



BUT FIRST ...

## The View from Here

Scenes from the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University

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13:12



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READING TIME: 8 MINUTES



“Red? Yellow? Green?” a student asks me at the entrance to the Gaza Solidarity Encampment. The colors categorize students by the level of risk they are willing to take, red being the highest.

“J-school,” I say, identifying myself as a Columbia Journalism School student.

“Oh! Welcome! We’re glad you’re here,” she says, and motions to a large poster, decorated with hearts, labeled “Community Guidelines.”

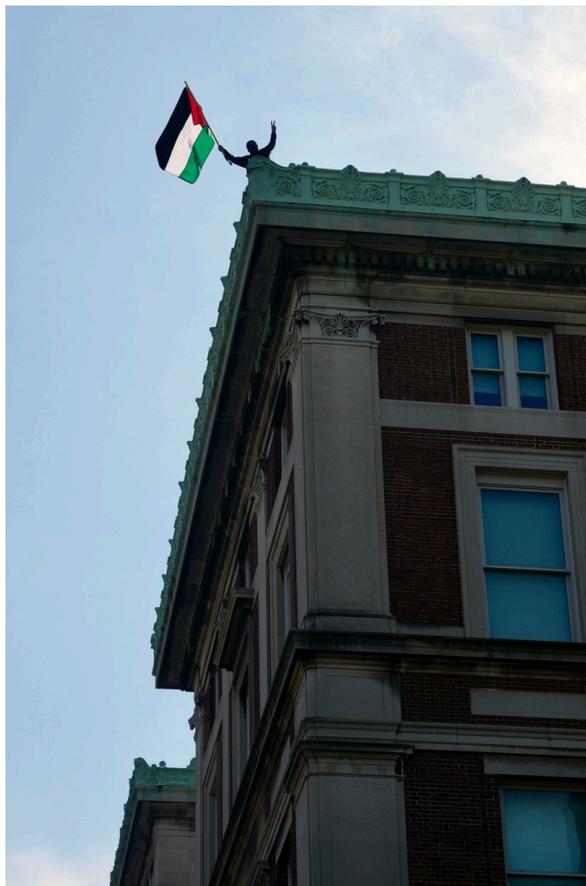
The list begins with a commitment to “remain grounded” in “solidarity with the Palestinian people” and asks students to assume “best intentions,” to grant “ourselves and others grace,” to “respect personal boundaries,” and not to litter.

Rule 10: “Do not engage with counter-protesters.”

While some students in the encampment are Jewish and hold Passover meals together, other Jewish students at Columbia have documented acts of harassment and violence committed against them.

Melissa Saidak, a Jewish graduate student in the School of Social Work, tells me she was walking past the encampment wearing a Star of David when a woman screamed at her, calling her a Zionist and a murderer.

Saidak wasn't trying to engage the protesters, she says. "I'm just trying to exist."



A student waves a Palestinian flag on the roof of Hamilton Hall.

The protests at Columbia began shortly after Hamas attacked Israel on October 7. Students built the first pro-Palestine encampment on April 17, the same day Columbia president Nemat Shafik testified before Congress about the university's response to allegations of anti-Semitism.

School administrators authorized the New York City Police Department to arrest more than 100 students at the encampment on April 18.

Maryam Alwan, a 21-year-old comparative-literature and English-studies student, was among those arrested and suspended.

"I remember as soon as I got out of jail, the first thing everyone asked was 'Are you O.K.?', and the second thing was 'Did you know that they took over the second lawn?'" she says.

Students built a new encampment, where Alwan has lived for almost two weeks, and which has inspired hundreds more at college campuses across the U.S. and beyond.

Protesters eat meals donated by supporters outside campus, use the bathrooms in nearby campus buildings, and shower at the university gym. As in Columbia's student body as a whole, female students outnumber male students. The vast majority wear face masks of one kind or another.

On April 23, after six days of failed negotiations, administrators demand that students leave by midnight. “URGENT ACTION CALL,” blares a notice on the encampment’s Telegram channel at 10:30 P.M. A news helicopter hovers above my off-campus apartment.

I pull on a hoodie, stuff my ID, notebook, and a battery pack into the pocket, and rush back to campus, where thousands of student protesters have gathered.

They have 15 minutes to clear the encampment.

