

Jewish, Muslim students on college campuses feel threatened, scared

News

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Jewish students at Rutgers University and members of the community attend a vigil for Israel on October 25. (AP Photo/Andres Kudacki)

After hundreds of students at the University of California, Berkeley, staged a walkout last week to protest Israel's military strikes in Gaza, Daniel Solomon, a graduate teaching assistant at the school, made a snap decision: Instead of the usual location near Sproul Hall, within earshot of pro-Palestinian groups' chants, he moved his class's meeting place to Berkeley's chapter of Hillel, the national Jewish campus organization.

Solomon said one consideration, given recent tensions on campus, was that the protests might devolve into violence. But more important, he wanted to provide a safe space to his group of mostly Jewish students taking a class on the Holocaust.

“These kids have been barraged with some of the most vitriolic, heinous rhetoric,” said Solomon, 29-year-old Ph.D. candidate in history. “Many of them have felt extremely worn down. I wanted to do something that I thought would be protective of them.”

In the wake of the Israel-Hamas war there has been an alarming rise in incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia, the likes of which students, faculty, and administrators say is unprecedented. Some students fear being targeted, while others describe a general feeling of vulnerability.

At Cornell University last week, threats against the school’s Jewish community were posted on a student message board, prompting the school’s president to call the FBI.

“If I see another pig baby jew I will behead you in front of your parents,” [one message said](#). Another threatened to “bring an assault rifle to campus and shoot all you pig jews.”

A Cornell University junior, Patrick Dai, was arrested Tuesday.

At Tulane University in New Orleans, where the student body is more than 40 percent Jewish, a pro-Palestinian rally led to a melee when one person attempted to set an Israeli flag on fire. A Jewish student ended up with a broken nose.

And at The Cooper Union, a private college in New York City, a dozen Jewish students sheltered in a library last week as pro-Palestinian demonstrators gathered outside banging on doors and windows.

“There’s a tremendous energy connected to a pretty radical version of pro-Palestinian politics that’s very present on campus and that often spills over into very intense hostility toward Israel, Zionism, but also certain forms of antisemitism,” said Ethan Katz, director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Berkeley.

Israel has not made clear how long it intends to continue its ground incursion into Gaza in retaliation for the October 7 attacks by Hamas, and with the death toll of more than 8,000 Palestinians likely to grow, protests are not expected to end soon.

On Monday, the Biden administration convened a meeting presided over by second gentleman Doug Emhoff in which attendees—who included Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League; Sheila Katz, head of the National Council of Jewish Women; and other Jewish leaders—discussed with US Education Secretary Miguel Cardona ways to better protect students from harassment, intimidation, and especially antisemitism.

One proposal at the meeting included more vigorous enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits certain forms of antisemitism and Islamophobia at any school that receives federal funds.

“We shared our concerns, not just for Jewish students, but that all students on a campus would feel safe from discrimination and hate,” said Jacob Blumenthal, CEO of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, who participated in the meeting.

Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim harassment and intimidation has also risen since hostilities broke out in Israel and Gaza. Police and the FBI are investigating a [death threat](#) slipped under the office door of a Palestinian IT employee at American University in Washington, DC. It read, “Go back where you came from. You might get lucky with a missile, and meet your Allah sooner! Death to all Palestinians!”

Consequences for students who support Palestinians have not been restricted to bullying by peers. Executives at Wall Street financial firms have pledged to blacklist students who sign statements criticizing Israel.

At Columbia and Barnard, 144 faculty members signed an [open letter](#) in support of pro-Palestinian student protesters, citing “grave concerns about how some of our students are being viciously targeted with doxing, public shaming, surveillance by members of our community, including other students, and reprisals from employers.”

Interfaith America, a group that helps build bridges of cooperation among different faiths, has been attuned to the growing intolerance, which is not always faith-based.

Todd Green, the organization’s director of campus partnerships, said some schools are better equipped to handle the rising tensions.

“Campuses that are best positioned to weather the storm well and open the door to building deeper, constructive, healthy relationships across political and religious

differences are those who've already been doing this work for some time," Green said.

He cited Elon University in North Carolina, where an October 18 event drew students and faculty for a collection of [roundtable discussions](#) about the Israel-Hamas conflict. The emphasis was not on taking sides but contextualizing the conflict and allowing students to take in a variety of perspectives.

But many students, scarred by mass shootings at schools during their growing-up years, feel triggered by inflamed tensions.

"People in my generation were always conscious of school shootings," said Jacob Finch, a sophomore at Cornell University who is Jewish. "There's definitely a foreboding sense—when's the next tragedy?"

Finch said that since October 7 he's been spending more time in his dorm room—alone. —Religion News Service

*(Editor's note: Religion News Service receives a grant from Interfaith America to train young journalists.)*