



April 5, 2024

VIA EMAIL

Secretary Miguel Cardona
Assistant Secretary Catherine E. Lhamon
U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-1100
Email: OCR@ed.gov

Re: Title VI Complaint Against Columbia University (National Origin–Palestinian, Race – Arab, Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics – Muslim)

Dear Secretary Cardona and Assistant Secretary Lhamon,

We write on behalf of four Columbia University students¹ and Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (Columbia SJP) who have been the target of extreme anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, and Islamophobic harassment on campus since October 9, 2023, including receiving multiple death threats, being called terrorists and “Jew killers,” told to “Go to Gaza so they can rape you and kill you,” harassed for wearing keffiyehs (traditional Palestinian scarf) or hijab, doxed, being stereotyped as supporting Hamas, terrorists, or being pro 9/11, being treated differently by high-ranking administrators—including Columbia University President Minouche Shafik, attacked with a chemical agent that led to a Palestinian student and others associated with Palestinians or perceived to be Palestinians being hospitalized, and more. Despite students filing dozens of complaints, Columbia failed to take meaningful steps to end the harassment, prevent it from occurring, or remedy its effects. Instead, Columbia reinforced the hostile anti-Palestinian environment by suspending Students for Justice in Palestine—a student organization that advocates for Palestinian human rights—for engaging in speech activity supporting Palestinian rights. In addition, Columbia formed an Anti-Semitism Task Force, which appears to exclude Jews who are affiliated with Palestinians and/or who support Palestinian rights.² The mandate

¹ These students are Maryam Alwan, Deen Haleem, Daria Mateescu, and Layla Saliba. Maryam, Deen, and Layla are of Palestinian origin.

² See, e.g., Prem Thakker, *Columbia’s New “Antisemitism Task Force” Won’t Say What It Thinks Antisemitism Is*, THE INTERCEPT (March 7, 2024), <https://theintercept.com/2024/03/07/israel-gaza->

of the task force suggests that it is making recommendations regarding student protests and discipline, raising concerns that the university will investigate or prosecute students who affiliate with Palestinians or speak in favor of Palestinian equality. Despite repeated asks from Palestinian students and their allies, Columbia has not created a similar Anti-Palestinian (or Anti-Arab or Islamophobia) Task Force to date, thus reinforcing the anti-Palestinian hostile environment on campus.

We will submit a more detailed report of these incidents—which continue up to today—under separate cover in the next fourteen business days, but we are including a brief description of incidents that have taken place between approximately October 9 and 31 for purposes of the 180-day filing period.

Our allegations fall into three major categories *with respect to incidents between October 9 and 31, 2023*:

1. Palestinian students, students perceived to be Palestinian, and students associated with Palestinians, Arab students, and Muslim students on campus have been subjected to a hostile environment on campus due to an onslaught of anti-Palestinian, Islamophobic, and anti-Arab harassment, threats, and social media targeting—of which the University had clear and repeated notice. Palestinian students and/or those associated with them and/or students perceived to be Palestinian, including Columbia students wearing a keffiyeh (traditional Palestinian scarf) have been doxed, followed, cursed at, faced with Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian rhetoric, called “terrorists” and “Jew killers,” had their university network ID demanded of them, and have received death threats. A Muslim student wearing hijab, upon walking back to her dorm after a protest for Palestinian rights, was subjected to racist anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic harassment such as, “I can see your hair, you terrorist!” Despite repeated notice, the University failed to respond effectively and promptly to eliminate the hostile environment and remedy its impact on affected Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students and their allies who were advocating for the rights of Palestinians. As a result of the above, students have felt unsafe on campus, have lost sleep, have avoided walking alone or studying on campus, and fell behind on assignments. After missing several weeks of class due to the constant harassment and grief of losing family members in Gaza, Palestinian student Layla Saliba had to take out student loans in order to enroll in summer classes. Maryam Alwan, a member of Students for Justice in Palestine, who is also Palestinian, not only missed numerous classes, but had panic attacks on campus as a result of the hostile anti-Palestinian environment on campus. Maryam eventually had to drop several classes and is now graduating a year late

[protests-columbia-antisemitism/](https://lithub.com/internal-emails-reveal-columbias-task-force-on-antisemitism-is-causing-ruptures-in-its-faculty/); LitHub, Internal Emails Reveal Columbia’s Task Force on Antisemitism Is Causing Ruptures in Faculty, LITHUB, (Feb. 26, 2024), <https://lithub.com/internal-emails-reveal-columbias-task-force-on-antisemitism-is-causing-ruptures-in-its-faculty/>.

as a result.