Students carry tents on their backs, move tarps in pairs, and stand on benches to take down banners and signs.

END THE SIEGE ON GAZA NOW, reads one.

NERDS FOR PALESTINE, reads another.

A man with a blue handkerchief over his face places a hastily made cardboard sign in a hedgerow. PRO-PALESTINE ANTI-HATE, it reads. PRO-LIBERATION ≠ ANTI-SEMITISM.

“Six minutes!” a student shouts as others pile the final remains of the encampment on a neighboring lawn.

About 100 student protesters cluster in formation at midnight.

And nothing happens.

“Get back on the lawn!” a student announces at 12:04 A.M.

The deadline has been extended to 8:00 A.M.

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The next afternoon, a Columbia student puts the final touches on a sheet of white canvas on the South Lawn. She raises herself onto her knees to inspect her work.

INTIFADA, it reads.

“To me, that word is trauma,” says Ariana Pinsker-Lehrer, a Jewish Israeli student. “It’s buses blowing up. It’s coffee shops blowing up. It’s violence that is targeted toward civilians.”

A GoFundMe started in January has raised more than \$8,000, which is now being used to pay for food and other necessities at the encampment. A community pantry is stocked with over-the-counter medication, sunscreen, and personal-care products.

Students purchase their tents online or bring them from home. The encampment includes tents for peer support, first aid, and a “People’s Library.”

For two weeks, the encampment largely remains calm, with undercurrents of tension. Negotiations are stalled.

Students attend self-defense and mass-blockade trainings, “healing circles,” an interfaith sermon, and teach-ins on topics such as anti-Semitism, prison abolition, and imperialism. Most evenings, protesters listen to stories and poems from Palestinian students.

Decisions are made, or not, after lengthy discussions, by consensus at daily assemblies. During periodic cleanup times, protesters are asked to pick up 10 pieces of trash each.



A student paints a banner reading INTIFADA at the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University.

“Mike check!” shouts a student, unamplified, from the food tents after dinner on April 24.

*“Mike check!”* the students who are able to hear shout back, to carry the message to the edges of the encampment.

“If you—” the student shouts.

*“If you—”* the crowd shouts back.

“Would like to—”

*“Would like to—”*

“Wash dishes—”

*“Wash dishes—”*

“Please come to the supply tent to help us.”

*“Please come to the supply tent to help us.”*

A student with extended family in the West Bank who asks not to be identified says his parents in the U.S. are worried about his safety.

“It’s so funny because my parents will call almost every day, and they’ll say, ‘Oh, my God, are you O.K.?’” he says. “And it really is just a bunch of nerds camping. Most of us are working on finals.”

But the small portion of students who are willing to face off with law enforcement are preparing for battle.

Pamphlets set out on tarps include “Lessons on Taking the School,” about the California State Polytechnic University at Humboldt student occupation on April 22, and “A Communique on Sabotaging Zionist Infrastructure: Shutting Down the Friends of the IDF Gala” in San Carlos, California, this past November, which refers to Friends of the Israel Defense Forces as “fascist scum.”

On the morning of April 29, school administrators pass out four-page letters describing an “alternative resolution,” allowing the students to avoid suspension if they agree to disciplinary probation, leave the encampment, identify themselves to security, and sign before 2:00 P.M. Most of the letters end up in the trash.

Students schedule a rally for 1:00 P.M. Hundreds of protesters and supporting faculty members march around the encampment.

Around 12:30 A.M., the students occupy Hamilton Hall. The INTIFADA banner is unfurled from an upper story of the building.

The atmosphere on April 30 is charged, like a live wire. Everybody knows that something is about to happen, but not what or when.

At 6:00 P.M., I watch from a window on the third floor of Pulitzer Hall, the journalism building, as N.Y.P.D. officers form a wide perimeter with barricades at the Broadway entrance to Columbia. Hundreds of protesters are at the gates, waving Palestinian flags and chanting, “Shut it down!”

I count the N.Y.P.D. vans: 36, plus two ambulances.

As the sun goes down, the students chant, “We will honor all our martyrs! All the children, sons and daughters!”

A student is perched on the ledge of Hamilton’s second story to hoist food and supplies, ferried in from outside the gates, in a milk crate from the ground with a pulley system.

