



December 8, 2025

Jay Rosselló  
Office of General Counsel  
University of Maryland  
4716 Pontiac Street, Suite 2117  
College Park, Maryland 20742

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (rossello@umd.edu)

Dear Mr. Rosselló:

FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative<sup>1</sup> is concerned by the University of Maryland's conduct charges against Riona Sheikh and Rumaysa Drissi, student journalists for UMD's independent Muslim newspaper, *Al-Hikmah News*. While FIRE appreciates that UMD is one of the few institutions in the nation whose policies earn our coveted "green light" rating, we urge you to drop charges that would sanction Sheikh and Drissi for exercising their rights as members of the student press to document newsworthy events on campus.

On October 21, UMD's chapter of Students Supporting Israel hosted an event with Israel Defense Forces soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Four protesters with signs entered the event and began chanting "Off our campus" and "Baby killers."<sup>3</sup> UMPD officers stood in front of the doorway to the event.<sup>4</sup> Sheikh and Drissi stood behind the protesters to capture video and photos of the protesters and UMPD officers.<sup>5</sup> UMPD officers told the protesters they were disrupting a university-sanctioned event and instructed them to leave, directing the protesters to back up toward the direction of where Sheikh and Drissi were standing.<sup>6</sup> Two protesters exited the building; the

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<sup>1</sup> For more than 25 years, FIRE has defended free expression on America's university campuses. You can learn more about our mission and activities at [thefire.org](https://thefire.org). FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative (SPFI) defends free press on campus by advocating for the rights of student journalists at colleges and universities across the country.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Vanessa Taft, Associate Director of Student Conduct, to Riona Sheikh, student (Oct. 28, 2025) (on file with author); letter from Taft to Rumaysa Drissi, student (Oct. 28, 2025) (on file with author); *see also* Lizzy Alspach, et. al, *UMPD detains protesters, student journalists outside event with IDF soldiers*, THE DIAMONDBACK (Oct. 22, 2025), <https://dbknews.com/2025/10/22/umpd-detains-protesters-journalists-israel-soldier-event/>. The recitation of facts here reflects our understanding of the pertinent information. We appreciate that you may have additional information and invite you to share it with us. To these ends, please find enclosed an executed privacy waiver authorizing you to share information about this matter.

<sup>3</sup> Video footage (on file with author). *See also* Letter from Taft to Sheikh, *supra* note 2.

<sup>4</sup> Video footage, *supra* note 3.

<sup>5</sup> Video footage, *supra* note 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

other protesters, along with Sheikh and Drissi, remained.<sup>7</sup> Sheikh continued to film from a position a few steps behind the protesters, while Drissi stood further down the hallway and took photos.<sup>8</sup>

UMPD then detained Sheikh and Drissi, as well as the two protesters.<sup>9</sup> During this period, Sheikh and Drissi repeatedly stated they were student journalists, though they did not provide university identification upon request.<sup>10</sup> (UMPD did not ask for media credentials from other *Diamondback* journalists, who also covered the protest inside Jimenez Hall.<sup>11</sup>) Footage shows a UMPD officer claiming Sheikh was “disrupting the event.”<sup>12</sup> When Sheikh proceeded to reiterate that she was a student journalist, the officer responded, “That doesn’t mean anything. You were screaming and disrupting the event.”<sup>13</sup> Yet footage shows neither Sheikh nor Drissi shouting as they documented the interaction between protesters and university police.<sup>14</sup>

On November 17, Associate Director of Student Conduct Vanessa Taft informed Sheikh and Drissi that they face charges, in part, of “[i]ntentionally and substantially interfering with the lawful freedom of expression of others” and “[e]ngaging in disorderly or disruptive action that interferes with University or community activities, including but not limited to studying, teaching, research, and University administration.”<sup>15</sup> Sheikh’s disciplinary hearing is scheduled for December 15, and Drissi’s is scheduled for December 22.

The First Amendment applies with full force to UMD’s actions,<sup>16</sup> including its pursuit of disciplinary sanctions.<sup>17</sup> And, of course, the First Amendment right of the press to gather information is long-established.<sup>18</sup> The press, including the student press, acts as “surrogates for the public” in keeping a watchful eye on the actions of government agents, such as police, in

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Taft to Sheikh, *supra* note 2; video footage, *supra* note 3.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Taft to Sheikh, *supra* note 2; video footage, *supra* note 3.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Taft to Sheikh, *supra* note 2.

<sup>10</sup> Video footage, *supra* note 3.

<sup>11</sup> Alspach, *THE DIAMONDBACK*, *supra* note 2. (“The anonymous source told The Diamondback they were never asked to provide media credentials, but UMPD officers asked for a university ID, which they did not provide. They also said they were not asked what media organization they were with. Reporters for The Diamondback took videos and photos as the detainment continued on Tuesday and were not asked for their credentials.”).

<sup>12</sup> Video footage, *supra* note 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* Further, in a statement to *The Diamondback*, Students Supporting Israel President Uriel Appel said, “In the grand scheme of things, [the protesters] accomplished absolutely nothing. *They didn’t even disrupt the event.*” Alspach, *THE DIAMONDBACK*, *supra* note 2 (emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> Notice of Charges from Taft to Sheikh (Nov. 20, 2025) (on file with author). Sheikh and Drissi received other charges, but those charges fall outside of FIRE’s mission; as such, we are addressing those pertaining to Sheikh and Drissi’s First Amendment rights.

