



INTERVIEW: Columbia Students on Encampment and Protest Suppression

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

Glenn Greenwald (GG): We are very delighted to be joined tonight by two Columbia students who have been very active in helping organise the campus protest against Israel's war in Gaza. First is Jon-Ben Menachem, a student of the PhD program of sociology. He is with the group CUAD, Columbia University Apartheid Divest, which describes itself as, quote, "a coalition of student organisations that see Palestine as the vanguard for our collective liberation". On Tuesday, he published a much discussed article in the zeteo, that was headlined, quote, *I Am a Jewish Student at Columbia. Don't Believe What You're Being Told About 'Campus Antisemitism'*. We are also joined by Mohammad Hemeida, who is a student at the undergraduate school who has been working as one of the principal media organisers and spokespeople for the student protestors. Gentlemen, it's great to see both of you. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Jon-Ben Menachem (JBM): Thanks for having us.

GG: Absolutely.

Mohammad Hemeida (MH): Thanks for having us.

GG: Yeah, sure. So as you guys know, there has been a lot said about campus protesters in general when it comes to the Israeli war in Gaza, but your campus in particular has received the bulk of the attention over the last couple of weeks, and all sorts of motivations have been attributed to the protesters generally to each of you individually. So just let me ask you to speak for yourself in just your own words, what are your motives for having decided to participate in these protests, and what are your motives for continuing to do so? Let's go ahead and start with you, Mohammad.

MH: So I think since October, all of us on this campus, students, faculty, staff have been seeing Israel's genocide in Gaza. We've been seeing almost 40,000 Palestinians, innocent people, women and children getting murdered in the thousands, brutally massacred. We don't want our tuition dollars going towards companies that fund and invest in Israeli genocide.

And so I think we've all come together for months now to protest. We've all come together to speak to the administration, but they won't listen to us. And I think the encampment that's going on right now is the culmination of months of the administration completely ignoring the student body and the university community at large.

GG: And John, what about your motives?

JBM: Yeah. Just to echo what he has just said, you know, I think especially after our chapter as Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace were targeted unfairly by the university last fall, there's been a huge mobilisation on campus to defend pro-Palestine organising and support the divestment campaign.

GG: So American protests, protests by American students against American backed wars or US foreign policy have a very long and noble tradition in the United States. This is not the first time we've had outbreaks of sustained protests. We had them in the 1960s against the Vietnam War. We had it against the invasion of Iraq in the 1980s, a very lengthy and ultimately successful student-led movement against the apartheid regime of South Africa, and demands that the universities divest from anything having to do with the South African regime. Typically, these protests are accompanied by formal demands, often aimed at the government or the university administration. So, Jon, in the case of the protest movement at Columbia, do you have formal demands that you're insisting upon, and if so, what are those?

JBM: Yeah. So the demands of the encampment right now are, disclosure, divestment and amnesty. So to walk you through those a little bit, disclosure refers to the fact that all of Columbia's endowment, the financial investments that Columbia has are not fully transparent. And then that relates to the divestment demand in the sense that, you know, the full extent to which Columbia's endowment is related to companies profiting from Israeli apartheid is not clear. But we would like to sever all of those ties. And amnesty refers to the disciplinary measures that were taken against, you know, at least 100 students last week. These Students are still suspended, and many were arrested as well. And it also includes, you know, actions taken against faculty members who have spoken out in defence of Palestine or in support of Palestine over the last six months.

GG: So, Mohammad assuming those are your understanding of these demands as well, does that mean that if those particular demands were met, the protest movement would dissipate and cease, even if the war in Gaza and Biden's support for it were ongoing?

MH: I think it's not a surprise at all that the protesters who are gathered here, the students, the faculty, all of us are concerned about the war. We're calling for a cease fire, we're calling to an end to the occupation, an end to Israeli apartheid. The demands of the encampment itself, as I understand it, is for our university specifically to divest from the war. So we want our university to not put our tuition dollars towards genocide. I think that's the immediate demand of the student movement. As for calling for a cease fire, obviously I think that's something that all of us are going to continue to engage in and continue to demand on the world scale.