During a break in the chants, a student demonstrator carrying a bag asks, “Did anyone request a vape?”

At 8:20 P.M., the Columbia Emergency Management Operations Team sends an e-mail to students. “Shelter in place,” it reads. “Non-compliance may result in disciplinary action.”

Students inside Hamilton prepare for a police surge.

Sueda Polat opens her phone to see an image of hundreds of officers in riot gear preparing for a surge through the gates.

“Just like a tree that’s planted by the water, we shall not be moved,” the students sing.

Polat, a graduate student studying human rights, picks up a loudspeaker with tears on her face just after 9:00 P.M.

“They would not have called the police on us, they would not have used the tools of state oppression, if we had not been successful, if we did not make them shake in their boots,” she shouts, her voice straining.

“They’re afraid! They’re more afraid than we will ever be!” She holds the loudspeaker up to amplify the students’ singing.

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**Around 12:30 A.M., the students occupy Hamilton Hall. The INTIFADA banner is unfurled from the top of the building.**

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A few minutes after 9:00 P.M., N.Y.P.D. officers in riot gear flood through the gates and down the pathways, ordering the students to back up.

“Just like a tree that’s planted by the water, we shall not be moved,” the protesters outside Hamilton sing to a steady drumbeat.

“N.Y.P.D., K.K.K., I.O.F., you’re all the same!” they shout, referring to the Israeli Occupation Forces.

Officers holding batons parallel to the ground tell students to clear the path. Most students and journalists are forced out the gates, onto the street.



After the encampment had been dismantled, all that remained were squares of discolored grass.

“Let’s go!” one officer shouts.

“N.Y.P.D., shame on you!” a student yells.

“Inside the building. Inside the building. Move, move, move,” another officer says, ordering us into the lobby of John Jay Hall, a dorm building.

“Fuck you!” a student shouts, as police close the doors and secure them with batons.

“Disclose! Divest! We will not stop, we will not rest!” the protesters shout.

“N.Y.P.D. is locking us into a building!” another student says, followed by calls of “Shame!” while another student screams about “genocide.”

I look from student to student, searching for another STUDENT PRESS sign among the kaffiyehs, and spot Yasmeeen Altaji, a fellow student from the Journalism School’s master-of-arts program.

“Let’s stay together,” we say in unison.

Outside the doors, officers separate students locking arms in front of Hamilton Hall. Underclassmen bear witness from their dorm windows.

One video captures a student rolling down the steps, limp, and another student rushing to their side.

Inside John Jay Hall, a protester shoots a film through a window of an N.Y.P.D. officer who’s texting.

“Did they fight?” reads a message on the officer’s phone.

“Nope,” the officer texts back. “Thought we fuckong [*sic*] shot someone.”

The Manhattan district attorney later says in a statement that an officer mistakenly fired a gun inside Hamilton Hall, the bullet striking a wall and not causing any injuries.

Many of the students in John Jay Hall are protesters, some are student journalists, and others are underclassmen caught in the middle. A young student hugs her knees to her chest, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling.

After about two hours, three protesters kick at the doors, demanding to see the officers’ badge numbers and taunting them.

A student unaffiliated with the protesters sits on the floor against the wall and rolls her eyes. “Please, shut the fuck up,” she says.

A campus security guard tries to calm the students.

“They hurt my friends!” one says. “I don’t trust them. So for you to say they’re here for my safety, that doesn’t mean anything to me.”

The guard puts up her hands and walks away.

The security guards allow students into the lounge, where a few shimmy out the windows and onto the sidewalk, about six feet below. The fireplace in the lounge is etched with a message: “Hold fast to the spirit of youth. Let years to come do what they may.”

After three hours, officers permit the students in John Jay Hall to leave in pairs.

Hamilton Hall has been cordoned off by the N.Y.P.D. as a crime scene, with tape around the perimeter.

On the South Lawn, officers are stuffing what’s left of the now empty encampment in black plastic trash bags, leaving only squares of discolored grass.

A few stray Palestinian flags remain on the lawn the next day, along with a red plastic heart reading “Love.”

The school announces that police will remain until May 17, two days after graduation. Campus is on lockdown, closed to most students, for the final days of classes.

On May 6, the school cancels its main commencement ceremony, scheduled for May 15. ©

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