<sup>16</sup> *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972) (“[T]he precedents of this Court leave no room for the view that, because of the acknowledged need for order, First Amendment protections should apply with less force on college campuses than in the community at large. Quite to the contrary, ‘the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.’”) (internal citation omitted).

<sup>17</sup> *Papish v. Bd. of Curators of the Univ. of Mo.*, 410 U.S. 667, 667–68 (1973).

<sup>18</sup> See *Branzburg v. Hayes*, 408 U.S. 665, 681 (1972).

their communities.<sup>19</sup> The Department of Justice has therefore correctly noted that “blanket enforcement of dispersal orders and curfews against press violates [the First Amendment] because they foreclose the press from reporting about what happens after the dispersal or curfew is issued, including how police enforce those orders.”<sup>20</sup> And the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland has recognized the “First Amendment right to record police officers as they carry out their public duties,”<sup>21</sup> including in private venues, when officers have no reasonable expectation of privacy.<sup>22</sup>

Both an anti-IDF protest taking place on campus and the police response to it are newsworthy events. As reporters, Sheikh and Drissi most certainly had a right to record the interactions between UMPD and protesters as part of their effort to disseminate news and information regarding an event that sparked interest within the campus community. Unfortunately, they were instead lumped in with the protesters and detained, substantially burdening their ability to gather news and inform *Al-Hikmah News* readers about protests happening directly outside the event.

As Sheikh and Drissi’s newsgathering was protected by the First Amendment,<sup>23</sup> UMD cannot justify continuing to investigate their protected expression.<sup>24</sup> This holds even if the ultimate outcome of the disciplinary proceedings is to clear Sheikh and Drissi, as the question is not whether formal punishment is eventually meted out, but whether the institution’s actions are “likely to deter a person of ordinary firmness from the exercise of First Amendment rights.”<sup>25</sup> As a result of their detention and these proceedings, Sheikh, Drissi, and other student journalists are likely to be deterred from covering protests of controversial speaking engagements for fear of once again being investigated for interference and disruption violations. While it is again worth noting that the hosts of this event publicly stated that no disruption occurred,<sup>26</sup> regardless of whether the *protesters* were disruptive, *journalists* documenting the protest should not be punished for the protesters’ actions.

Nor may UMD sanction Sheikh or Drissi for recording and taking photographs of the protesters without running afoul of its First Amendment obligations. These acts were protected and nondisruptive, and finding otherwise will only compound the chilling effect spurred by these investigations. Sanctioning Sheikh and Drissi for “interfering” or “disrupting” a university

<sup>19</sup> *Richmond Newspapers v. Virginia*, 448 U.S. 555, 573 (1980).

<sup>20</sup> *Investigation of the City of Minneapolis and the Minneapolis Police Department*, Findings, C. MPD Violates People’s First Amendment Rights, 2. MPD Retaliates Against Journalists and Unlawfully Restricts Their Access During Protests, U.S. DEP’T OF JUST. C.R. DIV. AND U.S. ATT’YS OFF. DIST. OF MINN. DIV., 51 (June 16, 2023), [https://www.justice.gov/d9/press-releases/attachments/2023/06/16/minneapolis\\_findings\\_report\\_2023.06.15\\_0.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/d9/press-releases/attachments/2023/06/16/minneapolis_findings_report_2023.06.15_0.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/3B74-P96M>].

<sup>21</sup> *Garcia v. Montgomery Cty, Md.*, 145 F. Supp. 3d 492, 509 (D. Md. 2015).

<sup>22</sup> *Mills v. PPE Casinos Resorts Md., LLC*, 2017 WL 18662474, at \*6 (D. Md. May 8, 2017) (recognizing the right to record law enforcement in a private casino).

<sup>23</sup> *See Garcia*, 145 F. Supp. 3d at 509; *see also Mills*, 2017 WL 18662474, at \*6.

<sup>24</sup> *See People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. v. N.C. Farm Bureau Fed’n*, 60 F.4th 815, 829 (4th Cir. 2023) (“If the First Amendment has any force, such ‘creation’ of information demands as much protection as its ‘dissemination.’”).

<sup>25</sup> *Abbott v. Pastides*, 900 F. 3d 160, 169 (4th Cir. 2018) (internal citation omitted).

<sup>26</sup> Alspach, THE DIAMONDBACK, *supra* note 2.

event merely for covering protesters' reactions to it would set a dangerous precedent, signaling to students that journalists do their work only at the sufferance of those in power.

Sheikh and Drissi's newsgathering is fully protected by the First Amendment, and as such, they should not be facing disciplinary proceedings charging them with interference or disruption. That the disciplinary process continues to move forward raises concerns about UMD's commitment to a free student press. We request a substantive response to this letter no later than December 18, confirming UMD will drop the interference and disruption charges against Sheikh and Drissi, and commit to protecting the student press.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Marie McMullan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Marie" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "McMullan".

Marie McMullan  
Student Press Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: James Bond, Director of Student Conduct  
Vanessa Taft, Associate Director of Student Conduct

Encl.