GG: So let me just ask you, one of the ways that there are a lot of people defending you is not just on the merits of the protest itself We've certainly done that many times. But as you may have heard while you were waiting tonight, also on free speech grounds, you have the absolute right to exercise your First Amendment rights by having your views be heard organising in defence of them. I'm wondering, though, whether part of the formal position of the protest movement in the encampment and maybe different protesters have different views on that, this is also to urge the administration to ban other students or outside voices from appearing on campus and speaking if they have a different view of the Israeli war in Gaza than you do. Is that part of what you're seeking is to have supporters of the Israeli war, the Israeli government, banned from speaking? Go ahead. Go ahead and answer that, Jon. You can answer that first.

JBM: I mean, no, and I also would like to say I kind of dismayed by the way, that this whole inspiring sequence of campus protests across the country have been turned into a sort of like, free speech or like campus intellectual freedom discussion, when really the attention should be on Palestine and on Gaza and on the violence that's happening there.

GG: Let me ask you about that, Mohammed, because obviously part of what has happened is that the police forces of cities and states and college campuses have been increasingly deployed to come and break up these protests to arrest the participants in them. We've seen that on your campus with the NYPD. We've seen it just yesterday at the University of Texas. Do you think it's important to, given the assault on your right to have these protests, in addition to the focus that you want to maintain on the war in Gaza, also to defend your constitutional right to have these protests without being shut down or silenced or arrested or disciplined by your school as a result of the views that you're expressing?

MH: So I think it's a good question. And I think to tackle that question, the most important thing that you should look at is why there's so much repression coming from universities, not just at Columbia, but across the country. And I think it's related to Israel. It's related to the specific subject matter that the protests are about. We had apartheid protests in 1985 in Columbia. There was a sit in. The repression wasn't nearly to the level that we're seeing now. We had anti-war protests in 1968 that involved the military industrial complex, and that was the worst repression that Columbia has seen in its history. It's being repeated now, and I think that has everything to do with the subject itself. So ultimately, the repression is coming because this concerns Palestine, because we're calling for Palestinian liberation specifically. And so you can't really separate or you can't divorce Palestinian liberation and calls for it from academic speech on campus. They're not two separate issues. The reason that we're prioritising Gaza is because that's the centre of all our demands. The fact that there are academic speech issues involved and intellectual freedom issues involved just has to do with the fact that the university is being so repressive because of our demands having to do with a topic like Palestinian liberation, which obviously we know there's been a history of oppression around in the US and elsewhere.

GG: Let me let me just stick with you for a second, Mohammad. And I wish I didn't even have to ask these kinds of questions, because I wish we could spend the bulk of our time on

the policies that you're protesting itself, but as you know, these protests have become very controversial on a national political level. The protest movement, of which you're a part, has been bombarded with all kinds of very serious accusations that just from the naked eye seem not just untrue, but not even really worthy of debate. Nonetheless, there are all kinds of people, upon Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson and various Republican senators and all kinds of media figures who have claimed that one of the purposes of your protest movement, or at least one of the animating sentiments behind it, is animosity towards Jewish students in particular, and a kind of accompanying desire to make them feel intimidated or threatened on campus. Can you talk about that?

MH: Sure. What I will say is, I have never felt closer to my peers, to the rest of the Columbia community Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Arab or otherwise than I have now. I think the encampment is a show of solidarity. If reporters or politicians wanted to take a look at it, they can. They can see what's happening there. We're singing cultural songs. We're watching dance performances by different groups on campus. We're having seminars, teachings. We're having interfaith gatherings. I mean, I'm Muslim. We're praying all five prayers in the camp. We had a Jumma prayer followed by a Shabbat service. We had Seder for Passover. So really, we've had so many Jewish students in the camp, Jewish students, several of them were the first to be arrested in the initial encampment on Thursday last week. So I've never felt closer to the community than I have now. And it's a call for liberation that united us all. And I think it's incredibly shameful and regrettable that many politicians and many in the media have chosen to misrepresent it and portray it as something that it isn't.

