

How Israel Should Respond to Pro-Palestinian Protests on US Campuses

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Last year, as the Israel-Hamas war unfolded, pro-Palestinian protests, encampments, building occupations, and votes on Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) resolutions spread across hundreds of US university campuses. Over the last several weeks, three major studies timed for the start of the academic year provide the first systematic evidence of the breadth and impact of the protest movement. Protesters achieved some, but not all, of their aims and created an environment that many Jewish students perceived as hostile. Still, the evidence suggests that most university students remain open to Israel's case, and smart policy choices by university administrations, Jewish organizations, and Israeli decision-makers can contribute to an improved campus climate in the year ahead.

According to the Anti-Defamation League's [comprehensive report](#) on anti-Israel activism, published in mid-September, last year's "popular movement for Gaza" spread to 360 university campuses in 46 states and included demonstrations, sit-ins, walkouts, tent encampments, and occupying buildings. The primary organizers were leftist student groups: Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, Democratic Socialists of America, and Students for a Democratic Society (a relaunch of the 1960s-era group).

The [pro-Palestine mobilization](#) gained momentum over the last decade, aligning with other leftist campaigns, including Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. It has been driven by and has championed the political theory of "settler colonialism," which increasingly serves as a foundational narrative for a range of critical perspectives, including Marxism, feminism, anti-racism, queer studies, and climate action. The movement's base expanded during each round of fighting between Hamas and Israel—particularly during the current war—growing in parallel with the proliferation of images of civilian death and suffering that have dominated media coverage outside of Israel.

Although there has been much speculation about the foreign funding of pro-Palestinian organizations, the ADL report mentions only minor sums provided by a few private foundations. Last year, the protesters generally demanded a

ceasefire in Gaza, divestment from corporations linked to the war in Gaza, a boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions, and protection from retaliation or disciplinary action. More generally, they have sought to delegitimize Israel, isolate it as a pariah state, and stigmatize its supporters.

One centerpiece of the movement has been to call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) of Israeli companies and academic institutions. According to the ADL report, student and faculty groups voted on 80 resolutions last year, calling on their institutions to implement BDS. Seventy-one resolutions passed, and just 9 were voted down. Despite this, no institutions adopted or implemented BDS measures although a few agreed to discuss the matter. Over the summer, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), an important national organization that advocates for academic freedom, [reversed](#) its longstanding categorical opposition to boycotts. This move increases the potential for future boycotts of Israeli academic institutions.

On many campuses, protesters have directed their ire at Jewish organizations, labeling them as Zionist and therefore fair targets. The ADL documented 73 protest-related incidents at Hillels and Chabad houses. In addition to occasionally targeting Jewish institutions, protesters often called upon universities to cut ties with “Zionist donors,” which many understood to be a thinly veiled reference to Jews.

Pro-Palestinian activists also organized tent cities or “encampments” at more than 150 universities. These encampments were generally more common at [selective, elite institutions](#) and at schools with [large foreign student populations](#) (often they are the same institutions). In most cases, the encampments violated university rules but were often tolerated by administrators who prioritized conflict management and de-escalation. The encampments served as meeting places for teach-ins and protests and often effectively (and sometimes intentionally) closed off public spaces to Jewish students who identified as Zionists. On many campuses, police were eventually called in to dismantle the encampments or disperse building occupations, leading to the arrest of nearly [3,000](#) students nationwide.

The Views of US University Students

A [report](#) by Graham Wright and colleagues at Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies offers the first systematic look at the attitudes and beliefs of American university students during this wave of intense protest activity. The study is based on a survey of more than 4,000 mostly non-Jewish students at 60 universities conducted toward the end of the 2023–2024 academic year. The

questionnaire elicited responses to statements that most Jewish students had identified as antisemitic in earlier research. Multivariate analysis identified four clusters of students among non-Jewish respondents:

- **66% were not hostile to either Israel or Jews.** This group included many students who had critical views of the Israeli government but who did not express systematic hostility toward Israel's existence or exhibit classically antisemitic attitudes.
- **15% were extremely hostile to Israel** but did not express classic antisemitic views. Most students in this cluster believed that Israel should not exist and indicated that they would not want to be friends with someone who supports Israel's existence.
- **16% expressed at least one antisemitic view** but were not systematically hostile to Israel. For example, students in this group agreed with statements like "Jews in America have too much power," or that "Jews don't care what happens to anyone but their own kind."
- **2% expressed views that were both hostile to Israel and antisemitic.**

The Brandeis research team concluded that about one-third of non-Jewish students are either deeply hostile to Israel or Jews, and this minority is largely responsible for the hostile climate reported by many Jewish students.

The Impact on Jewish Students

A [study](#) by Tufts University's Eitan Hersh and Dahlia Lyss provides the most thorough data to date on the pro-Palestine movement's impact on Jewish students. The report is based on nationwide surveys of Jewish and non-Jewish students conducted in April 2022 among 1,721 Jewish and 1,029 non-Jewish students; in November and December 2023 among 944 Jewish and 1,549 non-Jewish students; and in April 2024 among 1,006 Jewish and 1,516 non-Jewish students. A subset of respondents participated in more than one wave of the study, allowing for analysis of changes both at the individual level and within the broader population samples.

