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The Distortion of Campus Protests over Gaza



Image by [Hany Osman](#).

Helicopters have been throbbing overhead for days now. Nights, too. Police are swarming the streets of Broadway, many in riot gear. Police vans, some as big as a city bus, are lined up along side streets and Broadway.

Outside the gates of the Columbia University campus, a penned-in group of pro-Israel demonstrators has faced off against a penned-in group of anti-genocide and pro-Palestinian protesters. These groups are usually small, often vastly outnumbered by the police around them, but they *are* loud and they are not Columbia students. They've been coming every day this April to shout, chant, and hold up signs, some of which are filled with hateful speech directed at the other side, equating protests against the slaughter in Gaza with being pro-Hamas, and calls to bring home the hostages with being pro-genocide.

Inside the locked gates of the campus, the atmosphere is entirely different. Even as the now-notorious student tent encampment there stretches through its second week, all is calm. Inside the camp, students sleep, eat, and sit on bedspreads studying together and making signs saying, “Nerds for Palestine,” “Passover is for Liberation,” and “Stop the Genocide.” The Jewish students there held a seder on Passover. The protesters even asked faculty to come into the encampment and teach because they miss their classes. Indeed, it’s so quiet on campus that you can hear birds singing in the background. The camp, if anything, is hushed.

The Real Story on Campus

Those protesters who have been so demonized, for whom the riot police are waiting outside — the same kinds of students Columbia University’s president, Minouche Shafik, invited the police to arrest, zip-tie, and cart away on April 18th — are mostly undergraduate women, along with a smaller number of undergraduate men, 18 to 20 years old, standing up for what they have a right to stand up for: their beliefs. Furthermore, for those who don’t know the Columbia campus, the encampment is blocking nobody’s way and presents a danger to no one. It is on a patch of lawn inside a little fence buffered by hedges. As I write, those students are not preventing anyone from walking anywhere, nor occupying any buildings, perpetrating any violence, or even making much noise. (In the early hours of April 30th, however, student protesters did occupy Hamilton Hall in reaction to a sweep of suspensions the day before.)

As a tenured professor at Columbia’s Journalism School, I’ve been watching the student protests ever since the brutal Hamas attack of October 7th, and I’ve been struck by the decorum of the protesting students, as angry and upset as they are on both sides. This has particularly impressed me knowing that several students are directly affected by the ongoing war. I have a Jewish student who has lost family and friends to the attack by Hamas, and a Palestinian student who learned of the deaths of her family and friends in Gaza while she was sitting in my class.

Given how horrific this war is, it’s not surprising that there have been a few protesters who lose control and shout hideous things, but for the most part, such people have been quietly walked away by other students or campus security guards. All along, the main messages from the students have been “Bring back our hostages” on the Israeli side and “Stop slaughtering Gazan civilians” on the antiwar and pro-Palestinian-rights side. Curiously enough, those messages are not so far apart, for almost everyone wants the hostages safe and almost everyone is calling for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take a different direction and protect the innocent.

Unfortunately, instead of allowing students to have their say and disciplining those who overstep boundaries, Columbia President Shafik and her administration suspended two of the most vocal groups protesting Israel's war on Gaza: the student chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine. This only enraged and galvanized students and some faculty more.

The Right Seizes and Distorts the Narrative

Then the right got involved, using accusations of widespread antisemitism to take eyes off the astronomical death toll in Gaza — more than 34,000 reportedly dead as I write this, more than 14,500 of them children — while fretting about the safety of Jewish students instead.

The faculty of Columbia takes antisemitism seriously and we have methods in place to deal with it. We also recognize that some of the chants of the protesters do make certain Jewish students and faculty uncomfortable. But as a group of Jewish faculty pointed out in an op-ed for the student newspaper, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, it's absurd to claim that antisemitism, which is defined by the Jerusalem Declaration as “discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews,” is rampant on our campus. “To argue that taking a stand against Israel's war on Gaza is antisemitic is to pervert the meaning of the term,” we wrote. “Labeling pro-Palestinian expression as anti-Jewish hate speech requires a dangerous and false conflation of Zionism with Jewishness.”

