



[Arrest of Activist Ali Abunimah in Switzerland Highlights the Troubling Palestine Exception to Free Speech](#)

Late last week, Palestinian-American journalist Ali Abunimah was arrested by police in Switzerland where he was set to deliver a talk in Zurich – ultimately being held in prison for three days before being released to return to the United States. Activists were swift to justifiably denounce the move as a blatant violation and attack on freedom of speech, since Abunimah was detained and imprisoned solely for his advocacy of Palestinian rights. As a local Swiss human rights group also underscored, there was no valid legal basis for Abunimah’s violent abduction and arbitrary detention at the hands of authorities. Unfortunately, the incident highlights a concerning pattern, both in Europe and the United States, of attempting to suppress voices that draw attention to Israeli human rights violations and war crimes against Palestinians. There have been similar arrests and forms of censorship in various nations which demonstrate the extent of the clampdown, and what some analysts have referred to as the glaring Palestine exception to free speech.

Over the past 15 months since the onset of the Gaza War, efforts to suppress activism that is critical of Israel’s actions have shed light on the Palestine exception to free speech. Those expressing solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian rights and social justice have been targeted at an alarming level despite overwhelming evidence of Israeli human rights violations and war crimes. Many have sought to merely draw attention to this and advocate for appropriate policy changes towards Israel using freedom of speech protections that are supposed to be upheld and respected across much of Europe and the United States. Ahmad Ibsais [states](#) that the “widespread silencing of Palestinian voices” is a clear and disturbing pattern. He also highlights how much of the West emphasizes deaths when they happen to Israelis, while not providing fair context to the full scope of what is taking place. Often in Western media, Palestinian voices are heard at a fraction of the rate to pro-Israeli narratives. As Marda Dunskey, a professor at Northwestern University, [puts it](#) – this just makes it even more important to allow for these views to be heard.

Observers have commented about how sentiments sympathetic to Palestinians are being erased on social media and other untraditional but increasingly relied-upon outlets. According to a report by [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#), this is undeniable. In the month following the October 7th Hamas attacks, HRW analyzed the takedown and suppression of content on Facebook and Instagram. Out of the 1,050 instances reported, 1,049 were (peaceful and non-violent) content in support of Palestine, while only one that was removed or suppressed was pro-Israeli. One of the systemic causes of this censorship is a “Dangerous Organizations and Individuals” (DOI) [policy](#) that bars any party “that proclaims a violent mission or is engaged in violence.” What is interesting and inconsistent is that since this report was released, the International Criminal Court (ICC) found Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defense minister guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Thus, you would expect that following this ICC decision, the West would react in much the same way Meta has to Hamas. However, in the same period that Ali Abunimah was arbitrarily detained, the Swiss government welcomed Israeli President Isaac Herzog to the country – someone who has stated that “This rhetoric of ‘unaware and uninvolved’ civilians in Gaza is not true.” As such, many noted the absurdity of welcoming Herzog with open arms, while arresting and imprisoning Abunimah without cause.

It is also important to remember that there is a wide array of entities that are being affected by this [“Palestinian exception.”](#) According to The Guardian, the editor of eLife, Michael Eisen, was fired after reposting a satirical comment made by [The Onion](#) stating that “Dying Gazans criticized for not using last words to condemn Hamas.” Along with the repost, [Eisen stated](#) that the satirical news site had “more courage, insight, and moral clarity than the leaders of every academic institution.” [Other instances](#) of silencing include the author Adania Shibli’s award ceremony being postponed, as well as a smear campaign being run against U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib. Perhaps nowhere have these infringements on freedom of speech and the “Palestinian exception” been witnessed more than on college campuses. In December of 2023, [Governor Ron DeSantis](#) called on all public universities to terminate their [Students for Justice in Palestine](#) (SJP) organizations – which civil liberty groups concluded was a “clear violation of the student group’s constitutional right to free speech and association.” This is especially troubling as the [movement has not been violent](#) in any way where one could deem it a threat to society. The censoring of voices sympathetic to Palestinian rights has become more apparent, but it is not entirely new. Back in 2016, students at [Columbia Law School](#) called out the “Palestinian exception to free speech” at colleges and universities. The article acts as a forewarning to the law school community where they break down why the censoring is wrong, as well as how certain students and professors are being silenced. Additionally, just earlier this week, President Trump signed an executive order which pledged to deport non-citizen college students and others who took part in campus demonstrations. Rights groups and law experts have outlined that the new measure would violate constitutional free speech rights and therefore likely draw legal challenges if implemented, yet nevertheless, it is still deeply troubling that such a presidential directive has been issued.

Abunimah, who serves as the co-founder and executive director of the *Electronic Intifada* online news publication, recounted the alarming details of his recent personal experience in a statement upon his release. He explained how he had arrived in Switzerland last Friday for a series of events at the invitation of local organizers, and that after being questioned at the airport for over an hour and being allowed to enter the country, Abunimah was later violently arrested off the street the following day by undercover officers. Authorities accused him of “offending against Swiss law” despite not being presented with any charges, and he was questioned on Sunday morning without the presence of his lawyer. Abunimah was then repeatedly denied the ability to contact her, his family, or anyone from the outside world – proof off the bat to many that authorities clearly understood and were well aware of the illegality of their actions.