any person or entity or acted at the direction of or in concert with a federally-designated entity.

Jurisdiction and Venue

6. This Court has subject matter jurisdiction over this action under 28 U.S.C. § 1331 and 28 U.S.C. § 1343.

7. Venue is proper under 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b) as to all Defendants because Governor DeSantis is a resident of this district, and all Defendants are Florida residents.

Parties

8. Plaintiff Students for Justice in Palestine at the University of South Florida (“USF SJP”) is a registered campus student organization at the University of South Florida (“USF”) in Tampa, Florida, one of more than 700 registered campus student organizations. It sues on its own behalf.

9. Defendant Ronald DeSantis is the Governor of Florida. He is sued in his official capacity.

10. Defendant Raymond Rodrigues is the Chancellor of the State University System of Florida. He is sued in his official capacity.

11. Defendant Rhea Law is the President of the University of South Florida. She is sued in her official capacity.

12. Defendant Will Weatherford is the Chair of the University of South Florida Board of Trustees. He is being sued in his official capacity.

13. Defendants Michael Griffin, Sandra Callahn, Michael Carrere, N. Rogan Donnelly, Cesar Esmeraldi, Oscar Horton, Jenifer Schneider, Lauran Monbarren, Shilen Patel, Frederick Piccolo, and Melissa Seixas are all members of the University of South Florida Board of Trustees. They are being sued in their official capacity.

14. Defendant Brian Lamb is the Chair of the State University System of Florida's Board of Governors. He is being sued in his official capacity.

15. Timothy Cerio, Manny Diaz Jr., Aubrey Edge, Patricia Frost, Edward Haddock, Jack Hitchcock, Ken Jones, Darlene Luccio Jordan, Alan Levine, Charles Lydecker, Craig Mateer, Jose Olivia, Amanda Phalin, and Eric Silagy are all members of the State University System of Florida's Board of Governors. They are being sued in their official capacity.

Factual Allegations

USF SJP is an independent student group comprised exclusively of students enrolled at the University of South Florida.

16. Plaintiff Students for Justice in Palestine at the University of South Florida ("USF SJP") is a student group formed and operated by undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled at the University of South Florida ("USF").

17. Only undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled at USF are eligible for membership in USF SJP.

18. USF SJP brings students together to peacefully express their views on Israel and Palestine. Plaintiff works to raise awareness about how the Israeli government abuses Palestinians and encourages their fellow students and the public to demand justice and freedom for Palestinians. USF SJP's efforts include educational events about Israel's economic and military siege of Gaza, the apartheid-system of checkpoints and barrier walls that define Palestinian life, and the culture and pride of Palestine that persists among Palestinians despite these daunting challenges. (*See* Exhibit 1).

19. Such events include cultural fashion shows, soccer tournaments, poetry slams, general body meetings, and more recently, co-sponsoring a "Tear Down the Apartheid Wall" event where students were encouraged to come paint messages of peace and remember the lives lost in Gaza (Exhibit 2).

The Asserted "Rationale" for Defendants' Deactivation Order

20. The rationale laid out in Defendants' Deactivation Order, if it can be called a rationale, is baffling. The Order's rationale is as follows:

- (a) Israel was attacked on Oct. 7, 2023;
- (b) In the wake of that attack, a group called National Students for Justice in Palestine ("National SJP") released a "toolkit." That toolkit called on students to (1) "table/flyer on campus," (2) organize "teach-ins," and (3) sign onto or write pro-Palestine statements. It did not call on anyone to do anything violent or illegal.

- (c) The document also described the October 7th attacks as a part of more than 75 years of “resistance.” By stating that “Palestinian students in exile” are “PART of this movement, not in solidarity with this movement,” Defendant Rodrigues concluded that National SJP “affirmatively identified” itself with a terrorist led attack; and
- (d) “Based on the National SJP’s support of terrorism,” “student chapters” in Florida, which Defendant Rodrigues incorrectly asserted “exist under the headship of” National Students for Justice in Palestine, “must be deactivated.” Exhibit 1.

21. The Deactivation Order does not claim that USF SJP violated any state or federal law or university policy.

22. The Deactivation Order does not allege that USF SJP adopted, endorsed, or used the National SJP toolkit.

23. USF SJP was not involved in or consulted about the conception or drafting of NSJP’s toolkit.

24. The Order calls for deactivating USF SJP based solely on accusations leveled against National SJP.

The Deactivation Order Ignores USF SJP’s Independence and Separation from National SJP

25. The Deactivation Order does not accuse USF SJP of any wrongdoing.

26. Instead, without evidence, the Order postulates that USF SJP exists “under the headship” of National SJP. That is false.

