



Congressional Testimony

Crisis on Campus: Antisemitism, Radical Faculty, and the Failure of University Leadership

**Ted Deutch
Chief Executive Officer
American Jewish Committee
(Member of Congress 2010-2022)**

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, Members of the Committee, it is a pleasure to be before you this morning to testify in this body where I served alongside so many of you for seven terms.

Today, I am here in my capacity as CEO of American Jewish Committee, a non-partisan advocacy organization that stands up for Israel's right to exist in peace and security; confronts antisemitism, no matter the source; and upholds the democratic values that unite Jews and our allies.

I come to you today on the heels of AJC's annual Global Forum, where two thousand Jewish leaders – including hundreds of young leaders – from around the world convened just down the street to tackle the most pressing issues facing the Jewish people, America, Israel, and the world. As the culmination of our conference, some of them even met with members of this committee during our advocacy day. During the conference I sat down with AJC's Campus Global Board, which consists of students from across the world, from Harvard and Northwestern in the U.S. to the University of Cape Town and University of Amsterdam overseas. We work with these students to serve as ambassadors to effect change throughout their campuses and the global community. These amazing individuals have been forced to the front lines of countering antisemitism and what I will share with you today, I say with a heavy heart, as these students have gone through hell and back over the past eight months.

This academic year, campuses across the United States have experienced surging levels of antisemitism. Only days after the October 7th Hamas terror attacks in Israel, before Israel had made a single move to defend itself militarily against Hamas' brutal attack on Israeli civilians, anti-Israel activist groups on college campuses here in the United States began stoking the fires of anti-Jewish hatred. Protests in the weeks after 10/7 featured students and faculty who celebrated terror and unapologetically recast Hamas' barbarity as exhilarating, glorious, and liberating. Over winter break, the Jewish community held its collective breath, hoping the temperature would be turned down on college campuses in the spring. Instead, we witnessed a doubling down on extremism. Radical anti-Israel protesters commandeered campus quads and occupied university buildings, fomenting vile antisemitic messaging and creating an atmosphere of harassment, intimidation, and fear for Jewish students, faculty, and staff, and disrupting normal campus activities for all campus citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

I want to be clear in my testimony to Congress that the response of many university presidents and chancellors to the events of this last academic year has been woefully inadequate and lacking in leadership. It is completely unacceptable for higher educational institutions to be places of concentrated toxicity for students who are Jewish, Israeli, or Zionist, and yet that is what this year has brought into view. Now, it is incumbent on university leaders to use these summer months to confront this problem that has torn campus communities apart and risks permanently staining the reputations of our country's top academic institutions, which are incredibly important to the fabric and future of our society.

On Monday, blatant antisemitism celebrating Hamas was on full display in New York City (NYC) outside of an exhibit paying tribute to the more than 300 killed by Hamas at the Nova Music Festival. One woman conducting a call-and-response chant said, "When the Zionists decided to rave / Next to a concentration camp / That's exactly what this music festival was / It's like having a rave / Right next to the gas chambers / During the holocaust." On Tuesday, a group of people on a NYC subway car shouted, "Raise your hands if you're a Zionist, this is your chance to get out." When no one responded, the person shouting said, "Okay, no Zionists here, we're good." And on Wednesday, the homes of Jewish employees and leadership of the Brooklyn Museum were vandalized, including the hanging of a banner at the home of the Museum's director that said "white-supremacist Zionist." Those here today, those following this closely, and university leaders in charge of the safety and well-being of students on their respective campuses are foolish to believe that the threatening and dangerous antisemitism we saw increase toward the end of the academic year, and that we continue to see across our country and the world, will not reappear on campus in the fall. They cannot allow it. We cannot allow it. That is why university leadership must take the time over these next few months to seriously confront this problem.

This past year, Jewish students have been forced to walk a gauntlet on college campuses, finding alternative pathways to classes, dining halls, libraries, just to stay safe. They have had to come home to dorms even after their resident advisors posted on social media: "No Zionists allowed." They have watched as campus events featuring Israeli speakers were canceled or moved to secret out-of-the-way locations, and they have had their classes moved online when it was no longer safe for them to be on campus amidst increasingly radical protests. Some have missed classes because their classes were moved to inside anti-Israel encampments.

According to AJC's State of Antisemitism in America 2023 Report, 25% of American Jews with current or recent college experience have avoided wearing or carrying things that identify them as Jewish, and 24% say they have felt uncomfortable or unsafe at a campus event because they are Jewish. This past academic year, Jewish life on campus became narrowed, relegated to dark corners while lawless protesters took center stage and were allowed to remain there, despite pushing past every margin of acceptable conduct, occupying buildings, disrupting final exams and graduation ceremonies, and blatantly defacing university property with anti-Jewish and anti-American messages.

