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GARY FIELDS

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Genocide, Antisemitism and Freedom of Expression: The Failure of Our Universities



Encampment protest at the University of California, San Diego (May 5, 2024). Photo by Gary Fields.

Over the course of the last sixteen months, the public sphere has witnessed an assault on rights to free expression and freedom of assembly unlike anything since the Communist witch hunts and Lavender Scare of Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. Not only are government officials at all levels participating in this suppression of basic rights associated with the First Amendment. University Administrators are imposing censorship directives against students and faculty who have been speaking out against a genocidal onslaught perpetrated by the State of Israel against the Palestinians of Gaza that has been enabled and supported by the U.S. Government. The source of this military carnage, and the politics of censorship being woven around this assault by Government and university officials, derives from the pervasive influence of Israel and its ideology of Zionism on American politics and cultural life.

What is less understood in this appalling campaign is how Israeli influence, which was formerly restricted to support for the Jewish State in the sphere of American foreign policy, is now recasting domestic politics in the U.S., primarily around First Amendment Rights and the right to assembly. Paradoxically, where Zionist influence is remaking U.S. domestic politics most profoundly is on American University campuses. The complicity of University Administrators in this project of censorship is more than disturbing. These Officials have turned what are supposed to be spaces for the free and open exchange of ideas into surveilled and policed camps of fear and paranoia. How did this occur?

Since 1967, the U.S. has aligned its foreign policy with that of Israel and its primary goal of suppressing Palestinian rights by means of a brutal apartheid regime and an occupation army. At that time, what the U.S. saw in Israel was a partner in a common cause linked to the Cold War. For the U.S., Israel represented a powerful regional proxy capable not only of thwarting Palestinian self-determination, but disciplining those Arab regimes in the region that were aligned with the Soviet Union and supportive of the Palestinian struggle.^[1] From 1967 to present day, the U.S. has supported its ally with a vast arsenal of military hardware making it the single largest recipient of American military assistance and one the most powerful militaries in the world. At the same time, the State of Israel helped create a vast apparatus of political support in the U.S. for the Jewish State, anchored by the American Israel Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

For decades, this lobbying network, which casts its influence over all levels of American life, has successfully bribed and bought almost every single politician in the U.S. Congress and the Executive Branch to do Israel's bidding. The result is that there has been virtually no debate in the chambers of the American Government about Israel and its policies, despite the distasteful brutality of its decades-long rule over the Palestinians that the International Court of Justice has declared to be an illegal military occupation.

During the last 16 months, the U.S. single handedly ensured that Israel's incessant bombardment of Gaza would continue without interruption by sending it weekly shipments of armaments that Israel could in no way produce on its own. All this ordinance was exported illegally to Israel in violation of America's own laws about the use of such weaponry with the help of lies about the matter by Antony Blinken. While all of this is truly sordid, a new element has come into the picture that has played an integral role in what is now playing out on college campuses.

On April 24th of last year, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu broadcast a speech that was recorded in English specifically for an American audience.^[2] In it, he assailed the

protests on U.S. college campuses against the genocidal assault of his military, stating that “antisemitic mobs have taken over leading universities.” In his tirade, Netanyahu also emphasized the one card that Israel plays whenever it is criticized for its human rights abuses and violations of international law. Netanyahu likened the protests on campuses to Nazi pogroms in German Universities in the 1930s while labelling protestors as antisemitic bigots and demanded that University officials punish these protestors. “It has to be stopped,” he intoned.

In this way, the state of Israel, with its perch as a dominant influence in U.S. foreign policy, was now demanding an equally influential voice in American domestic politics involving rights to free expression and rights of assembly. Although aimed at University officials, Netanyahu’s comments, were also a signal to the various branches of the Israel Lobby to target those university institutions that seemingly failed to stem what he charged were the antisemitic mobs on college campuses.

Some universities such as Columbia in New York, had already heeded the call to defend Israel at all costs. In November 2023, five months before students even set up a protest encampment at the University, the Administration at Columbia preemptively banned its chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine, and Jewish Voice for Peace. On April 17, 2024, seven months into Israel’s murderous genocide, protestors at Columbia established the Encampment that would inspire a national and even global protest movement. Less than one week later, dozens of encampments emerged around the country.^[3] It was at this moment that Netanyahu made his demands to University Administrators with his overt reference to antisemitism and his unmistakable directive to shut down the encampments and discipline those students and faculty involved in these antisemitic Nazi pogroms. The message certainly reached Israel’s chief genocide enabler, Joseph Biden. On May 2024, Biden weighed in on the Encampment protests saying “order must prevail” and went on to echo the same kind of rhetoric about antisemitism as his Israeli counterpart. “There should be no place in any campus, no place in America, for antisemitism or threats of violence against Jewish students” he instructed his American audience.^[4] One by one, University campuses were violently cleared of these protests in May, 2024 soon after the speeches of Netanyahu and Biden – including my own campus of UCSD where the Chancellor called in 3 police forces on May 6th to shut down the Encampment and arrest protestors.

What enabled University Administrators to justify these crackdowns while defending their actions was the effort of a consortium of 31 countries known as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) to recast the historical definition of antisemitism. In 2016,

the IHRA crafted a definition of antisemitism with seven separate clarifications of its meaning that dealt specifically with Israel. Numerous organizations spearheaded by Human Rights Watch criticized this definition because it essentially equates criticism of a State (Israel) with the way antisemitism has traditionally been understood which is animus toward Jews and the Jewish people.^[5]

In the U.S., federal agencies now use the IHRA definition of antisemitism to assess compliance with Title VI of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act against discrimination. What this means for universities is that they can be held accountable for failing to correct violations of Title VI that prohibits discrimination, in this case discrimination against Jews. The problem is that with the IHRA definition, the meaning of antisemitism has been extended to include criticism of the State of Israel and its policies thereby making an exception of Israel as being above critique.

