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Did a Jewish nonprofit accidentally cause Michigan to drop charges against pro-Palestinian activists?

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said a letter supporting her from a local group had undercut the case.

By [Ben Sales](#) May 5, 2025



Protesters at the pro-Palestinian encampment at the University of Michigan, May 13, 2024, in Ann Arbor. (Adam J. Dewey/Anadolu via Getty Images)

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel unexpectedly dropped charges against seven pro-Palestinian student protesters, suggesting that an improper statement from a Jewish group motivated her decision.

Nessel brought the felony and misdemeanor charges in September against the protesters, who had participated in the University of Michigan's encampment last May. They stood accused of obstructing police and trespassing.

Critics, including Palestinian-American Michigan Rep. Rashida Tlaib, said Nessel brought the case because of "bias." [Nessel, who is Jewish, responded that Tlaib's claims were "antisemitic and wrong,"](#) but the criticism persisted. Last month, lawyers for some of the defendants called on Nessel to recuse herself from the case.

"It's our position that either the bias or the appearance of it is enough to merit recusal because the public has got to have faith that prosecutors are acting in the best interests of

justice and are treating individuals fairly,” said one of the defense lawyers, Jamil Khuja, [according to Michigan Public](#).

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Ann Arbor aimed to rebut those accusations when it issued a statement supporting Nessel last Friday.

“If it were successful, this would mark the first time a prosecutor would be disqualified from prosecuting a case based on perceived bias due to their religious faith,” said the statement from the JCRC, which is an arm of the local Jewish federation. “The notion that AG Nessel is biased against Muslims and Americans of Arab descent is unfounded and deeply offensive.”

If the statement aimed to encourage the case to press forward, it appears to have had the opposite effect.

On Monday, Nessel [said in a statement](#) that she had filed the right charges, “and believe, based on the evidence, a reasonable jury would find the defendants guilty of the crimes alleged.” But she also said that the case had engendered a “circus-like atmosphere” and did not believe that pressing the case would be “a prudent use of my department’s resources.”

She suggested that the JCRC statement was part of the reason she was dropping the charges.

“The motion for recusal has been a diversionary tactic which has only served to further delay the proceedings,” she said. “And now, we have learned that a public statement in support of my office from a local non-profit has been directly communicated to the Court.”

She continued, “The impropriety of this action has led us to the difficult decision to drop these charges.”

While Nessel didn’t directly name the JCRC or Jewish federation, federation CEO Eileen Freed believes Nessel was referring to her group. She called the fallout from the statement a “misunderstanding” — and said a logistical error may be to blame for why the statement helped quash the case.

Freed said she believed Nessel would have been aware that the statement went out. As a “for your information,” she said, the federation also sent the statement to the court. But it may have been sent to the wrong person, Freed said.

“The public statement was intended to be shared with the court’s public information officer and not a court administrator, and was not intended to be turned into an official court document,” she said in an interview.

She added that she does not know in what capacity the court viewed the document, but said, “I think the fact that it was misinterpreted in that way created a misunderstanding that would have perhaps continued to detract from the case.”

Freed said her organization has not heard from Nessel’s office since making the statement. She said she is now discussing the issue with her board and “clarifying our intent, which was not to communicate with the judge nor to influence the court.”

The result of the chain of events is that, at a time when the Trump administration has cracked down on campus pro-Palestinian activism nationwide — and shortly after federal agents [raided homes in Michigan while investigating pro-Palestinian vandalism](#) — seven protesters facing state-level prosecution have evaded any penalty.

One of the defendants, Samantha Lewis, called it a “great day,” and took a smiling photo with her co-defendants at the courthouse, [according to the Detroit Free Press](#).

Tlaib likewise celebrated the outcome. “Good news for our university student communities!” she [tweeted](#). “Our First Amendment rights should never be criminalized. Speaking up against genocide should be lifted up, not slammed with felony charges. Palestinians deserve safety + dignity.”

But Freed says she doesn’t regret making the statement in Nessel’s defense — even though she wishes the students had been prosecuted.

“I regret that the circumstances have resulted in them dropping the case, but I don’t regret that we did the statement,” she said. “I think it was important. Nobody else was speaking out about a potential dangerous precedent of removing somebody from the case because of their identity.”