In some cases, these radical individuals were granted a seat at the table with university boards as a reward for their blatant disregard of rules. It should not come as a surprise that this school year shook to the core the Jewish community's trust in institutions of higher learning.

Critically, we have reached a tipping point where the atmosphere on campus has become so unilaterally pitted against Israel at many schools that they are no longer environments that support free exchange, reasoned debate, critical thought, or truth-seeking. We have seen many campuses devolve into atmospheres incapable of sustaining a modicum of debate about the complexity of the Middle East, much less basic empathy for the suffering of innocent Israeli civilians.

This spring, a Jewish instructor at the University of Minnesota wrote in chalk on the sidewalk of her school's encampment, "Free the hostages." An encampment protester wrapped in a keffiyeh with a masked face, spilled water on those words and rubbed her foot across them until they were completely erased. Acts like these are emblematic of the attempted erasure of Jewish life from college campuses that we've been witnessing across this country. This cannot and must not be allowed to become our new normal.

In our work with administrators, AJC has emphasized [short, medium, and long-term initiatives](#) to shift the campus atmosphere and dispel the cloud of antisemitism that has gathered over campuses, which risks becoming permanent if we do not assertively counter it. Just as antisemitism is not just a Jewish problem but a vast systemic rot that affects all of society, addressing antisemitism on campus requires a coordinated, multi-pronged approach. In addition to meeting the immediate needs of Jewish students, staff, and faculty, real change requires a sustained commitment by educational institutions to improve the learning and living environment for everyone. We must seize the current moment and the opportunity it affords to demand that universities take action in both the near-term and the long-term, to counter antisemitism on their campuses.

Update Codes of Conduct

Many schools' regulatory statutes are outdated and ill-equipped to meet this moment. Administrators should update their regulatory statutes – codes of conduct for students and policies on faculty rights and responsibilities – to articulate a set of clear expectations for every campus citizen. Administrators must also clearly spell out consequences for those who violate policies and codes, and communicate those consequences clearly to the entire university community, enforcing policies when necessary. Too often this year, we have seen uneven enforcement and an unwillingness on the part of administrators to apply consequences to all groups without exception. Many of those exceptions have resulted in discrimination against Jews relative to other minority groups.

Establishing fair-minded, issue-neutral rules that apply equally to all campus citizens without exception, is an essential first step in creating campus communities where all students, including Jewish, Israeli, and Zionist students, can access the educational and professional opportunities they have earned. Enforcing those regulations is vital, and may require additional layers of accountability and pressure, including the pressure that has been generated by this year's congressional hearings on campus antisemitism. More needs to be done to apply pressure that aims at restoring institutions of higher learning to their core missions of fostering critical thought and debate, not promoting dogma or ideological conformity.

Antisemitism training and education

Universities nationwide, including elite schools like UC Berkeley, Harvard, and Columbia, have been host to shocking and blatant antisemitic messaging throughout this academic year. Anti-Israel campus protesters have broadcast imagery that invokes the [medieval blood libel legend](#)

and conspiratorial myths about the corruptive influence of Jewish money and power, and inversions of the Holocaust that accuse Jews of Nazism. Institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to counter anti-Jewish prejudice and ignorance, and they can do so by mandating antisemitism education for their entire communities of students, faculty, and staff. We recommend that schools introduce mandatory antisemitism education for all incoming students as well as faculty and staff, that addresses the history of anti-Jewish hatred and provides strategies for recognizing, unpacking, and confronting it in the present.

Mandatory education is a crucial starting-point for the entire campus community that blatant prejudice and ignorance will not stand, and that anti-Jewish hatred is as significant a threat to the larger project of higher education as any other form of hatred and prejudice. Mandatory education is an important starting-point, one that should form part of a comprehensive plan that enlists a variety of sectors across the university, including interfaith officers, student life officers, research directors, instructional staff, and many others. Our [Action Plan](#) offers a detailed set of recommendations for campus administrators to enlist their schools as active partners in the society-wide effort to counter antisemitism, just as the National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism offers its recommendations, including specific action items for the Department of Education. I encourage you to hold the Department accountable for its commitments.

Congress can help move universities towards that first step by recommending that they include antisemitism training alongside existing programming to counter hate and discrimination. It is equally essential that this programming use the [IHRA working definition of antisemitism](#), the model adopted by 35 nations worldwide and the definition currently used by the Department of Education to adjudicate Title VI antisemitism complaints. Too often we have seen educational programming, including teach-ins, be co-opted by anti-Zionist voices from the fringe on college campuses, when what is sorely needed is an understanding of antisemitism that attends to its current manifestations and connects the anti-Jewish messaging that we are witnessing in our world today to the long history of antisemitic tropes. Too often, these same anti-Zionist voices from the margins claim that antisemitism is being exaggerated and weaponized by Jews to muzzle political critique of Israel. These claims are dangerous, and we must reject these bad faith attempts to undermine the testimony of Jewish students about their experiences as Jews and Zionists.

