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Boston Area Students Against Genocide: Report from the Weekend of April 26



Cops on the campus of Northeastern University, Boston.

When I strolled into Harvard Yard around 6:00 pm on Friday, a Shabbat service was taking place in the student encampment for Palestine. Dozens of young people were seated in a large circle on the lawn, many wearing keffiyehs, a few wearing kippahs, and at least one wearing both. A guitar player strummed and led the circle in a Yiddish song while campers nearby talked in small groups, or stared at laptops, perhaps preparing for finals. Three police SUVs were parked in sight of the camp on the centuries-old Yard, and a keffiyeh was tied around the sculpted head of the university's namesake, John Harvard.

The encampment—or “the Liberated Zone,” as a big banner proclaimed it—now consisted of more than 40 tents. It had grown since Wednesday, when it was assembled by surprise during

a noon rally on the last day of classes. Video of the moment shows students suddenly dashing onto the grass with backpacks, tarps, and bags to begin erecting tents while supporters cheer. I had come to observe the camp and speak with Lea Kayali, a campus organizer and Palestinian American in her third year at Harvard Law School. Her family is from Jaffa and the West Bank, and the bombardment of Gaza has hit her hard. “I wake up and read the names of the dead,” she said, “the places that have been destroyed. Each headline is more gutting than the last.” Even Kayali’s cousins in the West Bank, whom she said don’t leave their houses for fear of being attacked by settlers or arrested, always remind her: “Keep eyes on Gaza.”

Though the devastation of Gaza can feel distant in the US, according to Kayali it is not. This is the point being made by student protesters at Harvard, Columbia University (where an encampment, and its police suppression, first made headlines), and other campuses across the country. Student demands include disclosure of investments in Israeli companies and others profiting from the attack on and occupation of Palestine, and divestment from those companies.

Kayali has been heartened by the enthusiasm of students new to the movement. “It’s been activating for many on campus,” she said, emphasizing the collective labor the camp requires. Students coordinate food and organize political programming, like a teach-in on the history of student activism. The camp, she said, “is an exemplar of community care, mutual aid.”

The moment the tents popped up, Kayali said, “the only sound you could hear was cheering. And this was from students who were just walking through the Yard!” Arabic students began to dance the *dabke*, a Palestinian folk dance, in a huge circle after the tents were raised. “Seeing a revolutionary joy that has really been absent the last seven months gave me more assurance that we can build the world we want,” she added. (When I left her, Kayali got up to help a couple of Black students practicing the steps to the *dabke*.)

Another inspiring moment for Kayali came Thursday during a visit to the encampment at Northeastern University, across the Charles River in Boston. There, the camp was encircled by a large ring of Boston police in riot gear, with helmets and zip tie handcuffs. But the activists stood in a smaller circle around the tents, linking arms and standing their ground. For about 20 minutes, she said, there was an intense stand-off. And then the police backed off.

Kayali’s visit to Northeastern typifies the supportive relationship among area encampments, as many student activists communicate across campuses. For instance, a speaker at a pro-Palestinian rally this week at Berklee College of Music mentioned spending time at the

Emerson College encampment before it was violently broken up by police and over 100 arrests were made. That Berklee rally ended with a march to join the Northeastern encampment.

Though the police pressure on Northeastern dissipated Thursday without mass arrests, early Saturday morning the school administration followed through on their threats to break up the camp. This time, Northeastern police, the Boston police, and Massachusetts state troopers detained over 100 students, arresting those who could not or would not produce Northeastern IDs. The tents and other camp equipment were thrown into moving trucks.

I saw one of these moving trucks leaving as I entered the Northeastern campus Saturday morning around 10am. Where the camp had been was an unbroken green expanse, empty of tents and students, surrounded by metal barricades. Nearby, a group of students faced some police officers and chanted “Israel bombs, NEU pays! How many kids did you kill today?”

A Northeastern student on the scene, senior Sarah Barber, told me that Northeastern’s ties to the defense industry, particularly Raytheon, had long been a subject of debate on campus. Even when she was a freshman, there were posters in common spaces that said “Pull out of Raytheon.” In fact, in 2023 the Student Government Association voted to call on school administration to end contracts with private military companies.

Barber said she was sympathetic to the camp, but also worried that if she joined, the university might withhold her diploma. She saw many on campus who were supportive of the encampment and the Palestinian cause, but others were hostile, and tempers sometimes ran high. Barber said, “I once walked by a girl in a hijab being screamed at by people. I asked if she was okay, and she said, ‘They just started screaming at me about Gaza.’”