27. USF SJP is fully autonomous from National SJP.

28. USF SJP does not receive funding from National SJP.

29. USF SJP does not pay dues to National SJP.

30. USF SJP has no financial relationship with National SJP.

31. USF SJP does not act under the direction of National SJP.

32. USF SJP operates pursuant to a governing document, its constitution.

Exhibit 2. By the terms of that document, USF SJP is affiliated with no other organizations. Ex. 2, Article II.

The Deactivation Order Asserts USF SJP’s “Guilt by Association” But Points to no Facts or Evidence of Guilt or Association.

33. The Deactivation Order is inconsistent with the disciplinary rights that USF guarantees to all student organizations.

34. USF has enacted and maintains “standards of behaviors” for all students and student organizations, spelled out in the University’s formal Student Code of Conduct. *See* USF 6.0222, <https://usf.app.box.com/v/usfregulation60021> (last visited Nov. 19, 2023). Under that Code, when allegations are advanced regarding a student organization’s alleged misconduct, the organization is expressly entitled to “due process rights.” Those rights expressly include written notice of the charges and allegations; the opportunity to review all available information supporting the charges, including all known witnesses; a fair and impartial hearing; and the “right to presumption that no violation occurred.” *Id.* 6.0221 § VII.E.

35. Defendants have brought forward no evidence that any act by USF SJP has in any way been barred by, or even inconsistent with, any recognized standard.

Neither have Defendants provided UF SJP with due process rights—either before or since issuing the Deactivation Order.

USF SJP is a law-abiding, peaceful student organization.

36. USF SJP has never provided material support to any designated foreign terrorist organization.

37. USF SJP is nonreligious and open to all currently enrolled students at the University of South Florida. Ex. 2, Articles II & III.

38. USF SJP was originally organized, and has operated, to:

A. Raise awareness on campus of the effects of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and blockade and siege of Gaza, the apartheid system imposed by Israel, and the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people, including their right, enshrined in United Nations Resolution 194, to return to their homes and property;

B. Bring USF students together to peacefully express their views and educate students on Israel and Palestine;

C. Bring students at USF together to celebrate Palestinian culture;
and

D. Provide a safe space for these activities on campus.

39. Historically, USF SJP has held both political events and social and cultural events, including fashion shows, soccer tournaments, and poetry slams. Social and cultural events have been some of its best attended events.

40. Since the beginning of the Fall 2023 semester, USF SJP has officially hosted only one on-campus event—a bake sale.

41. Since the beginning of the Fall 2023 semester, USF SJP has not organized protests or any other activities on campus.

42. After the events of October 7, National SJP created a “Day of Resistance Toolkit.” USF SJP was not involved in conceiving or drafting that toolkit. USF SJP has not pasted the toolkit or any material from it on social media.

43. Since October 7th, USF SJP has taken public steps to explain that its goal is to “promote peace” and that USF SJP “condemns all forms of violence.” Exhibit 3.

After being informed that USF SJP is not affiliated with National SJP, Governor DeSantis doubled down on deactivation.

44. On November 8, 2023, during a televised debate between Republican presidential candidates, Governor DeSantis falsely claimed that student groups at Florida state universities, including USF SJP, were affiliated with National SJP and that, as a result, they had been deactivated.

45. Governor DeSantis stated that, in Florida, “[w]e had a group of Students for Justice of Palestine (sic). They said they are common cause with Hamas. They

said, ‘We’re not just in solidarity. This is what we are.’ We deactivated them. We’re not gonna use tax dollars to fund jihad.”

46. The next day, on November 9, Chancellor Rodrigues said the opposite at a State University System Board of Governors meeting.

47. According to public reports, Chancellor Rodrigues acknowledged that the student groups at issue, including USF SJP, are “not subservient or under the National Students for Justice in Palestine.” As a result, Chancellor Rodrigues stated that “the universities have not deactivated their university chapters of SJP.”

48. Chancellor Rodrigues also stated that the universities, including USF, have received legal advice that “raise[s] concerns about potential personal liability for university actors who deactivate the student-registered organization[s].”

49. Governor DeSantis does not share Chancellor Rodrigues’s concern about the legality of deactivation.

50. According to public reports, a spokesman for Governor DeSantis’s responded to Chancellor Rodrigues’s comments by stating that it was “reprehensible to see some university administrators, after the fact, creating bureaucratic roadblocks” to dismantling the student groups, including USF SJP.

