



November 19, 2015

Robert J. Zimmer  
Office of the President, University of Chicago  
Edward H. Levi Hall, Suite 501  
5801 S. Ellis Ave.  
Chicago, IL 60637

Re: Harassment and intimidation against Zachary Taylor, Sara Rubinstein,  
and Students for Justice in Palestine

Dear President Zimmer,

I'm writing on behalf of University of Chicago students Zachary Taylor, Sara Rubinstein, and members of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at the University of Chicago. As you are aware, University of Chicago students who have spoken out in support of Palestinian human rights have been targets of several recent incidents of harassment, including threats and intimidation based on Islamophobia, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, on campus and/or online.

We write to put these recent incidents in the context of a documented pattern of suppression to silence Palestinian human rights advocacy; to remind you of your responsibilities under Title VI and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act; and to urge you to take immediate steps necessary to ensure that University of Chicago students enjoy the right to speak out in favor of Palestinian freedom without fear of repression, intimidation, or physical threat based on religion, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

SJP is dedicated to "raising awareness about the injustices concerning the occupation of the Palestinian people. SJP advocates for democratic and nonviolent principles to promote justice, human rights, equality, liberty, and self-determination for the Palestinian people."<sup>1</sup> Membership in and involvement with SJP undoubtedly serves an important educational purpose.

Distressingly, in just the past four weeks, SJP and University of Chicago students who speak out in favor of Palestinian human rights have been the target of several incidents of harassment and intimidation:

- On October 14, as part of the International Day of Action on University Campuses for Palestine, SJP put up posters at the University of Chicago in recognition of recent Palestinian victims of Israeli violence. Many posters were torn down or vandalized with Islamophobic and anti-Arab messages, including "stop venerating terror" and "TERRORIST." Members of SJP reported this

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<sup>1</sup> A profile of Students for Justice in Palestine at the University of Chicago is available at: <https://blueprint.uchicago.edu/organization/sjpalestine/about>.

incident to the Administration via e-mail on October 14 and to Associate Dean of Students Jeremy Inabinet during a meeting on October 20.

- On October 19, offensive posters using the SJP and University of Chicago logos were posted on campus. The posters replaced “Students for Justice in Palestine” with “Stabbing Jews for Peace,” an apparent attempt to malign the human rights mission of SJP by insinuating an anti-Semitic motivation. Members of SJP reported this incident – including a photograph of someone putting up the offensive posters – to the Administration on October 19, and to Associate Dean of Students Inabinet during a meeting with students on October 20.
- On October 22, a fake Facebook user named “Rachel Corrie”<sup>2</sup> posted harassing and intimidating comments about Mr. Taylor on SJP’s Facebook page. The posts included homophobic, disparaging comments about Mr. Taylor’s sexual orientation, and threatened to expose sexually explicit photos of Mr. Taylor. One comment, for example, threatened to post flyers on campus with “graphic nude photos of Zach he’s been sharing on [gay mobile phone app] grindr.” Another comment stated, “I think most queers would agree that power bottom Zach Taylor needs to stop pinkwashing palestinian brutality against palestinian homosexuals, oh and stabbing jews too.” Members of SJP reported these Facebook posts to the Associate Dean Inabinet via e-mail on October 22.
- On November 2 and 3, Sara Rubinstein, a transgender University of Chicago student who identifies as non-binary and queer, received threatening transphobic and homophobic Facebook messages from the same “Rachel Corrie” referenced above, including “when are you going to get your boobies taken off?” and “i’m going to have lots of fun with you and your family.” Sara Rubinstein is a member of Jewish Voice for Peace – UChicago, an ally organization of SJP, and had posted publicly on Facebook in support of Palestinian human rights. Sara Rubinstein reported these messages to the Administration via e-mail on November 3.
- On November 6, a Facebook user created a fake account using the name “Zach Taylor” and a profile photo of Mr. Taylor. The fake “Zach Taylor” made several offensive, harassing, and intimidating comments on SJP Chicago’s Facebook page. The comments included disparaging statements about Mr. Taylor’s sexual orientation, and attributed to him statements that would be construed as support for terrorism and anti-Semitism. In one post, for example, the fake “Zach Taylor” commented, “I would love to join, but I’m more interested in murdering some jews, er... I mean zionists.” Another comment stated, “...How can I get arrested, I want to fulfill a prison rape fantasy, dying for some big black cock.” Mr. Taylor reported these Facebook comments to Dean of Students Michele Rasmussen via e-mail on November 6.
- On November 14, a Facebook user created a fake account using the name and profile photograph of a Palestinian student at the University of Chicago, who is also a member of SJP. The imposter account left a series of harassing, threatening, sexual, and misogynistic comments on SJP’s Facebook page, including “you don’t have to rape me, i’ll make you touch my genitals.” The Palestinian student reported these comments to Dean of Students Michele Rasmussen and other administrators via email on November 16.

These incidents are troubling on their own, but they are not isolated. They are part of a well-documented trend to suppress Palestine activism on campuses, a trend that is increasingly manifesting itself through online threats and intimidation. While these incidents were unfolding at the University of Chicago, a

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Corrie was an American peace activist who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza in 2003. Rachel was 23.



Palestinian student at the University of Illinois-Chicago received an e-mail death threat as a result of his involvement with SJP at UIC.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, students who speak out for Palestinian human rights are increasingly finding themselves targeted and harassed online by websites like Canary Mission, which profiles and maligns pro-Palestine activists with the explicit intent of ruining their career prospects and chilling Palestine human rights speech. Palestine Legal and the Center for Constitutional Rights documented hundreds of other similar incidents of suppression of Palestine human rights advocacy across the country in a report we released in September, "[The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in the U.S.](#)"<sup>4</sup> We hope you review it carefully.

We hope this letter serves as a reminder of the University's obligations under both Title VI and Title IX of the Civil Rights Act. We expect that you will take appropriate steps to ensure that Palestinian and Arab students and Palestine solidarity activists on campus enjoy the right to speak out without fear of harassment and intimidation based on their race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Given the clear pattern of online harassment specifically targeting University of Chicago SJP members and threats of on-campus intimidation, as documented above, the University should commit its resources to investigating these incidents against its students, and should affirm the rights of students to speak out in favor of Palestinian human rights, as demanded by SJP.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding the University's response. I can be reached at [rsaksena@palestinelegal.org](mailto:rsaksena@palestinelegal.org) or 312-399-6624.

Sincerely,

Rahul Saksena,  
Staff Attorney, Palestine Legal

Cc Kim Taylor, Vice President and General Counsel  
Michele Rasmussen, Dean of Students in the University

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of recent Chicago-area incidents, visit: <http://palestineinamerica.com/2015/10/sjp-chicago-members-harassed-threatene>.

<sup>4</sup> The report is available at [www.palestinelegal.org/the-palestine-exception](http://www.palestinelegal.org/the-palestine-exception).