



Graduate Assistants United
YOUR UNION, YOUR VOICE

For more information, contact:
Communications Chair
352-575-0366
organizing@ufgau.org
ufgau.org

UF-GAU POSITION STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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UF Graduate Assistants United Stands Against Attacks on Freedom of Speech and Student Safety

GAINESVILLE, FL –

Graduate Assistants United at the University of Florida extends our deepest sympathies to all those within the UF and Gainesville community directly and indirectly impacted by the humanitarian crises occurring in Palestine and Israel. GAU stands with graduate assistants of *all* races, religions, ethnic backgrounds, and skin colors, which includes our Palestinian and Arab graduate assistants. We will not tolerate harassment, discrimination, or targeting of any student population, and expect UF administration and the state of Florida to do the same.

As part of the "[UF Core Values](#)" initiative, the university claims to promote the core value of freedom and civility by "embrac[ing] the freedom to inquire and express ideas without condemnation" through fostering "a community that affirms and embraces openness to an inclusive range of viewpoints." However, UF has participated in direct acts of discrimination against Palestinian and Arab students, including:

1. [Excluding](#) Palestinian and Arab students from university statements extending sympathy and protection against violence
2. [Deactivating](#) student-led pro-Palestinian organizations, and
3. President Ben Sasse [publicly maligning](#) pro-Palestinian students using derogatory language

These actions cultivate an atmosphere of hate and fear towards Palestinians and people of Arab descent, which has deadly consequences, as we saw in the tragic [shooting of three Palestinian students](#) in Vermont only days ago, and the fatal [stabblings](#) of 6-year old Palestinian, Wadea Al Fayoume, in Chicago and [Muslim pediatrician, Dr. Talat Khan](#), in Texas. At a time when they are in the most need of solidarity, Palestinian and Arab graduate assistants at UF have reached out to GAU saying they are afraid to attend class and go to work. We firmly condemn these listed

actions by UF, and aim to cultivate a welcoming, respectful, and safe academic community for *all* of its members.

Furthermore, UF has been complacent in discriminatory state legislation which targets and punishes Palestinian, Arab, and pro-Palestinian students for exercising their First Amendment right to free speech. We firmly condemn the State University System Chancellor Ray Rodrigues' order to deactivate the university's student-led organization, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). We strongly condemn the passage of identical bills [HB 465](#) and [SB 470](#), which are pieces of extremist, totalitarian legislation that will require public universities to report student information to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and deems current and future students that "promote foreign terrorist organizations" ineligible for fee waivers, institutional or state grants, financial aid, scholarships, or tuition assistance. The guidelines for defining students that "promote foreign terrorist organizations" is vague and can be used to perpetuate further discrimination of Palestinian, Arab, and pro-Palestinian students, as we saw in the disingenuous justification that was given by SUS Chancellor Rodrigues for deactivating SJP. This is only the most recent act of callous disregard for the safety and well-being of students of diverse backgrounds by UF, following years of silent obedience as the state legislature has systematically [removed](#) diversity, equity, and inclusion programming, [limited](#) access to gender-affirming healthcare, and [banned](#) the teaching of widely-accepted academic concepts that challenge white supremacy, such as critical race theory. While UF as an institution remains publicly "neutral" to these extremist policies, UF leadership at the highest level, the Board of Trustees, particularly Chair Mori Hosseini, continue to [individually finance](#) the largest political proponent of these laws, Governor Ron DeSantis.

In 2021 and 2022, [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), [B'tselem](#), and the [United Nations](#) charged Israel with apartheid and ethnic cleansing. As of November 22, over [14,000 Palestinians](#) have been murdered in Gaza since October 7, 2023, over half of which were children. [UN experts](#) have "strongly condemn[ed] Israel's indiscriminate military attacks against the already exhausted Palestinian people of Gaza." Israeli military forces have been bombing of Palestinian schools, hospitals, and civilian markets, and cutting off electricity, fuel, water, and humanitarian aid from reaching Gaza ([UN OCHA](#)). Speaking out against settler colonialism, genocide, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and war crimes is becoming synonymous with "promoting terrorism." These terms used to describe the seven-decade Israeli occupation of Palestine are not matters of opinion, and are legal terms defined by [International Humanitarian Law](#) and international governing bodies like the [United Nations](#). In 2016, the [Center for Constitutional Rights](#) argued that Israel's policies toward Palestine dictate genocide. To critically discuss these facts in a respectful manner is not and should not be synonymous with "promoting terrorism."

UF students are carrying the immense weight of human suffering with them as we watch unspeakable horrors unfold in front of us. School should be a safe place for students to learn, grow, debate, and find community. Instead, UF and the Florida state

legislature are imposing their personal opinions onto our academic community at the cost of the safety of Palestinian and Arab students. As such, UF-GAU demands:

1. UF administration and/or President Ben Sasse release a statement extending sympathy to Palestinian students impacted by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza;
2. UF maintain the registered student organization status of Students for Justice in Palestine with full privileges afforded to every other student organization;
3. UF remain neutral in the ongoing lawsuit of the state of Florida by the UF chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine; and
4. UF lobby against any further legislation that infringes on the First Amendment rights of students, such as HB 465 and SB 470.

UF-GAU is in support of:

1. An immediate permanent end to the violence in Gaza, broader Palestine, and Israel;
2. The safety and wellbeing of all UF students, and the freedom to openly express their opinions, debate, and connect with members of their cultural group without persecution;
3. The detailed documentation of any discrimination or harassment experienced by UF graduate assistants while attempting to complete their academic and employment duties, forwarded to UF-GAU for evaluation of potential contract violations; and
4. The support of professors with students directly affected by this humanitarian crisis through accommodations for courses (*e.g.*, deadline extensions, reduced penalty for missed classes) and research duties (*e.g.*, paid leave, patience towards grief, reduced work expectations) to ensure student success during this difficult time.

We also wish to uplift the following organizations as informational and community resources: the UF chapters of Jewish Voice for Peace, Islam on Campus, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Arab Student Association, as well as community group, The Solidarity Network. We want to remind graduate assistants facing immense grief that they are able to utilize the [UF Counseling and Wellness Center](#) and [TalkSpace](#) for free mental health services.

With Love and Solidarity,

Graduate Assistants United Leadership in Conjunction with Impacted Members

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GAU is the official labor union representing the approximately 4,000 teaching, research, and graduate assistants at the University of Florida. UFF, FEA, NEA, AFT, AFL-CIO. For additional information, please contact GAU's Communication Chair at communications@ufgau.org or 352-575-0366.