The percentage of Jewish students reporting that they had personally experienced antisemitism on campus increased from 11% in 2022 to 16% in 2024 (the question was not asked in 2023). The percentage reporting having experienced ostracization or a "social penalty" for supporting Israel as a Jewish state increased from 35 %in 2022 to 55 %in 2023, and then declined modestly to 52% in 2024. (This finding is unsurprising given that about one-fifth of non-Jewish students in

the study by Hersh and Lyss indicated that they would not wish to be friends with someone who supports Israel as a Jewish state.)

The study found that the increasingly hostile climate on campuses motivated many Jewish students to participate more regularly in Jewish activities. The percentage of students that attended Jewish events at least monthly increased from 34% in 2022 to 56% in 2023 and then tapered off to 49% in 2024. In the 2024 survey, 33% of Jewish respondents reported having attended a pro-Israel event, whereas about 17% reported having attended a pro-Palestinian event.

However, the fraught environment also discouraged many Jewish students from participating in Jewish life. The share of students reporting that they *avoided* Jewish activities because of fear of antisemitism doubled from 8% in 2022 to 16% in 2023 and then dipped to 14% in 2024. Similarly, the percentage of students who expressed “no fear” of antisemitism decreased from 38% in 2022 to 20% in 2023 and then rose to 27% in 2024.

Fear of antisemitism has also caused an increasing number of students to conceal their Jewish identities. The percentage hiding their Jewish identities to fit in increased from 16% in 2022 to 27% in 2023 and then slightly decreased to 24% in 2024.

Assessment and Recommendations

The elite universities in the United States are where political ideas, movements, and values are shaped and future leaders are nurtured. They are institutions of national and global significance and a critical arena for the State of Israel. Israel's standing among journalists, opinion leaders, and policy elites, along with the capacity of Israeli scientists and scholars to contribute globally, is influenced by developments at US universities.

These institutions also play a critical role for American Jewry. Historically, they have provided a key platform for upward mobility into the professions, sciences, and political life. Today, US universities are settings where Jewish young adults—about half raised in interfaith households—engage in a wide range of Jewish experiences that shape their identities and future trajectories as Jews.

In response to the deteriorating climate for Jewish and Israeli students, Jewish organizations such as Hillel International and the American Jewish Committee, often joined by public officials, have called upon universities to ensure a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students. They have urged universities to develop protest guidelines and codes of conduct for both faculty and students that

are fair, content-neutral, and prohibit activities that impede the university's academic mission or interfere with the rights of members of the campus community to speak, listen, teach, research, and learn.

Over the summer, [court cases](#) against Harvard, MIT, and UCLA led to findings and preliminary orders underscoring the legal obligations that universities have to uphold these standards. As a result, many universities have clarified restrictions on when and where demonstrations can be held, banned encampments, and introduced training programs on antisemitism.

The Israeli government also has a role to play. The protest movement on US campuses shapes the views of both Jewish and non-Jewish students alike, influences the perspectives of current and future policy elites, and contributes to Israel's isolation. Particularly concerning is the number of BDS resolutions that have passed and the AAUP's decision to allow future boycott initiatives to go forward without criticism.

Israel policymakers should seek ways to improve communication about Israel's objectives and actions in the ongoing war. This communication should reach diverse audiences through various channels and be delivered by a variety of spokespersons rather than primarily the IDF. In his recent speech at the United Nations, Prime Minister Netanyahu emphasized that Israel is fighting a defensive war, does not target civilians, allows humanitarian aid, and does not seek long-term occupation of either Gaza or southern Lebanon. While these messages are important, they have been communicated haphazardly and sporadically, perhaps because they resonate less with domestic audiences. (Given that actions speak louder than words, Israel must also demonstrate these values and commitments, which many observers believe it has done inconsistently.)

More generally, Israeli scholars and public intellectuals should be encouraged to make an [intellectual case](#) for Israel's right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state. Beyond disagreements between the Israeli right and left, this fundamental right can no longer be taken for granted, and the case must be reasserted. The majority of students and faculty at US universities, who have not adopted anti-Israel or antisemitic beliefs, can still be reached and it is a strategic imperative that Israel try to engage with them.

Israeli policymakers should also consider actions that will make Israeli academic institutions, scholars, and students less vulnerable to BDS. AAUP's revised guidelines will allow boycotts of academic institutions that violate academic freedom, such as by suppressing speech or discriminating against certain groups of students. Communicating more consistently and effectively about Israel's

academic institutions will reduce the risk of BDS. Israel's universities [rank highly](#) in global indices of academic freedom, educate and train Arab Israeli students in proportion to their representation in the population, and advocate consistently for a liberal public sphere. By ensuring that Israeli academic institutions continue to honor these norms of academic freedom, even during wartime, policymakers can further diminish the chances of boycotts by US institutions.

Combating tacit, undeclared boycotts will be more difficult. However, formal agreements between Israeli and US institutions for research partnerships, faculty and student exchanges, study abroad programs, and dual-degree programs can help offset the effects of quiet boycotts. Paradoxically, many US institutions that wish to demonstrate that they reject antisemitism may be willing to establish or expand such programs in the coming year.

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