

Testimony to Pennsylvania Senate
Education Committee on Campus
Antisemitism

Thursday July 25, 2024

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Spoken Testimony:

Good morning.

My name is Ben Messafi, I am a proud Jewish student at the University of Pennsylvania.

I am here today, scared and nervous. I am anxious that, like the last, this upcoming academic year will bring more riots, encampments, and harassment of Jewish students.

For over 2 weeks at the end of April, a violent and illegal encampment took over Penn's campus. To the public, it was advertised as "a peaceful protest." But for Jewish students, it meant facing direct calls for our genocide and a violation of our civil rights. A peaceful protest would not have generated 150 direct reports of harassment from Jewish students. In just my personal experience, I encountered the following:

A student wearing a sweatshirt depicting a star of David with rats, a direct reference to Nazi propaganda. Upon asking this person about the design, she seemed aware and proud of its antisemitic connotations.

Myself and other students wearing *kippahs* were called "Nazis" and "Child killers."

Chants of "Al Qassam Make us proud;" Al Qassam refers to the military wing of Hamas.

Protestors telling me "Hamas should do it again" while we were displaying footage of the October 7th massacre, and clapping when the video displayed a woman being raped.
Again, clapping when a woman was shown being raped.

Having to evacuate Hillel, the only safe spot for Jews on campus, because there was an active bomb threat on the building.

Classroom buildings and libraries being blocked and occupied by non-student protestors during finals week.

A tenured Professor commented on Instagram during the encampment "one guy is wearing tefillin, not sure why, but it makes it worse" and liked a tweet stating "Playing the victim is what Jews are best at."

While we sang a song for peace towards the encampment, we heard "globalize the intifada" back, advocating for the international implementation of the suicide bombings that once tormented Israel

And this harassment did not stop at Jewish students. American flags that were placed on Penn's college green were removed and desecrated, and replaced by flags representing the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which is a US-designated terrorist organization.

And after the encampment was taken down, its organizers posted on Instagram “escalate protests to an open intifada in every city, and disrupt all facets of daily life until our people can breathe freely without the taint of the Israeli-American war machine.” And a report just last week from the Department of Homeland Security revealed that Iran was directly involved in funding these encampments, with Students for Justice in Palestine now under federal investigation. This impacts every single American and they are not stopping at Jews. Wake up America, the U.S and the Western World is next, and it is up to us to stop it in its tracks NOW.

Freedom of speech does not mean freedom to incite violence, call for the genocide of Jews, and blatantly violate university policy. And these acts of hate ARE NOT peaceful. There are other ways to protest the ongoing war than to declare war on your Jewish students who have ZERO involvement in an overseas conflict.

Even with the new open expression guidelines Penn released, there is no guarantee of increased protection. Penn public safety posted signs surrounding the encampment on its third day stating “This is trespassing, please leave.” Instead, nobody left, and when I met with public safety officers after being harassed, they said “Sorry, we can’t do anything about this,” When more Jewish students raised concerns, they were advised to avoid that area of campus or go home - Jewish students were advised to avoid the main library during finals week. How can we trust our administration to execute its policy and stand up for their Jewish students? Administrations must be held accountable.

The encampment was against university policy prior to these guidelines, and it took two weeks for the University to enforce the policy. Once the encampment was cleared, officers found homemade weapons in the encampment. AND, the same individuals proceeded to set up an encampment at Drexel, spray painting “We’ll be back” on the Drexel quad when that encampment was subsequently cleared.

When the Quakers established this commonwealth, they valued safety for all faith groups seeking sanctuary. And it is the unity of Pennsylvanians that protected these groups and this freedom in times of crisis. This is not just a Penn problem, it is a problem for every Jewish student in the commonwealth who is scared of being harassed and excluded for being Jewish. This is why I established PA Leads the Fight, a coalition of Jewish students from 8 Pennsylvania universities, uplifting each other's voices and ensuring that *no one is left behind*. Because in Pennsylvania we are neighbors and here for each other. We need to uplift each other, learn from each other, and be strong to show that Jewish students everywhere are fed up, and ready to take action to protect themselves. We know this is hard work, but through peaceful dialogue, community building, and unity, we will soon be in a better place. We will never back down.

I am thankful for this opportunity to speak before you today. As someone who has seen all of this happen first hand, I am today asking for 3 basic items from your committee and Pennsylvania officials:

1. First, hold administrators accountable and ensure that they are enforcing their policies addressing student safety and open expression guidelines on campus and that extra security is provided to Jewish centers on campus.
2. Second, pass a resolution recognizing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism across the state. The only way we can allow for peaceful protest on both sides without any harm to Jewish students is to define exactly what antisemitism means. A large majority of Jewish students endorse this definition, and 35 states have already recognized the definition.
3. Third, Look into the negative environments that are fostered by allowing SJP chapters to use their status in universities to shame and intimidate Jewish students, including outside organizations such as the Philly Palestine Coalition, which is a group of non-Penn affiliates sponsoring these violent protests on campus.

The movement to protect *all* students in Pennsylvania is only getting started and we are united more than ever. There will be a time where Jewish students can feel safe again, and it is your efforts that will help us get there.