51. The spokesman stated that the Governor’s office “trust[s] that the [Board of Governors’] steps today are part of an effort to see this directive through.”

52. The uncertainty surrounding Defendants' plans for USF SJP leaves the organization and its student members in limbo.

53. Administrators previously informed USF SJP that a decision would be made regarding the group's potential deactivation by October 31, 2023. That deadline came and went without any substantive update.

54. The Governor's Order leaves open the possibility that USF SJP and its members can avoid the harms of disbandment if they associate under a different name.

55. Shortly after October 31, Danielle McDonald, the Dean of Students at USF, met with USF SJP and inquired as to if USF SJP would consider changing their name in order to appease complaints by parents, alumni, and other community members. USF SJP declined any kind of name change. To date, USF SJP has not heard a final decision on the fate of their student organization. However, the impact is clear. The very name "Students for Justice in Palestine" has become associated with criminal activity as a result of Defendants actions.

56. Administrators have not formally withdrawn the possibility of deactivation and, in light of Governor DeSantis's avowal that the student groups will be deactivated, USF SJP has every reason to fear that deactivation could occur at any moment.

Irreparable Harm

57. In the wake of the Defendants' publicized Deactivation Order, and the defamatory imputation that USF SJP has provided material support or is affiliated with organizations providing material support to terrorists, a felony violation under Florida law (Fla. Stat. § 755.33), USF SJP has been forced to divert time and resources to defending its reputation and trying to vindicate its constitutional rights rather than focusing on its mission.

58. If it were deactivated, USF SJP would stand to lose, among other things, the following benefits accorded to registered student organizations: (a) university funding, on which USF SJP depends for its operations, (b) the ability to reserve and hold events in university facilities, and (c) access to university fora, such as BullsConnect, to advertise its events and communicate with students on campus.

Count I

**FOR VIOLATION OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT
TO THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION
(42 U.S.C. § 1983)**

59. Plaintiff repeats and re-alleges all preceding paragraphs.

60. The Deactivation Order unconstitutionally denies USF SJP and its members protected First Amendment rights to associate, assemble, and speak.

61. The Deactivation Order unconstitutionally singles out and punishes USF SJP on the basis of an association, or imputed association, with National SJP.

62. The Deactivation Order unconstitutionally singles out and punishes USF SJP for the viewpoint (or assumed viewpoint) of National SJP.

63. The Deactivation Order unconstitutionally singles out and punishes USF SJP for viewpoints the USF SJP has not expressed but that the order presumes it holds.

64. 42 U.S.C. § 1983 provides a cause of action against every person who, under color of law, deprives a person of their rights secured by the Constitution or federal law.

65. USF SJP respectfully requests this Court to enter a judgment in its favor, and against Defendants, for preliminary injunctive relief followed by a permanent injunction; declaratory judgment; costs and attorneys' fees wrongfully incurred to bring this action; and any other remedy as provided by applicable law.

Prayer for Relief

WHEREFORE, USF SJP respectfully requests that this Court enter judgment in favor of Plaintiff and against Defendants, and:

- A. Issue preliminary and permanent injunctive relief enjoining Defendants from deactivating USF SJP.
- B. Declare that Defendants' announced intention to deactivate USF SJP violates the First Amendment.

- C. Award Plaintiffs' attorneys' fees, costs, and expenses under 42 U.S.C. § 1988; and
- D. Grant all further relief to which Plaintiff is entitled or the Court deems just and proper.

Dated: November 20, 2023

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Roza Tawil

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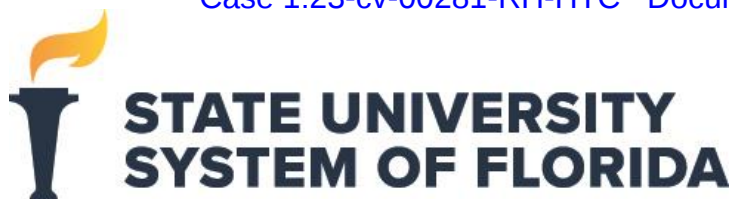
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**Pro hac vice applications forthcoming*

Counsel for Plaintiff

EXHIBIT 1



MEMORANDUM

Office of the Chancellor
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TO: SUS Presidents

FROM: Chancellor Ray Rodrigues

DATE: October 24, 2023

RE: Deactivation of National Students for Justice in Palestine

During a holy Jewish holiday, the recognized terrorist organization, Hamas, launched an unprovoked attack on Israel—among those killed were babies, women, and elderly. To date, approximately 1,400 Israelisⁱ have been killed, including 31 American citizens.ⁱⁱ Governor DeSantis, our State University System and the Florida College System have condemned these attacks.

