

In Michigan, Boston and elsewhere, pro-Palestinian protesters assert themselves at college graduations

In all cases, the commencement ceremonies went on as scheduled

By [Philissa Cramer](#) May 6, 2024



Salma Hamamy carries a Palestinian flag during a pro-Palestinian protest during the University of Michigan's commencement ceremony on May 4, 2024 at Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, Michigan. (Nic Antaya/Getty Images)

[\(JTA\)](#) — Dozens of students unfurled Palestinian flags and banners at the main commencement ceremony of the University of Michigan.

A single student staged a provocative demonstration during a ceremony at Northeastern University, raising hands stained with red paint as a symbol of violence in Gaza. And a Palestinian student speaker used her speech to lambaste Israel's war against Hamas at the University of Toledo.

Such were the disruptions during the first major weekend of graduation ceremonies to take place amid a sweeping pro-Palestinian protest movement

on college campuses across the United States. In each case, graduation ceremonies went on as planned.

But the handful of dramatic but brief interruptions that took place over the weekend offer concrete examples of what kinds of protests schools might expect over the next several weeks, as thousands of colleges and universities hold their annual commencement exercises.

Pro-Israel demonstrations were also visible on many campuses, with some students decorating their caps with the Israeli flag and, at the University of Michigan, an airplane trailing a pro-Israel banner above the ceremony.

Several schools, [including Columbia University](#), cited upcoming commencements as a reason to clear out pro-Palestinian protest encampments, saying that students and families deserve a ceremony free from interruption. One, the University of Southern California, [canceled its main ceremony](#). That decision had come after it had selected a pro-Palestinian valedictorian, then barred her from speaking following what it said was pressure from Jewish critics.

Schools had planned for potential interruptions, training volunteers on how to redirect protesters and reiterating rules to students and guests ahead of time.



Michigan, which enrolls many students from Palestinian-American communities in the Detroit area, experienced the biggest protest when dozens of students unfurled large Palestinian flags and marched toward the stage. [According to The New York Times](#), they chanted, “Regents, regents, you can’t hide! You are funding genocide!” The public university is governed by a board of regents.

The disruption took place during a speech by Carlos Del Toro, secretary of the U.S. Navy, the Detroit Free Press [reported](#). “It is indeed these young men and women who will protect the freedoms that we so cherish as Americans in our Constitution of the United States, which includes the right to protest peacefully,” he said, according to the report, which said the protest ended without any arrests.

One person was arrested as they ran up to the stage in protest during Northeastern’s commencement at Fenway Park in Boston on Sunday, according to [local news reports](#). At a different Northeastern ceremony the previous day, a graduate student had doused himself in red paint in an act of pro-Palestinian protest — an event that was captured on a university

livestream. The Northeastern administration later edited that segment of the video out of the recording it posted online.

“The disruptive stunt by one student at a college ceremony was upsetting to everyone who attended the event,” it said in a statement. “Out of respect for members of our community, we will not amplify this disgraceful behavior by making it available online.”

At the University of Toledo, the student speaker at the graduate school ceremony was Maha Zeidan, a graduating law student and the president of the graduate student association. She took the stage wearing a keffiyeh hijab and a Palestinian flag stole over her black graduation robe, then delivered a speech that outlined a litany of offenses that she said Israel had committed in Gaza. She drew a link between U.S. spending on Israel and poor health care outcomes in the United States.

“Although today is a day of happiness and accomplishments, this is a difficult reality we must acknowledge as we proceed to the next chapter of our lives,” said Zeidan, who said she was born in Palestine, according to a recording of the event available online. “Why, you may ask? Because we the people are funding these horrors with our tax dollars.”

She later added, “I apologize that this is not a typical graduation speech, but there is nothing typical about the time we are living in.”

After she exited the stage to cheers, a university administrator took the podium. “As stated earlier in the program, invited speakers are sharing their personal views and do not represent the views or values of the University of Toledo,” he said. “As a state institution of higher education, we are required to maintain a campus in which the free exchange of ideas is not suppressed. Today is about celebrating our graduates. Let’s refocus our attention on celebrating our students who are receiving their degrees today.”