Sadly, that's exactly what the right has succeeded in doing. Not only is the slaughter in Gaza getting lost in the growing fog of hysterical speech about antisemitism on American college campuses, but so is the fact that Arab and Muslim students are being targeted, too. Some students even reported they were sprayed with a mace-like material, possibly manufactured by the Israeli military, and that, as a result, several protesters had to go to the hospital. My own students told me they have been targeted with hate mail and threats over social media. I even saw a doxxing truck sponsored by the far-right group Accuracy in Media driving around the Columbia neighborhood bearing photographs of Muslim students, naming them and calling them terrorists. Again, it's important to note that most of the harassers have been outsiders, not students.

No, the real threat to American Jews comes not from students but from the very white nationalist MAGA Republicans who are shouting about antisemitism the loudest.

Then came the Republican hearings.

The Congressional Hearings

Having watched the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania stumble and fall in the face of MAGA Representative Elise Stefanik's bullying accusations of

antisemitism in December, Columbia President Shafik did all she could to avoid a similar fate when it was her turn. But when she submitted to four hours of McCarthyite-style questioning in Congress on April 17th — one Republican even asked if there were Republicans among the faculty — Shafik cringed, evaded, and caved.

“I agree with you” was her most frequent phrase. She never pushed back against the characterization of the Columbia campus by Republican Representatives Virginia Foxx and Stefanik as riddled with antisemitism. She never stood up for the integrity of our faculty and students or for the fact that we’re a campus full of remarkable scholars and artists perfectly capable of governing ourselves. She never even pointed out that who we suspend, fire, or hire is none of Congress’s business. Instead, she broke all our university rules by agreeing to investigate and fire members of our own faculty and to call in the police when she deemed it necessary.

The very day after the hearings, that’s exactly what she did.

Meanwhile, the death toll in Gaza was never even mentioned.

A Pandora’s Box

Shafik’s craven performance in front of Republican lawmakers opened a Pandora’s box of troubles. The student protesters swelled in numbers and erected their encampment. Faculty members wrote outraged opinion pieces condemning Shafik’s behavior. And when she called in the police to arrest students, more students than ever joined the protests all over the country.

Then, on April 24th, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson visited Columbia with Republicans Mike Lawler, Nicole Malliotakis, and Anthony D’Esposito (and even Foxx from North Carolina), acting as if some kind of terrible riot had gone on here. Standing at the top of the steps in front of the grand facade of Low Library, a century-old building meant to symbolize learning and reason, and surrounded by heckling students, Johnson declared that some Jewish students had told him of “heinous acts of bigotry,” characterized the protesters as “endorsed by Hamas,” and called for Shafik to resign “if she cannot immediately bring order to the chaos.”

“What chaos?” said an undergraduate standing next to me on the steps as we listened.

“He’s saying a bunch of 20-year-old American college students are in cahoots with Hamas?” another asked incredulously.

Johnson then escalated the threats, claiming the National Guard might be called in and that Congress might even revoke federal funding if universities couldn’t keep such protests under control.

I looked behind me at the encampment on the other side of campus. In front of the tents on the grass, the students had erected a sign listing what they called “Gaza Encampment Community Guidelines.” These included: “No desecration of the land. No drug/alcohol consumption. Respect personal boundaries.” And most significantly, “We commit to assuming the best intentions, granting ourselves and others grace when mistakes are made, and approaching conflict with the goal of addressing and repairing.” Designated faculty and students stood at the entrance to make sure no outsiders got in, and that nobody entered the encampment unless they had read and agreed to that list of commitments. The noisiest people on campus were the thronging media. But *nobody* and *nothing* was out of control.

The Weaponization of Antisemitism

Sadly, despite the reality on the ground at Columbia, the right’s wild narrative of virulent antisemitism here has been swallowed whole, not just by Republicans but by a long list of Democrats, too, including President Biden and Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Chuck Schumer, not to speak of New York Representatives Hakeem Jeffries, Jerry Nadler, Dan Goldman, and Adriano Espaillat. They have all publicly condemned the supposedly rampant antisemitism on campus without, it seems, bothering to check their facts.

