

Monday, February 24, 2025



Dear Committee Members,

I am submitting this testimony as a member of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) Baltimore, is a national grassroots Jewish organization in support of Palestinian rights with over 10,000 supporters in Maryland, as well as chapters in Baltimore, the DC Metro area, and at University of Maryland College Park. I am a resident of Baltimore City and District 41. I am testifying in **opposition** to **SB0709 "Criminal Law - Masked Intimidation - Prohibition"**.

JVP leaders and members alike in Maryland strongly oppose this bill. While we of course oppose harassment and intimidation, this bill could be exploited as a blanket prohibition on wearing masks at protests and to punish protesters for disfavored speech. As such, it directly undermines the rights of individuals to peacefully assemble and express their views, particularly in contexts where they may need protection from respiratory illness, doxxing, harassment, or violence themselves.

The American Civil Liberties Union has opposed mask bans such as this. The prohibition of masks at protests could result in a chilling effect on free speech. Individuals may feel discouraged from participating in political demonstrations if they believe their identities will be exposed by state or private actors seeking to quash their political opinions, leading to a reduction in diverse voices and perspectives in public discourse.

In recent months, many peaceful activists and protestors, including many Jews in support of Palestinian rights, have faced severe repercussions for their participation in demonstrations, including doxxing—where personal information is shared publicly to incite harassment and in some cases death threats.

As stated by the ACLU, “At a time when both public and private actors are increasingly turning to invasive surveillance technologies to identify protesters, mask-wearing is an important way for us to safeguard our right to speak out on issues of public concern.”

This bill is also deeply ableist and a threat to public health. Although the bill technically permits masks for health or religious reasons, it's unclear how protesters who are wearing masks for these reasons will be able to prove that to police officers at a protest, putting marginalized people especially at risk and endangering the public at large in a world where easily communicable viruses still present a serious public health risk.

Masking is an important public health measure and people's decisions to mask in order to protect themselves and those in their community should be between them and their medical care teams. Police at a protest are unqualified to assess health concerns, and the requirement of individuals to provide private health information to officers to justify wearing masks for health reasons is an outrageous and inappropriate invasion of individuals' privacy.

It's clear that the true intent of this bill is not public safety, but oppressing freedom of speech and increasing the vulnerability of people willing to exercise their freedoms of speech and peaceful assembly. This bill's sponsors have been open about their intent to target speech critical of the State of Israel, describing it bill as a response to protests against Israel's genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

Finally, Maryland already has laws in place to address harassment and intimidation. Interpreting this bill as charitably as possible, it would therefore at best be redundant rather than effectively addressing the underlying issues of violence and intimidation.

We believe this bill **does not protect the Jewish community**. Instead, we believe it **actively endangers us and our allies**. It is for all these reasons that I am encouraging you to **oppose** to **SB0709 “Criminal Law - Masked Intimidation - Prohibition”**.

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dr. Katherine Blaha
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