

## HIGHER EDUCATION

# Colleges braced for antisemitism and violence. It's happening.

'I had Jewish blood on my hands,' a Tulane student said after aiding a classmate who was assaulted at a pro-Palestinian rally



By [Jack Stripling](#)

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Recent days have witnessed what Jewish students and watchdog groups describe as a raft of antisemitic incidents on college campuses. Jewish students at Cooper Union in New York City sheltered in a library as pro-Palestinian demonstrators banged on the glass walls of the building. At a pro-Palestinian protest near Tulane University, at least two students were assaulted in a melee that began when someone tried to burn an Israeli flag. And anonymous posters flooded a Cornell message board with threats, prompting the school's president to alert the FBI. "If you see a Jewish 'person' on campus follow them home and slit their throats," one message said. Another threatened to "bring an assault rifle to campus and shoot all you pig jews."

### Israel-Gaza war

Gaza's largest hospital, al-Shifa, "is not functioning" after days without power, water or reliable internet, the World Health Organization said. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday defended his military's assault on the enclave. Understand what's behind the Israel-Gaza war.

College administrators braced at the start of the Israel-Gaza conflict for an outbreak of antisemitism, Islamophobia, harassment and even violence. Free speech advocates predicted infringements on constitutional rights. Now, as the raid by Hamas against Israeli civilians gives way to wider combat in the region, those fears appear to be coming to fruition. The solemn and peaceable candlelight vigils from earlier this month preceded uglier confrontations, leaving Jewish college students feeling anxious, afraid and unsafe.

Amid what the Biden administration on Monday described as an “alarming rise” of antisemitism on college campuses, some Jewish students say they feel more vulnerable than ever before.

A group called Stop AntiSemitism, which publicizes acts of bigotry against Jewish people, said that it received a few reports of incidents daily before the Oct. 7 Hamas attack — occasionally a couple of dozen. Now, some 500 reports are arriving daily, said Liora Rez, who founded the group in 2018 and serves as executive director.

“It’s very frightening to be a Jewish college student right now,” Rez said. “We think the floodgates have opened up. ... It’s a nightmare.”

## 'TERRIFYING': Violent pro-Palestinian protests rock streets near Tulane University



Israel’s counterattack against Hamas, the militant group that controls the Gaza Strip, has brought forth intense protests nationwide, including on college campuses. At many rallies for Palestinian sovereignty and human rights, demonstrators have used variations of a phrase that some Jewish students call a threat: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

Defenders of the phrase often say that the line refers to a one-state solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over that tract of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, in which Arabs and Jews could have equal voting rights. But the U.S. and U.N. position is that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state and that the conflict should be solved with a “two-state solution,” one country for each group.

Jewish students hear “the river to the sea” as an open call for the eradication of Israel, a haunting proposition given the legacy of the Holocaust that led to Israel’s creation. The phrase has been printed on fliers and projected onto the facade of a building at George Washington University. Sometimes the line has been accompanied by other boilerplate like “Glory to our martyrs,” in which Jewish students see praise for killing Jewish civilians, as Hamas did earlier this month.

“There’s nothing wrong with advocating for a Palestinian state,” said Jonathan Greenblatt, chief executive officer and national director of the Anti-Defamation League, who calls the uptick of antisemitism on campus real and unambiguous. “There’s nothing wrong with advocating for a two-state solution. There’s something profoundly wrong with advocating for a final solution. The line is much more black and white than people appreciate.”

The debates also pose a free-speech challenge for university leaders, who must walk a line between allowing members of the community to voice their views while still working to make campus groups feel safe. Activists argue about what constitutes antisemitism, and even where hatred of Jews is clear, it’s generally not illegal. At the same time, donors and politicians are pressuring administrators to take a hard line against antisemitism and the community members they say espouse it. At the University of Pennsylvania, for instance, a board member at the business school urged others to slash their donations until the university takes a tougher line against hateful speech.

## An ‘anti-Jew’ rally

At Cooper Union last week, Taylor Roslyn Lent said she witnessed a pro-Palestinian protest morph into a “pure anti-Jew” rally. Lent was among about a dozen Jewish students in a library Wednesday as pro-Palestinian demonstrators gathered outside the glass walls. Her group included men wearing yarmulkes, making them identifiable as Jewish, she said. Protesters banged on doors and windows, chanting aggressively and pointing at the Jewish students, Lent said.

“I felt hated for my Jewish identity,” she said. “There’s definitely a big difference between a pro-Palestine-anti-Israel rally, and an anti-Jewish rally. And the more the day went on, the more it felt like an anti-Jewish rally.”

She grew more anxious, she said, when Cooper Union officials began offering the students what sounded like various means of escape — an escort to the second floor, a backdoor exit followed by an Uber ride.

“I felt not safe, deep down,” Lent said.

In a briefing with reporters after the incident, an NYPD chief of patrol said there was “no direct threat” to the students — and that they had not been in danger. In a statement provided to The Washington Post on Monday, a Cooper Union spokesperson reiterated that point.