Hamas is responsible for this attack and claims it as “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the wake of this terror, military leaders of Hamas have called for the mobilization of Palestinians in support of the Operation.^{iv}

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.”^v

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 State University System of Florida has at least two institutions with active National SJP Chapters.

These chapters exist under the headship of the National Students for Justice in Palestine, who distributed a toolkit identifying themselves as part of the Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. **Based on the National SJP’s support of terrorism, in consultation with Governor DeSantis, the student chapters must be deactivated.** These two student chapters may form another organization that complies with Florida state statutes and university policies. The two institutions should grant these two chapters a waiver for the fall deadlines, should reapplication take place.

SUS Presidents
October 24, 2023
Page 2 of 2

Promoting excellent educational quality while providing a safe environment for all students is paramount.

The State University System will continue working with the Executive Office of the Governor and SUS's Board of Governors to ensure we are all using all tools at our disposal to crack down on campus demonstrations that delve beyond protected First Amendment speech into harmful support for terrorist groups. These measures could include necessary adverse employment actions and suspensions for school officials.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

ⁱ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/live-updates-whats-happening-on-day-15-of-the-israel-amas-war#:~:text=More%20than%201%2C400%20people%20in,in%20the%20initial%20 Hamas%20a ttack.>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/18/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-october-7th-terrorist-attacks-and-the-resilience-of-the-state-of-israel-and-its-people-tel-aviv-israel/>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/amas-calims-to-fire-5000-rockets-at-israel-declares-operation-al-aqsa-flood/

^{iv} <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/amas-commander-says-attacks-are-in-defense-of-al-aqsa-claims-5000-missiles-fired/ar-AA1hPuEf>

^v <https://dw-wp-production.imgix.net/2023/10/DAY-OF-RESISTANCE-TOOLKIT.pdf>

EXHIBIT 2



Posts

Follow



studentsforsocialismust and 3 others



TEAR DOWN THE APARTHEID WALL!

A Demonstration for Palestinian Liberation



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA
**STUDENTS JUSTICE
PALESTINE**



November 14th

11 AM ~ 3 PM

MSC Plaza



MSA @ USF
Muslim Students Association



SUMA@USF



379 likes

studentsforsocialismust Next Tuesday we're holding our 'Tear Down the Apartheid Wall' event outside the MSC to remember the martyrs of Gaza & the West Bank. Come by between 11-3pm to paint messages of peace and Palestinian resilience on our model of Israel's Apartheid Wall 🕊️ 🇵🇸

November 9



studentsforsocialismusf and 3 others



On one side of our replica wall, we will include a list of all Palestinins who have been killed since October 7th. On the other, we encourage students to vandalize the wall by painting messages of peace. The wall will continue to stand throughout the semester as a frequent reminder of not only the apartheid state, but also of the resolve of the Palestinian people.



379 likes

studentsforsocialismusf Next Tuesday we're holding our 'Tear Down the Apartheid Wall' event outside the MSC to remember the martyrs of Gaza & the West Bank. Come by between 11-3pm to paint messages of peace and Palestinian resilience on our model of Israel's Apartheid Wall

November 9

EXHIBIT 3



sjp_usf



OFFICIAL STATEMENT

On behalf of the Students for Justice in Palestine at the University of South Florida, we stand in full solidarity with the Palestinian resistance against more than 75 years of apartheid. We would like to address that our organization promotes peace and condemns all forms of violence. Our goal is to continue to be the voice for the Palestinians here on campus and within our community that are grieving for their loved ones back home. We will continue to advocate for the rights of Palestinians who have been under occupation, settler colonialism, and genocide for 75+ years.

The resistance you see today is a response to almost a century's worth of oppression. Although many will choose to turn a blind eye to the truth, we are here to peacefully spread awareness. We stand for the oppressed, not the oppressors, and send our condolences and prayers to the people of Palestine who have suffered for decades. Palestinian blood runs through our veins and although we cannot be with our people physically, they are indeed, forever in our hearts.

The people united will never be defeated.

— The Students for Justice in Palestine, USF



468 likes

sjp_usf And as always, Free Palestine 🇵🇸

View all 55 comments

jael_mitchell You can not seek humanity from people who don't see you as human. we need to DEMAND liberation.



October 18