We have moved past the point where we need to ask whether antisemitism education is needed in universities. Universities - including DEI initiatives - must move past pondering *if* and ask *how* to best integrate education about Jewish history and identity and antisemitism awareness training into their student-facing programming for the Fall. DEI programs can be places where that education is rolled out, but centers that attend to inclusion and diversity work on college campuses must demonstrate that they are willing partners to those efforts. The current crisis on campus represents an opportunity and a test of these programs' ability to respond productively. American Jewish Committee is ready and willing to help strategize how to meet that need with university partners to expand the umbrella of their anti-bias and anti-hate work. We also acknowledge that there will be pockets of resistance at schools that dangerously see their social justice mission as one that excludes Jews and Zionists. Congressional attention has cast much-

needed attention on this issue and the importance of including Jewish voices and antisemitism awareness in the project of diversity and inclusion work. In the coming year, we encourage Congress to keep applying pressure to ensure these programs become part of the solution rather than contributing to the epidemic of campus antisemitism. When Jews are excluded from campus groups, this is discrimination that must not be tolerated.

Cultivate Intellectual Pluralism by Departments and Programs

The intellectual atmosphere of many universities has, in recent years, overwhelmingly embraced and rewarded activism over civil discourse, ideological posturing over collaboration to resolve shared problems. The results of those priorities have been made clear through campus protests that have violated the rules governing assembly and free speech, interfering with students' ability to learn and faculty-members' ability to conduct classes and engage in research. Some graduate and post-graduate students in STEM fields have vowed to refuse to work alongside Zionist or Israeli fellow-researchers. Some faculty have made it their mission to enlist students in a social justice battle that places Israel and Zionism squarely in the crosshairs. The fact that this is happening on campuses nationwide is not an accident of the times; it is a direct consequence of prioritizing activism when faculty are hired and students are recruited, and it is deeply corrosive both to academic institutions and to our shared democracy.

In order for administrators to change the intellectual climates of their institutions in a positive way, they must contend with the intellectual units on their campuses that blatantly foster anti-Israel and anti-Zionist climates. On many campuses, there are a handful of schools, programs, and departments that consistently issue collective statements condemning Israel and Zionism. These are spaces that Jewish students know they must altogether avoid or hold their heads down and endure in silence while concealing their identities as Jews. And they are deeply at odds with the university's ideals of free intellectual exchange.

The blatant ideological bias exhibited by departments that consistently and concertedly condemn Israel and its very existence must be addressed strategically with a view towards restoring universities to their missions as centers of fact-based exchange and truth-seeking. It should not be considered a badge of pride for departments to issue statements condemning Zionism or the State of Israel. It is a mark against free inquiry and the reputation of their institutions. Whatever negligible effect departments' political statements might have on conditions in the Middle East, they have an exponential chilling effect on departmental culture, including the education of students, and the promotion and hiring of junior faculty. Difficult as it is, university leaders must find effective ways of addressing this issue, or risk capitulating the climates of their institutions to a form of ingrained antisemitism whose messaging unapologetically mixes age-old antisemitic tropes of Jewish power, control, and malice with contemporary anti-Zionist antisemitism.

Responsibilities of Faculty

Faculty on the tenure track and prospective job candidates who are Israeli, Zionist, or Jewish are at risk of discrimination and exclusion. There are no magic bullets to resolve this issue, but it is a problem that reaches all the way down to the root-structure of many institutions, and will require attention, focus, and in all likelihood, additional sources of pressure and oversight in the years to come.

One way of approaching this issue is through a focus on the responsibilities of university instructors and research supervisors. Administrators must make clear that instructors and supervisors - and especially tenured faculty - come into their roles with rights *and* responsibilities. The way past the weaponization of classroom spaces in service of anti-Israel ideology comes from modeling a different kind of leadership in the classroom. Classroom instructors are leaders who offer a standard of intellectual inquiry for students, by reinforcing essential critical thinking skills like applying evidence to argument. Classrooms are not spaces where professors should be subjecting students to off-topic diatribes about their political opinions on the Israel-Gaza war. Microbiologists, for example, should not be turning their classrooms into pulpits about Israel, Zionism, or any other subject unrelated to their designated area of expertise. And academic freedom does not protect faculty who choose to hijack their classrooms for the purposes of anti-Israel indoctrination.