An administrator “checked in with students to offer support if they were feeling concerns about leaving the building,” the spokesperson said in an email. “None took her up on those offers.” According to the spokesperson, Cooper has “increased security on campus in collaboration with external security partners and with the NYPD.”

The incident at Cooper Union comes on the heels of several others that have raised concerns about the safety and treatment of Jewish students. At Stanford University, an instructor was accused earlier this month of telling Jewish students to stand in the corner of a classroom, saying, “This is what Israel does to the Palestinians.” (The university said in a statement that the instructor was “not currently teaching” while Stanford looked into the matter.)

On Thursday, a pro-Palestinian rally near Tulane’s campus turned violent, leaving Dylan Mann, a Jewish student, with a broken nose. In video of the event, a protester sought to light an Israeli flag on fire, prompting a pro-Israel demonstrator to try to snatch the flag. In an ensuing melee, a couple of the demonstrators, who appeared to be pro-Palestinian, repeatedly struck Mann, videos show. Mann went to the hospital for treatment, he told The Post in an interview Monday.

In a dazed state, Mann said he was guided to safety by “two very brave girls,” who came to his aid. One of them was Natalie Mendelsohn, a fellow Tulane student, who rushed to Mann after he had been “bashed in the face,” she told The Post. “There was blood all over me — all over him,” she said.

“I had Jewish blood on my hands,” Mendelsohn said, “and that’s something I never thought I would encounter. It was very surreal and shocking.”

In statements, Tulane President Michael Fitts described the violence at the rally as “deeply distressing.” He said that “several individuals” had been arrested and that they would be barred from entering Tulane’s campuses. University police will increase their presence and patrols on campus, he said. “We fully recognize that our community was deeply affected by yesterday’s violence,” the statement said, “and that we must ensure it does not happen again.”

Mendelsohn grew up hearing stories of her grandfather, Victor Mendelsohn, a Holocaust survivor. She said the sight of a Jewish student being beaten triggered an instinct: “I had to do something.”

After the incident, Mendelsohn said, “I immediately called my dad.”

David Mendelsohn, Natalie’s father, said she was “sobbing, crying, fearful” when she called. He “kept a stiff upper lip,” he said, but spent the whole day troubled that his daughter had been in danger.

“You can’t say everything’s going to be okay, because everything’s not going to be okay,” David Mendelsohn said. “Things are going to get worse.”

## **Blacklisting Palestinian supporters**

As tensions rise, some pro-Palestinian students say they, too, are being targeted and harassed for nonviolent protests against what they call Israeli occupation and control of Arab lands. A student at the University of South Florida, who has joined in rallies there, said that someone on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, had referred to the pro-Palestinian gatherings as “target practice.”

“We took that as a threat that someone might want to do us harm,” said the student, who asked not to be identified because she feared being “blacklisted” for her views. Several companies said this month that they would not hire Harvard students whose student organizations had signed a letter denouncing Israel.

The South Florida student said that she and others on campus are “vehemently opposed” to Israel “occupying and colonizing Palestine.” But “we do not support Hamas,” she said. “We do condemn Hamas.”

The chancellor of Florida’s State University System, in consultation with Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, has ordered that campus chapters of National Students for Justice in Palestine be “deactivated,” suggesting the group provides “material support” to Hamas, a recognized terrorist organization. The Anti-Defamation League and Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law have called on college presidents to investigate chapters of the student group, accusing some of “celebrating terrorism.”

In a letter last week to University of Florida President Ben Sasse, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, a free-speech advocacy group, urged the president not to comply with the chancellor’s “unconstitutional” deactivation directive. “At times of great political and social unrest,” the letter said, “illiberal calls to silence unpopular views inevitably rise.”

In a letter published Monday, more than 100 Columbia University and Barnard College professors defended the rights of students who had condemned “Israel’s apartheid and colonial system.” The students’ claims “should not be considered anti-Semitic,” the letter states. Moreover, the professors condemned “the vicious targeting of our students with doxing, public shaming, surveillance by members of our community, including other students, and reprisals from employers.”

Where is the line between free speech and supporting terrorism? When does political activism slide into antisemitism or Islamophobia? The precise answers may be elusive, but college students say the fear they’re experiencing at this tense moment is unfamiliar and intense, showing no signs of abatement. And political leaders are weighing in. On Tuesday, Virginia Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin, for instance, created a situation room to track and “combat threats of violence against Jewish people and other religious communities,” including on campus.

Law enforcement is on alert around the country. On Tuesday, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) said on X that police had taken into custody a “person of interest” in the case of message-board threats at Cornell. George Mason University officials also said police in Virginia were investigating a video of a person taking down and tearing up a poster that appeared to depict Israeli children who have been kidnapped.

Diego Leibman Gálvez, a senior at Stanford University, said he’s “seen a massive rise in antisemitism on campus.” He pointed to pro-Palestinian groups on campus “openly celebrating an attack on innocent civilians” and marching on campus chanting “from the river to the sea.”

“It’s a very popular chant across campus,” he said. “Whether or not the students who are yelling understand what they are saying, as a Jew, it’s scary. It’s a scary time to be on campus.”

*Laura Meckler contributed reporting to this story.*