

Antisemitism at US Universities Takes Center Stage on Capitol Hill

December 6, 2023 by Dan McCue



Bella Engberg and Talia Khan. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — The four students, each from an elite university, stood pensively beneath Gilbert Stuart's iconic life-size portrait of George Washington, which hangs in the Rayburn room of the U.S. Capitol.

Talia Khan, Bella Engberg, Eyal Yakoby and Jonathan Frieden all looked like they'd prefer to be anywhere but before a phalanx of reporters and cameras, even if that somewhere else was an all-nighter cramming for an end-of-semester exam.

Instead, they were flanked by House Republican leaders and members of the chamber's Education and Workforce Committee, who invited them to Washington on Tuesday to relate their

personal experiences with the rise of antisemitism on American college campuses since the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7.

“This is a very important day,” said Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., a member of the committee.

“Jewish students are facing sustained attacks from fellow students and professors who are openly propagandizing terror ... and in response, campus leadership has cowered to the woke antisemitic mob.”



Eyal Yakoby speaks, while Bella Engberg, Talia Khan and members of Congress look on.

(Photo by Dan McCue)

Noting that the committee was about to hear from the presidents of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Pennsylvania and her own alma mater, Harvard University, Stefanik called their response to the rising tide of antisemitism at their institutions “indefensible” and “enabling.”

“I continue to demand that Harvard President Claudine Gay resign and that Harvard and schools like it are prohibited from collecting taxpayer dollars,” she said.

The first student at the podium was Talia Khan, a graduate student at MIT and president of the university’s Israel Alliance.

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Calling the current atmosphere on the campus “extremely toxic,” Khan, the daughter of a Jewish mother and Afghan Muslim father, said she and other Jews among the student body were subjected to a wave of increasingly threatening incidents that have forced them “to hide their identities and their perspectives.”

She added that she was forced to leave her study group for her doctoral exams this semester after members of the group told her the more than 260 people killed by Hamas at the Nova Music Festival on Oct. 7 “deserved to die because they were partying on stolen land.”

Khan went on to say that matters worsened on the campus after a postdoctoral student at the university began espousing the view that Jewish Israelis “want to enslave the world in a global apartheid system.”

As the situation escalated, she said, MIT administrators failed to enforce their own rules related to antisemitic behavior.

Khan said that indifference empowered an anti-Israel group on campus called the Coalition Against Apartheid, whose members “blocked hallways, stormed the offices of the MIT Israel internship offices and harassed the staff and faculty there.”

In addition, she said, the group, known as CAA, also “invited dangerous outsiders to the campus to join them in yelling hateful and violent chants.”

“This is the same climate of antisemitism that has led to massacres of Jews throughout the centuries. This is not just harassment, this is our lives on the line,” Khan said.

Bella Engberg, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, is a junior at New York University.

“What is it like to
be a Jew at NYU?”
she asked
rhetorically.

“Being a Jew at
NYU is walking to
class and passing
torn and defaced
posters of
innocent hostages
with the words

Jonathan Frieden (Photo by Dan McCue)

‘occupier’ and ‘murder’ written across their faces. ... It is going to
the library to study and being interrupted by unauthorized
protests where students and faculty call for a globalized intifada
revolution ... it is being surrounded by social justice warriors who
say resistance is justified when people are occupied ... and being a
Jew at NYU for me personally has meant being physically
assaulted in the university library by a fellow student just
because I was wearing an American and Israeli flag pin ... and
having my attacker still roam freely throughout the campus. ...
Being a Jew at NYU is experiencing how diversity, equity and
inclusion is not a value that NYU extends to its Jewish students
since Oct. 7.”

University of Penn Student Eyal Yakoby said while he still loves
his university, it has utterly changed in recent weeks with
antisemitic protests, bomb threats and anti-Jewish graffiti —
including Swastikas — becoming the norm.

“I used to dismiss the fear that this could happen as nonsense
and fear mongering, then I was made aware that Penn
recommended students not wear clothing or accessories related
to Judaism,” he said.

Since then, Yakoby said he's seen "hundreds of posters" mocking the hostages taken by Hamas, most of them featuring cows instead of humans.

"Two weeks ago, while on my way to class, I was greeted with chalk writing on a sidewalk. It said, '90% of pigs are gas chambered.'

"I shouldn't be here," Yakoby said, breaking his train of thought momentarily. "I should be studying for exams and taking in every experience as an undergraduate student in my senior year of college.

"I am here because 36 hours ago, I, along with most of my fellow students on campus, sought refuge in our rooms as classmates and professors chanted proudly for the genocide of Jews while igniting smoke bombs and defacing school property.

"The neighboring university's president immediately released a statement describing this as a brazen display of antisemitism. He went on saying silence in the face of the ... demonstration was not an option. Penn's president, meanwhile, said nothing.

"Despite all of this, I am adamant and hopeful that we will not accept, or embrace, this horrific new normal on college campuses," Yakoby said.

The final speaker was Jonathan Frieden, a student from Harvard Law School.

Frieden said he was utterly shocked when more than 30 Harvard University student organizations signed a letter stating that Israel was "entirely responsible" for the Hamas attack in October.