GG: So, Jon, you wrote this article that I referenced in zeteo news, the headline of which is: *I Am a Jewish Student at Columbia. Don't Believe What You're Being Told About 'Campus Antisemitism'*. And you, I think, very compellingly made the case that what the media is saying, what pro-Zionist media figures and the like are saying is basically just fabrications about what is taking place in the encampment. Earlier today, the student senate of the Columbia Law School sent out an email where they were expressing what they called their grave dismay at various reports of what they view as evidence of anti-Semitism. They said there have been chants such as: Yes, Hamas, we love you, we support your rockets, too. Somebody, and I saw the video, it seemed like it was one straight person on the street who said: Go back to Poland. They also listed: Stop killing children. I'm not really sure why that's an anti-Semitic phrase. It seems sort of fundamental to any anti-war protests. But in any way, you know, it seems like you could take any protest movement and demean it by focusing on one or two isolated cases that were done. When the Iraq war protests were taking place there were hundreds of thousands of people protesting all around the world, and they would find some communist sign, one of 10,000 signs and then focus on it and try and claim that it was a communist movement. Have you heard things like this that have been said, either by participants, in the college protest or people on the street nearby? And if so, what is the posture of the encampment towards statements like those? [00:12:43][96.2]

JBM: I cannot emphasise strongly enough that the encampment and the CUAD coalition more broadly, are, you know, extremely against bigotry and hate. There has been no

anti-Semitism that I have witnessed or heard about coming from the encampment or CUAD people. You know, New York City is a big city and the fact that, you know, that these protests are happening at Columbia has brought a lot of sort of fringe actors uptown. And, you know, like yesterday, the founder of the Proud Boys was on campus. Like, I saw him there. Actually as soon as I walked on campus, I heard undergrads panicking that he was there. We aren't sure how he got in. Theoretically, a campus is closed to anyone without a Columbia ID or without a New York City press pass that's been approved by Columbia. But he was there at the same time as Speaker Johnson, which I found very concerning, because, you know, theoretically, these Republicans are parachuting in not out of a concern for our safety – but like the Proud Boy founder is there at the same time. And, you know, I really want to stress that. Jewish students on campus have probably felt, you know, some type of discomfort at the pro-Palestine protest, but discomfort from safety concerns.

GG: Yeah, the irony, of course, is that the American right has been mocking for a decade the idea that students have the right to feel comfortable and safe and free from ideas that make them uncomfortable. And now suddenly, there's this effort to deploy that exact rationale to demand that the police come in and shut you down. Let me ask you, one of the claims that has been made is that your encampment and the protesters who are part of them, have made it impossible for other students to attend classes to the point that Columbia had to announce that school would be remote through the end of the semester. Is there any basis at all for the claim that the encampment has in some way impeded professors or students from attending classes? Mohammad, you can go ahead and take that one if you want.

MH: Not at all. Again, I think it's shameful that a lot of people misrepresent the encampment. The Columbia administration's actions are entirely motivated by the Columbia administration itself. And they think that by turning classes virtual, that that could basically reduce the foot traffic on campus. They think that that makes it more feasible that they could take repressive actions against the encampment with less witnesses around. So the Columbia administration does a lot of things that make students feel unsafe. The foremost, of course, being the threat of bringing NYPD or the National Guard on campus. I think that might be the number one reason why any student might be afraid of going to classes on any random day, because what if they're walking near the encampment and suddenly a bunch of cops descend and arrest everybody in it, everybody near it? So I think from what I've heard from my own friends, from what I've heard from people in the encampment, that's the number one threat to our safety. And as for virtual classes, no, the encampment is restricted to a lawn. They're not stopping anyone whatsoever from going to class. Professors are still holding classes in person. And professors walk by the encampment. Students walk by the encampment. It's not disrupting campus life whatsoever. Really the concern is just that we want to gather in a place that makes the Columbia administration listen to our demands in a way that they haven't been for the last seven months or so.

