

Muslim students vow appeal in free speech conviction

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LOS ANGELES (RNS) A group of Muslim students who were convicted Friday (Sept. 23) of disrupting a speech by the Israeli ambassador plan to appeal as Muslim community leaders call the high-profile free speech case a civil rights moment.

The "Irvine 11" were charged with systematically heckling Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren during a speech to about 500 people last year at the University of California, Irvine.

"We'll be filing the notice of appeal within 30 days of the verdict," attorney Reem Salahi said Monday. "Obviously there's issues that came up in the trial that we'd like to appeal. We are concerned about the constitutionality of the statute ... against disrupting a public meeting."

A jury found 10 of the 11 guilty of two misdemeanor charges of conspiring to disrupt, and disrupting, Oren's speech. All 10 students received three years of probation; after a required 56 hours of community service, the probation will be reduced to one year.

Charges against the 11th defendant were dismissed after he agreed to do community service.

UC Irvine had disciplined some of the activists before the trial, and the Muslim Student Union was suspended for one academic quarter. Salam Al-Marayati, president of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, said the university's actions were "sufficient," and said Orange County District Attorney Tony Rackauckas never should have filed criminal misdemeanor charges.

"What a waste of tax dollars -- 300 potential jurors that had to be selected for a misdemeanor jury trial," Al-Marayati said.

Al-Marayati said the case represents, "an initiation of our community into the broader civil rights community. In terms of unfair treatment within the criminal justice system, other minorities have had to deal with these issues, and I think our community now is being instituted into this club."