Administrators thus justified their abrogation of free speech and rights to assembly by decrying Encampment protests as violations of Title VI that protects minority groups from discrimination but in this case, the protection was reserved not for Jews but for Israel. In this way, University Administrators turned a venerable Civil Rights Era law on its head. They claimed that the protests against a State committing genocide in Gaza with American support, were bigoted, antisemitic acts, and that campuses had become unsafe for Jewish students and Jewish faculty. This fictional discourse of antisemitic bigotry against Jews has spread throughout the community of University Administrators and has assumed the form of newly designed restrictions on speech and protest accompanied by firings, suspensions, and the establishment on campuses of a climate of surveillance and fear.

This massive campaign on college campuses against freedom of expression and rights to assembly has now come into contact with an equally ominous force – the anti-immigrant assault now underway by the current Administration. This convergence of anti-immigrant and anti-Palestinian vitriol has evolved swiftly with recent events.

Last week, in a bizarre paradox, the U.S. Government announced that it was withholding \$400 million from Columbia University for its supposedly hostile antisemitic climate toward Jewish students and faculty. Despite the University's brutal crackdown on protestors against the Israeli genocide against the people of Gaza, and despite Columbia's ongoing crackdown on anti-Israel protest of any kind, such censorship of protest against Israel was apparently not good enough for the Administration and the Zionist networks of lobbyists and donors who dictate policy to both government and universities.^[6]

One week ago, ICE agents apprehended one of these Columbia protestors, Mahmoud Khalil in what is reminiscent of the illegal renditions under George W. Bush's war on terror and spirited him to some unnamed prison location in Louisiana. Columbia officials offered no comment on its own involvement in this appalling violation of the constitutional rights of one of its own students. Trump himself has weighed in on this shameful apprehension with a boastful missive on his Truth Social page in which he gloats: "Following my previously signed Executive Orders, ICE proudly apprehended and detained Mahmoud Khalil, a Radical Foreign Pro-Hamas Student on the campus of Columbia University. This is the first arrest of many to come. We know there are more students at Columbia and other Universities across the Country who have engaged in pro-terrorist, antisemitic, anti-American activity, and the Trump Administration will not tolerate it." Indeed, this is no idle threat.

Commensurate with the kidnapping of Mahmoud Khalil, the Department of Education issued a list of 60 University campuses suspected of harboring antisemitic activity. "Too many universities have tolerated widespread antisemitic harassment and the illegal encampments that paralyzed campus life last year, driving Jewish life and religious expression underground," said Craig Trainor, Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights for the Department of Education. Trainor used the occasion to accuse the Biden Administration of "doing little to hold those institutions accountable." The truth of the matter, however, is vastly different. It is the Biden Administration, following the lead of Netanyahu and the State of Israel, that essentially rolled out the red carpet for precisely this kind of lawless suppression of free speech and freedom of assembly to take place.^[7]

As one of the Universities targeted by the Administration with being a repository of anti-Jewish hate, and as a campus located in San Diego on the border at one of the most critical immigration flashpoints, my own campus of UCSD now finds itself in a perilous predicament. Students at UCSD established a large and spirited Encampment near the Main Library of the University. This Encampment was brutally attacked by three different police units on May 6, 2024 and was one of the most noteworthy where both students and faculty were arrested.^[8]



Police confront Encampment protestors at the University of California, San Diego. Photo by Gary Fields.

At the same time, with the ongoing threats of deporting immigrants, alongside the boastful swagger of Donald Trump on the ICE abduction of Mahmoud Khalil from Columbia, UCSD is poised at the epicenter of a disturbing convergence of anti-Palestinian and anti-immigrant vitriol. With its credentials as an Encampment against Israeli genocide and with a strategic location on the Mexican border, my campus may very well witness visits from ICE agents targeting not just DACA students and the like, but those who have protested Israel's genocide in Gaza. Indeed, University Administrators throughout the country, including at UCSD, have played a duplicitous role in the calamity now unfolding on campuses with the ICE arrest of this student at Columbia by shamefully discarding the idea of the university as a space of open discussion and debate about issues of the day. What is to be Done?

It may seem counterintuitive, but the ongoing crackdown on pro-Palestinian protest and the chilling campaign against freedom of speech and assembly, alongside what is now an intensified assault against immigrant rights, is creating a new set of imperatives for protest. It may very well be time once again to test the water with protests directed both at the protection of immigrant rights, against Israeli genocide, and against the curtailment of our basic rights of free expression and assembly. The situation at Columbia with the abduction of Mahmoud Khalil, and the likelihood of more of these assaults on our rights makes such protest more critical than ever.

Notes.

^[1] <https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/11/15/343218/>

^[2] <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-likens-us-campus-encampments-by-antisemitic-mobs-to-1930s-nazi-germany/>

[3] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68906215>

[4] Steve Holland, “Biden Breaks Silence on College Protest over Gaza Conflict, Reuters,” (May 2, 2024); <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-breaks-silence-college-protests-over-gaza-conflict-2024-05-02/>

[5] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/04/human-rights-and-other-civil-society-groups-urge-united-nations-respect-human>

[6] <https://theintercept.com/2025/03/08/columbia-trump-funding-gaza-israel/>

[7] Noura Erakat, “The Boomerang Comes Back: How the U.S.-backed War on Palestine is Expanding Authoritarianism at Home,” *Boston Review* (February 5, 2025); <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-boomerang-comes-back/>

[8] <https://www.axios.com/2024/04/27/palestinian-college-protest-arrest-encampment>

Gary Fields is a Professor in the Department of Communication at UCSD and the author of [Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror](#). He lives in San Diego.

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