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United States: Student Mobilizations Against Israel's War Spread

Thursday 25 April 2024, by [SHEPPARD Barry](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2024).

Ever since Israel's war on Palestinians and increasing destruction of infrastructure and mass killings of the population in Gaza, protests have developed on campuses.

The response of supporters of Israel's war have charged that campus pro-Palestinian demonstrations are anti-Semitic. As the killings and destruction have intensified, so to have many types of antiwar protests in American society increased, including on campuses, and so have the demands of Israel's supporters to suppress pro-Palestinian faculty and students.

Recently, at the University of Southern California a South Asian American Muslim student, Asia Tabassum, was chosen by USC to be her graduating class valedictorian, based on her grades.

Almost immediately pro-Israel forces on and off the campus demanded she be removed as valedictorian, because she is Muslim and pro-Palestinian, and she herself was barraged with hate speech.

USC capitulated and announced that she would not give the commemoration address at her class' graduating ceremonies. The University claimed "security concerns" were the reason, but did not explain then or since what those "concerns" were.

Tabassum posted a response on the website of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, saying in part, "I'm not surprised by those who attempt to propagate hatred. I am surprised that my own university — my home for four years — has abandoned me."

Immediately, there were student and faculty protests. This led USC to say there would be no commencement speech by anyone, and then to say that all the outside speakers, including those to be given honorary degrees, would not attend, obviously for fear they might say something pro-Palestinian.

A few days later, a pro-Palestinian student protest in the form of an encampment being held on Columbia University's New York campus was attacked by police, and over 100 arrests were made.

In addition to opposing Israel's war in Gaza, the student were demanding that the University divest its investments in the U.S. massive weapons program being sent to Israel.

This is the most arrested at a protest at Columbia since some 700 were arrested during an occupation by anti-Vietnam war students in 1968.

Prior to the police action on campus, Columbia suspended three women students from the University's historically largely female Barnard College — Isra Hirsi, Maryam Iqbal, and Soph Dinu — for participating in the encampment. Isra Hirsi is the daughter of representative in Congress from

Minneapolis, Minnesota, Ilan Omar, one of two Muslim members of Congress (the other being Rashida Tlaib) and the first woman of color to be elected from Minnesota.

Other protestors were suspended a day later.

Suspension meant not only not being allowed to attend classes, but also denial of their rooms in dormitories or meals in the cafeteria.

Columbia University President, Minouche Shafik, called in the cops to break up the protest. She did this right after being grilled by a witch-hunting Congressional bipartisan committee going after university and college officials to ban pro-Palestinian demonstrations.

Even the police reported that the encampment was peaceful and there was no violence or threats at the encampment. The arrests were made peacefully. Shafik has yet to come up with credible arguments for her action, and the arrested activists were charged for “trespassing” on their own campus!

Columbia students have reacted to the attack by holding actions on the campus every day since. The University, however, is blocking all “outsiders” from the campus, normally open to visitors. One such outsider jumped a fence to participate in the day’s demonstration — that was Cornell West, a well-known Black activist and professor at the Columbia affiliated Union Theological Seminary.

West is also an independent candidate for the presidency in November’s election. He told *Democracy Now* that he lauded the students for “fighting in the face of domination and occupation, and doing it with tremendous determination.”

Amy Goodman reported on *Democracy Now* on April 23: “As Israel’s assault on Gaza enters its 200th day, Palestinian solidarity protests and encampments are spreading on college campuses across the United States, inspired by the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University.

“Here in New York, police raided a student encampment at New York University Monday night. Police arrested more than 150 people, including students and 20 faculty members. Earlier on Monday, police at Yale University arrested 60 protesters, including 47 students who had set up an encampment to demand the school divest from weapons manufacturers....

“Other campuses where encampments are occurring are now in place at numerous other schools, including University of Michigan-Ann Arbor; University of California, Berkeley; University of Maryland; MIT and Emerson College in Boston.”

A theme that has been used to call for suppression of pro-Palestinian demonstrations is that they are aimed to frighten and threaten Jewish students on campuses. The White House has joined this chorus. The New York Times reports:

“President Biden condemned antisemitism on college campuses in a statement on Sunday, three days after more than 100 people protesting the Gaza war on Columbia University’s campus were arrested [\[1\]](#).

“Biden’s statement, which came as part of a lengthy Passover greeting he issued from the White House, didn’t name Columbia directly but said there had been “harassment and calls for violence against Jews” in recent days.

“This blatant Antisemitism is reprehensible and dangerous — and it has absolutely no place on college campuses, or anywhere in our country,” the statement said....

“Earlier Sunday [April 21], the White House issued a separate statement directly in response to anti-Israel protests at Columbia, which are continuing this week as students occupy the university grounds in tented encampments.

“ ‘While every American has the right to peaceful protest, calls for violence and physical intimidation targeting Jewish students and the Jewish community are blatantly Antisemitic, unconscionable, and dangerous,” said the statement from Andrew Bates, deputy White House press secretary.’

“The protest at Columbia University came the same week as many other demonstrations across the country [2] that were meant to highlight Israel’s war in Gaza. Protesters have blocked major roads in New York and San Francisco and airport access roads in Chicago and Seattle.”

Students who are pro Israel’s war, may feel they are increasingly in a minority on most campuses, but the charges of anti-Semitic violence by students protesting the war are baseless and no examples are given.

What is left out of this narrative is that there is a significant section of Jewish students who are part of the pro-Palestinian actions and often play a leading role for example on Columbia, where the Jewish Voice for Peace is playing such a leading role from November, and was one of the organizations Columbia officially banned then, but JVP carried on.

Monday April 22 was the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover, that celebrates the liberation of Jews from Egypt, and has come to mean liberation for all oppressed people.

Celebrations of Passover occurred in many of the occupations. The staunchly pro-Israel *New York Times* did admit that: “On the first night of Passover, the singsong of the Four Questions echoed from Jewish homes and gatherings around the world, including from unlikely, contested spaces: the center of pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia and other universities where demonstrations are taking place.

“As evening fell over Columbia’s tent encampment on Monday, about 100 students and faculty gathered in a circle around a blue tarp heaped with boxes of matzo and food they had prepared in a kosher kitchen. Some students wore kaffiyehs, the traditional Palestinian scarf, while others wore Jewish skullcaps. They distributed handmade Haggadahs — prayer books for the Passover holiday — and read prayers in Hebrew, keeping to the traditional order.”

So much for the “anti-Semitism” of pro-Palestinian students.

One final thought. There have been various commentators who raise the similarity of these occupations to those that occurred in the 1960s. Are we seeing a new wave of student radicalization?

Barry Sheppard

Footnotes

[1] <https://archive.is/ZeCUc>

[2] <https://archive.is/oRqWU>