Meanwhile, MAGA Christian Nationalist Sean Feucht posted on X that “Columbia has been taken over by radical Pro-Hamas protesters.”

Back in the real world, the right’s hysteria over such supposed antisemitism hasn’t really been about protecting Jews at all, as many faculty members (including us Jewish ones) have written and spoken about. Rather, the right is weaponizing antisemitism as a way of furthering its campaign to suppress the kind of freedom of thought and speech on campus that threatens its authoritarian goals of turning this country Christian, conservative, straight, and white — not to mention their urge to suppress support of Palestinian autonomy.

When Students Don’t Feel Safe

My students tell me they feel perfectly safe on campus. They may not like some of the chants they sometimes hear. I myself have caught a few that chilled me as a Jew. I’ve also heard chants that sicken me on behalf of my Muslim friends. But those have been rare. And campus is a place where everyone should be free to debate, disagree, express their opinions, listen, and learn. We have to remember that free speech does not mean speech we agree with.

No, where my students do not feel safe is out on Broadway, where extremists on both sides gather. They don’t feel safe when the false narratives of Republican politicians draw far-right angry mobs to the campus gates, something that is happening just as I’m writing this piece.

Most of all, they don't feel safe when police arrive on campus with guns in their holsters and zip-ties hanging from their belts.

I stood and watched that day the police came. Four huge drones hovered overhead, along with those eternally buzzing helicopters. Dozens of police buses were lined up on West 114th Street on the south side of campus as if prepared to deal with some massive, violent riot. Then, in came the police, some in riot gear, to tie the hands of more than 100 students behind their backs and march them onto police buses.

Not a single student resisted. Even the police were quoted as saying they presented no danger to anyone. As NYPD Chief of Patrol John Chell said, "To put this in perspective, the students that were arrested were peaceful, offered no resistance whatsoever, and were saying what they wanted to say in a peaceful manner."

Not long later, those arrested students were suspended and the ones who attend Barnard were locked out of their dorms. Faculty and friends had to offer their couches and spare beds to save those young women from being homeless on the streets of New York. One of them is in my building staying with a colleague downstairs. "Nobody told our parents that we were being evicted," she told me in my lobby.

Faculty Response

Many faculty were so shocked by these events that on Monday, April 22nd, some 300 of us gathered on the steps of Low Library, holding up signs that said, "Hands Off Our Students" and "End Student Suspensions Now." Several professors gave impassioned speeches praising those students for their courage, demanding that academic freedom be protected, and castigating Shafik for throwing us all under the bus.

Still, Gaza was not mentioned. It seemed as if the genocide occurring there was disappearing in the fog.

"I'm worried that the message of our protest is getting lost," that suspended student told me as we spoke in the lobby. "Everyone's talking about academic freedom and police repression instead."

Indeed, not only is the protest against Israel's pathological spree of murder in Palestine and on the West Bank being drowned out in this debate, so are the student protesters' demands, so let me reiterate them here:

That Columbia divest of all investments that profit from Israel's occupation and bombing of Palestine.

That Columbia sever academic ties with its programs at Tel Aviv and other Israeli Universities.

That the policing of the campus be stopped immediately.

That the university release a statement calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The other day, on New York's National Public Radio station, WNYC, I heard a caller who had been a campus protester in 1968 say something like, "It's funny how the protesters of 50 years ago are always right, but the protesters of today are always wrong." The people who demonstrated for civil rights then were demonized, beaten, even murdered, but they were right, he pointed out, as were the people who demonstrated against the Vietnam War. (I would say the same for those who protested against the Iraq War and for the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements.)

One day, the students who are protesting the genocide in Gaza and the persecution of Palestinians today will be seen as on the right side, too. History will prove it. Until then, let's turn the discussion back to where it belongs: an end to the war on Gaza.

Final Note: This piece was written before the president and trustees of Columbia called in the riot police on the night of April 30th, against the advice of many faculty, to arrest the students in the encampment, as well as those who had occupied Hamilton Hall. Videos show considerable police violence against the students. What happens next remains to be seen.

This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).

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