GG: Jon, I think one of the things that has been forgotten, because it's now six or seven months ago, is that immediately after October 7th, there was this consortium of billionaires who are highly supportive of Israel and have been for a long time, people like Bill Ackman, a

bunch of hedge fund managers who made a very public campaign that called on any student who is "caught", quote unquote, supporting the Palestinian cause or opposing the Israeli war in Gaza to be basically blacklisted and never hired in a permanent way as punishment for their political views. I knew a lot of Columbia students when I went to law school. I went to NYU and like a lot of schools like that, students go there with the intention of having career options. People think about their careers. You're in a PhD program, so I assume that's more around the corner for you than, say, the average grad student. Have you yourself experienced, or have you heard other people experiencing kinds of fear about what this political protesting and political activism might do to your future career prospects?

JBM: I mean, I think, as you've been saying, over the past several decades, there has been a pretty concerted campaign to punish anyone who speaks out in defence of Palestine or criticises Israel in any way. So as a Jewish person, I mean, I've received a lot of hate mail this week for saying anything at all in public. And if you're curious as to why more Jewish students won't put their name and face out there in support of the encampment, I mean, that's why. Right? I'm 29, so I'm actually a great deal older than many of the people in the encampment. So I'm a little bit more comfortable taking risks because I've already gone out into the professional world and made connections of my own. But, yeah, it's definitely a difficult thing. I do want to stress that many of the people who have been targeted most viciously are, you know, not white Jewish people, but Black and Brown people in America.

GG: Mohammad, what have you heard from school administrators recently, over the last week or so about your rights to continue to participate in the encampment and your rights in general, to continue to engage in this kind of activism?

MH: I think our emails are flooded with threats. There were threats about continuing to engage in protests since October, peaceful protests. And as protests escalated and as we started the encampment, there have been more emails about disciplinary action. You'll be subject to suspension. You may be subject to arrest. Obviously, after the 108 students were arrested on Thursday, that made it very, very clear to us just the extent to which the university was willing to go to stop us from peacefully demonstrating. So I think we're aware that the university is constantly threatening us. But I think also in some emails, they will slip in messaging about how much they care about free speech, how much they care about freedom of expression, I just wish that their actions would follow that sort of language.

GG: Well, look, there's a lot of different ways to spend your time when you're on a college campus, and I can't think of many things that are more worthwhile to do than the kind of protesting and activism in which you're engaged. I know that's not an easy thing to do in the United States, where the elite class has been the most pro-Israeli class of any country, anywhere in the democratic world by a very good distance. So I want to congratulate both of you. I hope you'll keep up the good work. And I really appreciate your coming on to talk to us tonight.

Thanks for watching this clip from System Update, our live show that airs every Monday through Friday at 7 p.m. eastern exclusively on Rumble. You can catch the full nightly shows

live or view the backlog of episodes for free on our Rumble page. You can also find full episodes the morning after they air across all major podcasting platforms, including Spotify and Apple. All the information you need is linked below. We hope to see you there.

END

Thank you for reading this transcript. Please don't forget to donate to support our independent and non-profit journalism:

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| BANKKONTO: Kontoinhaber: acTVism München e.V. Bank: GLS Bank IBAN: DE89430609678224073600 BIC: GENODEM1GLS | PAYPAL: E-Mail: PayPal@acTVism.org | PATREON: https://www.patreon.com/acTVism | BETTERPLACE: Link: Click here |
|---|--|--|---|

The acTVism Munich e.V. association is a non-profit organization with legal capacity. The association pursues exclusively and directly non-profit and charitable purposes. Donations from Germany are tax-deductible. If you require a donation receipt, please send us an e-mail to: info@acTVism.org