2. Columbia also engaged in different treatment on the basis of Palestinian national origin and association with and advocacy for Palestinians. On October 9, 2023, Columbia President Minouche Shafik sent a university-wide email beginning with the words, “I was devastated by the horrific attack on Israel this weekend.” The president’s 499-word statement provided an extensive list of resources for students, faculty, and staff to get health and other support services from the university. Unlike the president’s rapid and proactive outreach to provide support to students impacted by the attack *on Israel* (i.e. Israeli students, faculty, and staff), administrators have sent no such response condemning or expressing devastation with respect to Israel’s attack *on Gaza* (i.e. which impacts Palestinian students, faculty, and staff), which has, to date, killed more than 32,000 Palestinians. Layla Saliba, a Palestinian student whose family was killed by Israel in Gaza (as noted above), was left to fend for herself, as Columbia did not offer her the same support and resources as non-Palestinian students when it came to assistance requesting accommodations from professors. Palestinian students reported different treatment and lack of regard for Palestinian students to administrators and to date have still have not seen statements similarly expressing horror and devastation at Israel’s attacks on Gaza, despite the exponential difference in loss of Palestinian life.³
3. Since October, the University directly engaged in racist harassment of Palestinian students and students associated with Palestinians. For example, on October 12, 2023, a Columbia employee, while standing near an SJP protest for Palestinian rights, stated, in an interview with student-run radio WKCR station, “I hope every one of those people die.” Students at the protest were Palestinian, Arab, and/or Muslim, or were associated with Palestinians. Standing near the same protest, Columbia Professor Shai Davidai made anti-Palestinian comments and insinuated that the students were supporters of terrorism. On October 18, 2023, Davidai spoke at a vigil on Columbia’s campus where he called on Columbia to “eradicate pro-terror student organizations,” in apparent reference to Students for Justice in Palestine, which he likened to supporters of ISIS, a racist anti-Palestinian stereotype. On the social media site X (formerly Twitter), Davidai has also compared Palestinian students and students affiliated with Palestinians to people who would celebrate 9/11, another dangerous and racist stereotype. Since October, Davidai has persisted in his harassment of Columbia students who are Palestinian or are affiliated with Palestinians, which will be detailed in our forthcoming report. Despite ample and

³ Nearly three weeks after her initial statement expressing horror at the attacks in Israel, on October 27, President Shafik sent an email condemning antisemitic incidents on campus, whereby she also mentioned that Palestinian, Muslim and Arab students had been doxed. The message did not express condemnation of Israel’s attack on Gaza or provide resources to students impacted by these attacks, as she had done in her October 9 email. In fact, the email did not mention the word Gaza.

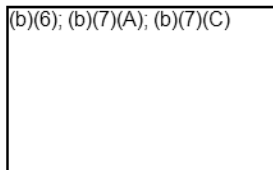
early notice of Davidai's actions, it appears Columbia waited until February to investigate Davidai, which, upon information and belief, is still on going. To our knowledge, Columbia has not made any statements condemning Davidai's actions or language conflating Palestinians (or students perceived to be Palestinian or associating with Palestinians) with terrorism, ISIS, or 9/11.

Based on the facts described here, and our forthcoming supplementary report, we urge you to conduct a systemic investigation into Columbia University for violating its obligations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

As a university obligated to provide an educational environment welcoming to all regardless of race, color or national origin, Columbia cannot justify its failure to address the hostile anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim environment that Maryam Alwan, Layla Saliba, Deen Haleem, Daria Mateescu, and Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine were subjected to, nor its own discriminatory treatment of Palestinian students, students perceived to be Palestinian and students associated with Palestinians.

Sincerely,

(b)(6); (b)(7)(A); (b)(7)(C)

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Sabiya Ahamed

Staff Attorney
Palestine Legal

