

Sahar Tartak Testimony

House Education and the Workforce Committee

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

“Confronting the Scourge of Antisemitism on Campus”

November 14, 2023

There’s a Jewish concept that encourages bringing light into times of darkness through acts of loving-kindness. So, I’ll begin by dropping a few coins into this charity box.

Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, good morning. My name is Sahar Tartak, and I am an orthodox, Persian-Jewish student at Yale University. Thank you for having me speak. It is an honor, and I appreciate your service to this country. I am humbled before you.

Noting your commitment to democracy and the free world, I want to paint a picture of how, since Hamas’ October 7 massacres, college campuses have become a place for the opposite — a love of Hamas and all the oppression it represents. Since October 7, there has been a 400 percent increase in reported antisemitic incidents of vandalism, harassment, and assault, in comparison to the same time frame in the previous year across America.

Let’s start with Yale, my own university, where I receive death threats for my pro-Israel activism. And Yale, an Ivy League institution, whose administration refuses to provide direct protection to my peers and me. That’s just the beginning.

I haven’t had time to mourn the murder of over 1,400 members of my extended Jewish family across the ocean. I’ve been too busy mourning the loss of my freedom on campus. At an interdepartmentally sponsored Yale event last week titled “Gaza Under Siege,” my pro-Israel peers and I were barred from entry. We pressed our ears against the door for two hours, listening to phrases like “The Israeli state cannot remain the state of the Jewish people.” “Israel aims to inflict as much harm, damage, and death as possible.” They refused to label Hamas “terrorists” and justified their actions, saying “violent resistance movements often emerge in colonized spaces.” An official Yale University response declared that “opinions and positions from people of all backgrounds were expressed respectfully during the program,” but we were kept outside the door.

The week before that, I also didn’t have time to mourn. As a reporter at the Yale Daily News, the oldest collegiate paper in the country, I was too busy dealing with the Daily News’ redaction of my mention of Hamas’ raping women and beheading men from an article I wrote for the paper because the editors deemed these atrocities “unsubstantiated.” Yale’s administration made no comment. The week before that, I didn’t have time to mourn, because I went to film one of the many anti-Israel protests at Yale, where hundreds of my peers gleefully yelled “resistance is justified.” Yale’s administration made no comment. The week before that, I wrote an article about the officially recognized campus group Yalies4Palestine publicly “[celebrating] the resistance’s success,” along with university faculty in attendance. Again, the Yale university administration did nothing.

On campus, I sit in a crowded dining hall and ask myself, “how many of the people in this room would celebrate my death; how many want me dead?”

By now, you have no doubt heard of the egregious physical attacks and intimidation against Jewish students at Cornell, Columbia, and Cooper Union. You have likely heard of the Israeli student at Harvard University who was physically assaulted and taunted with yells of “shame, shame” as he walked on campus – begging his assailants to stop attacking him. At the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a Jewish student was assaulted - punched in the head and kicked in the chest, and his Israeli flag was ripped up by a knife-wielding collegiate peer.

You may not, however, have heard about the hundreds upon hundreds of individual stories of Jewish students who are living in constant fear and intimidation, who have begun calculating their every move since October 7th through a lens of fear. I know a university freshman whose residential counselor laughed contemptuously at a survivor of the Nova music festival massacre for visiting the school to speak. Others have told me that they aren’t comfortable approaching their own professors for help with coursework because those professors are openly pro-Hamas. Another peer slept on a friend's couch because her roommate supports Hamas. My peers and I have begun to recede into Jewish centers exclusively to study, eat, and talk for fear of anti-Jewish peers on campus.

You may ask, how have things escalated to this point across American colleges? The answer can be found directly within university administrations who have allowed these egregious attacks to go on unchecked in the name of academic freedom, and who “all sides” every issue. The Amherst administration responded to the Jewish student being attacked by releasing a statement that denounced all forms of “antisemitism, islamophobia, or any form of bigotry.” However, only one form of bigotry drove the attack: antisemitism.

Multiple university administrations have made similar “all sides” proclamations, unable to condemn anti-Jewish hatred for fear of appearing pro-Israel, and because support for Jews has somehow become synonymous with hatred for Muslims or Palestinians. They certainly have had little to say about those students and faculty who yell “resistance is justified” in reference to Hamas’ burning babies alive in ovens and cutting off mothers’ breasts before their children, other than suddenly rushing to the defense of their academic freedom — even those universities that did not value academic freedom for certain professors before.

These failures can be fixed. There are options. Universities must derecognize and defund student groups that promote violence, call for “intifada,” or support US designated terrorist organizations, such as National Students for Justice in Palestine, which commemorated terrorist leader Abu Ali Mustafa on their Instagram page.

Universities don’t get to feign helplessness. If they fail to respond to antisemitic acts and protect their minority students, they should be stripped of their federal funding. The federal government cannot subsidize hotbeds of antisemitism. The Department of Education should proactively open Title VI investigations, not just receive them passively. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices should be questioned for protecting every minority group other than mine.

This is not an exhaustive list, but I urge you to mobilize on this issue. Do not abandon your Jewish student constituents during this crisis. Academia has turned its back on us. Will you do the same?