Thank you for your time.

Additional Written Information (Will not be spoken)

The Encampment is Self-Destructing: My op-ed published in the Daily Pennsylvanian, UPenn's Student Newspaper: May 7, 2024

More than one week into the encampment on College Green, with over 150 incidents of antisemitism and harassment reported to Penn Hillel, the public endorsement of two United States-designated terrorist organizations, and two American flags planted near the encampment being forcibly removed and damaged by protesters, students have had enough. It is time to end this antisemitic and anti-American encampment now.

On April 26, pro-Israeli and Jewish students sponsored a screening of the Oct. 7 massacre adjacent to the Button on campus, broadcasting the screen in the direction of the encampment. Standing just outside the encampment when the video was playing, I heard three protesters clapping and cheering as a video of an Israeli woman getting raped and paraded in the streets of Gaza was displayed. The night before, I spotted a protester wearing a sweater with a Star of David and two rats depicted on the back, which imitates Nazi-style propaganda from the 1930s.

The following night, protesters were recorded cheering "Al Qassem make us proud, take another soldier down." Al Qassem is the military wing of Hamas, the group behind the Oct. 7 rape, mass murder, and abduction of Israeli civilians that has contributed to the deaths of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians since it took control of Gaza in 2007.

Last Tuesday, I walked near the encampment and saw a large PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) flag flying, which is a U.S.-designated terror organization. PFLP has been behind numerous terror attacks against Israeli civilians, including the hijacking in 1976 that diverted a flight leaving Israel to Entebbe, Uganda, and the raid of a Jerusalem synagogue, killing four in 2014. PFLP also opposes all negotiations with Israel and only envisions a Middle East without a Jewish state.

Even worse, Penn's anonymous social media app, Sidechat, has been filled with an increasing number of pro-Palestinian supporters at Penn speaking out against the encampment, citing the diversion of the encampment from the values of the protest. Instead of protesting for the establishment of a Palestinian state and the end of the war, the encampment has turned this movement into an antisemitic cesspool, where students cannot walk on campus with Judaica items without being harassed by protesters. Even worse, not all members are students. When I attempted to look inside the encampment several days ago, I was approached by two protesters acting as "guards." They did not name themselves, but they both acknowledged that they were not students, just Philadelphia residents with no association to Penn. Why should people outside of the Penn community have the ability to use Penn property to sleep and harass Jewish students? Why are non-Penn affiliates determining who is and who is not allowed on parts of our campus?

On April 29, pro-Palestinian protesters stormed Hamilton Hall at Columbia University, shattering the front windows and taking one security guard hostage. NYPD then forcefully removed the protesters, facing instant backlash. With Columbia's administration being hesitant to clear up the protest, students were able to easily obtain access to the building and vandalize it. As the protests at Penn are continuing to radicalize, the administration must follow through on their promise to clear the encampment before it is too late. Penn could be next.

Supporting the encampment and the groups they endorse is preventing any meaningful action and dialogue from occurring at Penn. Instead of speaking to diverse groups of students about their experiences with the conflict, the encampment is choosing to invite individuals outside of the Penn community to come to Penn and harass Jewish students. Instead of inviting leaders of the Jewish community to speak with students on the other side to discuss issues and common ground, the Chabad rabbi is being denied entry into the encampment because he is visibly Jewish. Instead of making Jewish students willing to talk to pro-Palestinian protesters about points of common ground, Jewish students are being harassed with Nazi-era rhetoric and praising of terrorist organizations that want to annihilate Jews from this planet.

If we want real action and dialogue to occur on this campus, continuing to support an encampment that has turned into an antisemitic hatefest continuing to harass Jewish students is not the answer. There is room for dialogue, there is room for peaceful protest, and there is room for change. There is a difference between a peaceful protest to endorse a cause, and cheering for terrorist groups that actively call for the elimination of Jewish students. Harassing Jewish students is not the best method to get community members to support your cause. Enough is enough.

Resources:

[Guide to Recognizing Anti-Israel Actions as Antisemitic](#) Compiled by American Jewish Committee (AJC), the Global Advocacy Organization for the Jewish People

[Guide for State Legislators to Combat Antisemitism](#) Compiled by American Jewish Committee (AJC)

“Globalize the Intifada.” *How it is Antisemitic and Offensive to Jewish Students:* “The Second Intifada, also known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada, was a period of intense conflict and Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule that began in late September 2000 and continued until 2005. It was characterized by widespread protests, demonstrations, and suicide bombings, resulting in a high number of casualties on both sides, with close to 1,000 Israelis killed or injured by Palestinian terror attacks, including suicide bombings in civilian areas and passenger bus bombings. The phrase “Globalize the Intifada” calls for people from around the globe to participate in rising up against Israel. Since the phrase is most closely associated with the violence of the First and Second intifadas, indiscriminate use encourages targeting institutions, and individuals around the world who show support for Israel, which includes the majority of Jews. Widespread violent actions against synagogues, Jewish homes, cultural centers and individuals taken in the name of resisting Israel demonstrates the need for increased vigilance by those advocating for Palestinian rights against using potentially inciting language.” Source AJC Translate Hate