The administration’s excuse for breaking up the camp was that it included “professional protesters” from outside, and that antisemitic chants had been heard, including “Kill the Jews.” But as another pro-Palestinian student on the scene, Alina Caudle, pointed out, that phrase was actually yelled by a counter-protester Friday night at the camp. In video of the incident, a young man draped in an Israeli flag shouted, “Kill the Jews! Anybody on board? That’s what you chanted for!” Pro-Palestinian students can then be heard shouting him down. I stopped by the MIT encampment on Sunday, a warm spring day. Students talked, snacked, worked on laptops, or spoke to visitors. While I was there, a couple of mothers from Lexington came to ask how they could help, and a high school student took some pictures. Seated on a lawn chair in the sun, I spoke for over an hour to Zeno (who uses just his last name), a graduate student at MIT’s Sloan School of Management—Netanyahu’s alma mater.

Zeno, a former captain in the Air Force, had been active in the Black Graduate Students Association (BGSA) before October 7. He explained, “We were doing a lot of group studies on different liberation movements. My family’s Black American and my mother’s Puerto Rican—through that side there’s indigenous Taino—so being Black and indigenous, I know oppressed populations when I see them.”

Groups that Zeno organized with demonstrated for a ceasefire and held a teach-in about Black and Palestinian solidarity. MIT Graduates for Palestine began researching and publishing about MIT’s ties to the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Student groups also created referenda calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to MIT’s “special relationship” with the Israeli ministry; a vote by MIT undergraduates resulted in 63% support for such a resolution, and MIT graduate students voted 70% in favor.

“One of the more concerning pieces of research,” Zeno said, “involves autonomous robotic swarms. Imagine quadcopter drones being AI-driven rather than piloted, and imagine if they could swarm together. AI built by Zionists—how dangerous would that be? Sci-fi kind of stuff.”

When the police cracked down at Columbia, MIT students quickly came together on the night of Sunday, April 21, to set up tents. Zeno said it garnered a lot of support from other students and faculty.

He explained, “It’s a hearts and minds campaign—but first hearts. When you put yourself on the line, risking arrest, risking your career, that inspires people. We get more and more courage. Someone might say, ‘I was nervous about what my lab might think of me,’ but now they’re spending the night out here. So every day we’re growing the community.”

Zeno understands the risks better than many. When the Emerson College encampment was threatened late Wednesday night, he and about ten other MIT students answered a call for support and crossed the Charles River to join the Emerson activists.

Zeno said, “The state troopers pulled up with lots of cars, zip ties, face shields, very militarized.” The MIT students were chanting when confronted by a policeman, who said they wouldn’t be arrested if they left immediately. “We didn’t reply except to start chanting ‘Free Palestine,’ at which point the cops got...agitated.”

He said his face was slammed against the wall, and then he was slammed against the hood of the police car. “I told the cop, I’m a disabled veteran, I have an autoimmune disorder that makes my fascia tight, so you have to be careful how you’re cuffing me. My arms don’t move that far up my back! But he kept trying to force them farther up.” According to Zeno, his friend, a Black Muslim, had his head banged on the ground, resulting in a concussion.

Despite this and other injuries to protesters, police initially claimed the only injuries were to officers.

Just as the crackdown at Columbia begot more college encampments, though, this police violence only increased students' solidarity. Zeno described how, as he was being cuffed with his face against the hood of the car, he was looking into the eyes of another MIT student being cuffed on the other side of the car. Laughing, he said, "She was newer to the camp, I hadn't even talked to her yet, but we trauma-bonded."

When I ask about how solidarity with Palestine connects to other causes, Zeno warms to his topic. He talks about white supremacy, corruption in the military, the two-party system, the working class, climate change, while a student in a colorful crocheted kipah with a Star of David necklace steps closer and starts nodding. "I see vets unhoused and people walking over them! This is a full-on dystopia and this is not how society is supposed to function. And then I come here and see people helping each other, pooling their resources, and not to add to their 401k."

He pauses. "We could be so much better. We have the imagination to build a better society, and it's people like this administration who can't see it."

His words reminded me of the Shabbat service I'd heard two days before at Harvard. Someone was unfolding the passage where the prophet Moses asks to see the face of God. They said, "Moses, after fleeing persecution, dares to ask for the unimaginable. When I think of my ancestors, I think of his courage in asking this. But the difference is, what we are asking for is not unimaginable. We are imagining it here together as one. Shabbat Shalom!"

In the background, I could see Kayali still practicing the *dabke*. She had been joined by a couple more people who jumped and wheeled together, the circle widening as I walked away.

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