Administrators have a duty to reinforce the limits around academic freedom so that faculty understand that tenure does not give them a blank check – rather, academic freedom gives them leeway to pursue lines of inquiry oriented towards truth in their chosen fields, along with a set of responsibilities to impart the skills of truth-seeking and rigorous intellectual inquiry to their students. Just as we expect professors not to abuse their authority over students in a host of ways, we expect them not to abuse their authority by turning their classrooms into indoctrination centers for privately held political opinions, including anti-Israel activism. Standards for tenure and promotion ought to take these items into account, and in turn clarify these priorities for everyone on campus involved in the tenure review process. There must be real and consequential priorities in place for determining faculty-members' potential for professional advancement, that take into account their capacity to cultivate critical thinking in students.

Administrators should also clarify and raise awareness around the university's standards for educational programming to ensure that events like teach-ins and panel discussions meet basic educational criteria, such as those outlined in the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP's) [guidelines](#) on academic freedom. The AAUP is explicit that faculty members "should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matters which are unrelated to their subject, or to persistently introduce material which has no relation to the subject." It is essential that programming bearing the university's name offers expert-led opportunities to learn about complex topics, including Israel/Palestine, Zionism, and antisemitism. Programming on antisemitism should be especially sensitive to these standards. It should never become a shell for anti-Zionist or antisemitic messaging without reference to the history or lived experience of anti-Jewish hate.

Prioritize Campus Physical Security

Security concerns have risen in proportion to escalating threats of violence against Jews on campus in the months following 10/7. It is the university's responsibility to anticipate these security needs in Jewish cultural and religious spaces on campus, for programming featuring Jewish and Israeli speakers, and in spaces where Jewish students and faculty routinely live and work and where they may be at risk. Ensuring the physical safety of Jewish students, faculty, and staff is a basic and necessary first step in creating an atmosphere where Jewish campus citizens can work and learn freely.

After so many campuses have experienced such significant issues— more than 150 schools have open Title VI investigations currently being reviewed by the Department of Education, university presidents should be voluntarily announcing that they will open Title VI Compliance Offices, much like they have Title IX offices. This should be a simple step that will show not just Jews, but all minority groups, that the university cares about their wellbeing and will not tolerate a hostile learning environment.

Congressional Action

Congress will also have an important role to play in creating pathways towards improved accountability and I encourage you to support and pass [H.R. 7921](#), the *Countering Antisemitism Act*, the most comprehensive legislation to address domestic antisemitism to date, which would help strengthen federal efforts to counter antisemitism, including in higher education. I am also encouraging you to support robust funding for the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, the office responsible for investigating Title VI discrimination complaints that arise on campus. Currently, each investigator in the Office for Civil Rights is working on 50 different cases. This office needs additional resources to continue to ensure perpetrators are held accountable and Jewish students can feel safe on campus again. Congress should also provide sufficient funding for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which currently is unable to meet the needs of all applicants.

As a former Member of Congress, I know the position you are in. There are students from your district being told that their identity as Jews and as Zionists is putting their safety at risk and preventing them from participating in student groups on campus. This is not only discriminatory and a violation of codes of conduct but should really strike you at your core. Many of these students might be home for the summer or will return to your districts, after having experienced antisemitism directly this past academic year, to start the next phase of their lives. Spend time hearing their voices. Let your staff and your constituents understand them and stand with them as they describe what they have faced and expect to face when they return to campus. If you have a college or university in your district as I was also privileged to have, then you understand the power of your voice. Please use it and use it wisely. University leaders will listen to you. You understand the role these campuses play in your communities, and you can help them be a positive force for cooperation and community rather than division.

I would also like to acknowledge the hearings Congress has held which have placed this problem of antisemitism on campus in the spotlight and the Speaker's House-wide effort. Many committees, including yours, are involved in this process, but what I'd like to stress is that antisemitism is not only a threat to the Jewish community, it is a threat to democracy. This moment is not only about the Jewish community, but also about the society we live in, and we must find ways to work together in a bipartisan manner to hold these schools accountable, to protect students, and create a better future for our children and grandchildren.

There is no quick fix to resolve the entrenched problems we've seen take hold of institutions of higher education in recent years and especially this last year. But currently, we are at an inflection point where university leaders can no longer claim ignorance. This last year has previewed for administrators what is to come next year when classes resume and new developments stoke the existing fires of outrage and protest on campus. We know and understand that true shifts in campus climate will not happen overnight, and that clearing the clouds of antisemitism and prejudice will take time. But universities are accountable for this long-term change, just as they are accountable to the legacies of their institutions over a period of decades and centuries. They must spend this summer devising real and focused solutions, and resist focusing their energies on evading consequences while continuing to drift along on the same imperiled course.

Organizations like AJC that work in tandem with university leaders, board members, and elected officials, are a vital part of this ongoing conversation, and we will continue to chart the most productive pathways forward out of the current crisis, and work diligently to create a brighter future for Jewish students at universities across the country.