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In a letter titled “Joint Statement by Harvard Palestine Solidarity Groups on the Situation in Palestine,” the organizations, including the Ivy League’s affiliate of Amnesty International, condemned Israel and said the Hamas attack “did not happen in a vacuum.”

Instead the signers said it happened because the Israeli government has forced Palestinians to live in an “open-air prison for over two decades.”

“We, the undersigned student organizations, hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence,” the letter said. “The apartheid regime is the only one to blame.”

“On my way to class, I walked by mobs of people chanting ‘from the river to the sea,’ which is a call for the destruction of the state of Israel,” Frieden said. “More recently they’ve also started chanting ‘we have you outnumbered’ and ‘globalize the intifada.’

“A few weeks ago, a protest involving about 200 people, many of them not law or Harvard students, marched into our building and down the hall, chanting these phrases,” he said. “The dean and others locked their doors for their own safety. I watched one person hide under a desk.

“In addition to being a safety concern, these kinds of disruptive events are clearly against school policy. And yet we have heard nothing from Harvard. No email. Nothing.”

Frieden said his goal in speaking out is not to limit the free speech rights of his fellow students.

“The only thing we’re asking the university to do is to enforce its own politics and ensure safety and a climate conducive to education.”

“I want to be clear, this is not just about the Middle East, this is antisemitism right here in our homes on our campuses,” he added. “It is dangerous, it is going unchecked and everyone that does not join to put a stop to it is part of the problem.”

Eyal Yakoby (Photo by Dan McCue)

After the students left the Rayburn Room to attend the committee hearing, Rep. Kevin Kiley, R-Calif., said their experiences had made clear that this “is a time of reckoning for higher education in the country.”

“We have to ask, ‘How is it that America’s leading ... elite institutions of higher learning have been gripped by such an ancient and retrograde prejudice as antisemitism?’” Kiley said.

“How is it that bureaucracies devoted to diversity, equity and inclusion have turned a blind eye to the targeting of Jewish students on their campuses and in some cases have contributed to that hostile environment?”

“~~Yes~~ ^{A+} this is a time of reckoning for higher education in this ~~country~~. Our universities cost too much. Their degrees deliver too ~~little~~ value and they’ve become among the most intolerant places ~~in the country~~,” Kiley added.

During the hearing that followed, Liz Magill, the president of the University of Pennsylvania, and Sally Kornbluth, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Harvard's Claudine Gay, acknowledged that antisemitism has surged on their campuses since Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

But they said the situation hasn't been caused by the universities, rather, it's part of a broader increase in antisemitism in American society as a whole.

"We have seen a dramatic and deeply concerning rise in antisemitism around the world, in the United States and on our campuses — including my own," said Gay. "I know many in our Harvard Jewish community are hurting."

Later, she said, "Antisemitism is a symptom of ignorance. And the cure for ignorance is knowledge. Harvard must model what it means to preserve free expression while combating prejudice and preserving the security of our community."

All three presidents began their remarks by condemning Hamas explicitly, something they were criticized for not doing in the immediate aftermath of the Oct. 7 attack.

Throughout the hearing, the three administrators were repeatedly pounded by Republicans over their funding, the political slant of their faculty and the antisemitic incidents the students described on their campuses.

Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., the Republican chair of the committee, flat out accused the universities of fomenting the current outbreak of antisemitism, saying, "it did not come out of nowhere."

"There are cultures at your universities that foster it," she said.

But the most fiery exchanges, no doubt, occurred between Stefanik, the fourth-ranking Republican in the House, and Harvard's Gay.

At one point, Stefanik compared students calling for "intifada" on campus with a "Harvard student calling for the mass murder of African Americans."

She then demanded Gay answer "yes or no" to whether she agreed these sayings were protected speech at Harvard.

"You are president of Harvard, so I assume you're familiar with the term 'intifada,' correct?" Stefanik asked Gay.

"Then you understand that the use of the term 'intifada,' in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, is indeed a call for violent armed resistance against the state of Israel, including violence against civilians and the genocide of Jews?" Stefanik said.

"That type of hateful speech is personally abhorrent to me," Gay said.

Stefanik then asked Gay whether hateful statements made by student groups that support Palestinians or their demonstrations violated the school's code of conduct.

"It is at odds with the values of Harvard," Gay said. "We embrace a commitment to free expression, even of views that are objectionable, offensive, hateful."

Stefanik also asked if there would be any disciplinary actions taken against students who called for "intifada" or chanted "from the river to the sea."

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"When speech crosses into conduct that violates our policies, including policies against bullying, harassment or intimidation, we take action," Gay said.

But the Harvard president went on to cite student rights to privacy as the reason why she could not provide details on who was disciplined for their antisemitic behavior or how they were disciplined.

“I will not say more about any specific cases other than to reiterate that processes are ongoing,” Gay said.

The response wasn’t enough for Stefanik.

“Do you know what the number one hate crime in America is?” she asked the university president.

“I know that over the last couple of months, there’s been an alarming rise of antisemitism, which I understand is the critical topic that we are here to discuss,” Gay said.

“That’s correct. It is anti-Jewish hate crimes and Harvard ranks the lowest when it comes to protecting Jewish students. This is why I’ve called for your resignation and your testimony today. Not being able to answer with moral clarity speaks volumes,” Stefanik said.

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