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Zionist ‘Safety Patrols’ on Campus Have Little Concern for Jewish Safety



Image by Janne Leimola.

Last academic year saw university students across North American campuses form Gaza solidarity encampments to protest Israel’s ongoing genocide of Palestinians and their universities’ financial complicity in the carnage. The sit-ins received widespread media coverage and helped carry Israel’s crimes against Palestinians to the top of the Western news agenda.

Although these campus protests were overwhelmingly peaceful and included many anti-Zionist Jewish students and faculty, Israel’s supporters in media, politics and academia itself responded to the demonstrations by accusing protesters of peddling anti-Semitism and intimidating Jewish students. Towards the end of the academic year, police dismantled most of these campus protests, arresting hundreds of students in the process and charging them with crimes ranging from third-degree trespass to felony burglary.

Now, as a new academic year starts and Zionist genocidal aggression continues in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon students are once again mobilising in protest. These student protesters are already facing further intimidation from university administrations, threats from political leaders, abuse from the police and unsubstantiated accusations of anti-Semitism from mainstream media. Moreover, campuses this academic year are facing a new threat: intimidation from so-called Zionist “self-defence” groups with far-right links.

At the University of Toronto, Magen Herut Canada (Defender of Freedom Canada), a volunteer-based Zionist vigilante group affiliated with Herut Canada – an organisation tied to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s far-right, revisionist Likud Party, which advocates for the “Greater Israel” settler-colonial vision – was mobilised to ostensibly “defend” Jewish students from what they claim to be protesters’ anti-Semitism.

Magen Herut plans to expand its “volunteer safety patrols” across Canada and into the United States. Membership requires ideological alignment with Zionism and experience in policing, security, or the military. With more than 50 members, Magen Herut coordinates through WhatsApp groups to patrol up to 15 zones, including university campuses, and to appear at Gaza solidarity protests, where they intimidate attendees. They go on patrol in sizeable groups, wearing black T-shirts that identify them as members of the Magen Herut “Surveillance team”. The group’s leader, Aaron Hadida, a security expert, teaches “Jewish self-defence,” including the use of firearms. Magen Herut works closely with J-Force, a private security firm that provides “protest security” for Israel supporters. J-Force deploys volunteers to pro-Palestine events in tactical gear. Both groups are expected to remain active on campus throughout the academic year.

Zionist activists with the Jewish Defense League (JDL), a Southern Poverty Law Center designated hate group whose stated goal is to “protect Jews from anti-Semitism by any means necessary”, have also been spotted at pro-Palestinian events at the university. The group, which was largely inactive prior to October 7, was deemed a “right-wing terrorist group” by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2001, Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that several “counter-protesters” waved flags with the JDL or the Kahane Chai symbol on them at a small pro-Palestine march at the University of Toronto on September 6. Kahane Chai is a fascistic Israeli group tied to JDL, which advocates for the forced expulsion of Arabs from Israel. Other participants in the Zionist action, the newspaper said, were seen wearing Kahane Chai caps and shouting chants calling for violence against Muslims and Palestinians, including “Let’s turn Gaza into a parking lot.”

The JDL has a long history of racist violence and terrorism. Its members bombed Arab and Soviet properties in the US and assassinated those it labelled “enemies of the Jewish people”, focusing on Arab American activists. They were linked to several 1985 bombings, one of which killed West Coast Regional Director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Alex Odeh; the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre when 29 worshippers were fatally shot in a Hebron mosque during Ramadan; and a 2001 plot targeting US Representative Darrell Issa in his San Clemente, California district office and the King Fahad Mosque in Culver City, California.

The presence of uniformed far-right Zionist “patrol teams” and JDL flags at the University of Toronto is alarming. It means that persecutory tactics long used by Zionists to curb anti-colonial resistance in Palestine and elsewhere are now being imported into North American university campuses, which in the past year became epicentres of anti-Zionist resistance and solidarity between anti-colonial movements in the West.

The aim of these Zionist groups is twofold: fracture, weaken and defame intersectional resistance to white supremacy, which of course includes Zionism, and provide support for US-led Western imperial expansionism and genocide, spearheaded by Israel.

To divert attention away from their far-right ties, fascist roots and blatant aggression against anti-genocide student protesters, the Zionist vigilantes active at the University of Toronto duplicitously frame themselves as Jewish “self-defence” forces.

The concept of “self-defence” has vastly different meanings for the colonised and the coloniser. For the colonised, “self” is tied to cultural identity, ancestral land and vital resources. Whereas for the coloniser, it is grounded in a constructed identity, land theft and the protection of stolen resources along with shifting blame for resistance to colonisation onto the colonised victims. Indeed, the leading Zionist militia from 1920 through the 1940s, the precursor of the “Israel Defence Force”, was named Haganah, meaning “defence” in Hebrew, and was a major force in appropriating Palestinian land and ridding it of its native population. Zionist vigilante groups like the JDL employ the same “self-defence” rhetoric and methodologies used in Palestine since 1948 to justify offensive aggression and colonisation while appropriating Jewish victimhood and conflating it with Zionist criminality. They invoke fear in order to produce subservience and support for their eliminatory agenda. These groups rely on the concepts of deterrence and dehumanisation of Palestinians to justify extreme measures, framing their actions as defensive, thus obfuscating the potential illegality that comes with offensive aggression whilst responding to perceived threats with lethal force.

Zionist vigilante groups on Northern American university campuses target anti-genocide protesters under the guise of “Jewish defence” as a means of defending white supremacy in its Zionist and American forms and fracturing anti-colonial resistance led by Palestinian, Black, brown, Indigenous, immigrant and Jewish anti-Zionists.

In contrast, the anti-colonial alliance, both in North America and globally, is built on a shared understanding that white supremacist oppression is entrenched in systemic racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and imperialism. By presenting a united front against all forms of racism and capitalism, it challenges the colonial and neocolonial establishments. As part of this resistance, it rejects Zionism as a white supremacist, European-driven project, drawing parallels to other manifest destiny ideologies that have fuelled Western settler-colonial ventures, including in the US.

Regardless of the outcome of the upcoming US elections, white supremacy, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism continue to rise across North America. Additionally, the election discourse risks diverting attention from the threats posed by the increasing presence of Zionist groups with direct ties to far-right violence. To challenge it, people, including Jews, must stand against all forms of ethnocentrism and exclusion. The Jewish community’s long history of trauma and persecution should inspire a unified pursuit of justice, freedom and equality for everyone, rejecting Zionist vigilante terrorism.

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

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