



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 14 May 2024

What do the US Student Encampments Mean for the Democrats?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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Unit for Political Studies

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Universities across the United States, including Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and UC Berkeley, have transformed into scenes of protest against the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza in recent weeks. The protesters are demanding that their universities cut off academic relations with and divest from Israel. While most university administrations, under political pressure from major donors, as well as the Israeli lobby, resorted to repressive punitive measures to extinguish peaceful student encampments under the pretext that they were “antisemitic,” some chose to negotiate. While these demonstrations have yet to reach the scale of the major student protests of the late 1960s against the Vietnam War or the 1980s against the apartheid regime in South Africa, they do represent the largest student protest movement in decades. They will not only have repercussions on US universities and their global reputation, but will likely affect the US electoral map in November.

Background of the Protest Movement

Protests in support of the Palestinian cause denouncing Israel have become a prominent feature on US college campuses since the start of the Israeli war on Gaza last October. Student demands call on the Biden administration to end its special relationship Israel and stop providing military aid and to enact an immediate and permanent ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, the students demand from their universities to cease cooperation with Israeli military industries, divest from weapons and technology companies that cooperate with Israel, estimated at tens of billions of dollars of investments, and cut ties with Israeli universities. The protesters are also demanding amnesty for fellow students and faculty members who were fired or sanctioned for their participation in the protest movement.¹

In December 2023, the US Congress jumped into the fray, attempting to intimidate university administrations and force them to act against the students protest movement. A hearing for the presidents of three prestigious universities (Harvard, Pennsylvania, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology-MIT) before the Parliamentary Education and Workforce Committee, was conducted like a McCarthyist investigation, accusing administrators of overlooking “anti-Semitism” and the threat to the safety of Jewish students and faculty on campus. Although many Jewish students have themselves participated in and even organized the protests, the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard were forced to resign under pressure after seeking to balance constitutionally protected “freedom of expression” rights with ensuring the safety of the campus. Meanwhile, the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology remains under ongoing criticism and pressure aimed at pushing her to step down.²

On 17 April 2024, the parliamentary committee held another hearing for the President of Columbia University in New York, Nemat Minouche Shafik. In this case, Shafik focused on her administration’s efforts to fight anti-Semitism instead of protecting freedom of expression and attacked several faculty

1 Explainer: What is Behind the Pro-Palestinian Protests at US Universities? *Reuters*, 3/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3JWtUS3>

2 Ellen Ioanes & Nicole Narea, “What the Backlash to Student Protests over Gaza is Really About,” *VOX*, 3/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/44DVfSa>



members at her university and the protesting students.³ Nevertheless, several legislators subsequently accused her of showing weakness in the face of student protests and called on her to resign. In expression of their dissatisfaction with Shafik's testimony, some Columbia University students set up a Gaza solidarity encampment on the university's campus, reiterating their demands that the university divest from companies linked to Israel and sever academic ties. Shafik responded by calling the New York Police in an attempt to break up the camp. However, within a few days, university encampments spread across the country, inspiring universities abroad in Canada, Britain, France, Australia, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, and Mexico. On 30 April, the New York Police stormed the Columbia University campus after students occupied Hamilton Hall, arresting dozens and destroying the encampment. So far at least 2,400 students have been arrested on 46 US college campuses since 17 April.⁴

Republicans in Congress are working on a legislation to target university funding, including tax credits, federal research grants, and student financial aid.⁵ In early May, a large majority of Republicans and some Democrats approved the draft "Antisemitism Awareness Law," which adopts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. This definition conflates criticism of Israel with hate speech against Jews in examples appended to the definition, which Congress makes part of the definition. It states that "argeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity [... and] Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor [and] Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation" are all forms of antisemitism.⁶

Biden and the Democrat Dilemma

President Biden and the Democrats face a real dilemma as a result of the student protests. The educated youth fall within Biden's electoral pool, which is reflected in his administration's attempt to balance between protecting freedom of speech and the right to peaceful protest with their desire to root out the "anarchy", "violence", and "antisemitism" that they claim these protests entail on the other hand. This also explains the division of Democratic representatives over their position on the student protests, with a clear generational division within the Democratic camp regarding the position on Israel and its onslaught in Gaza.

Biden's attempts to create a balance were clear in his statement condemning the "antisemitic protests" while also condemning "those who don't understand what's going on with the Palestinians"⁷ Biden

³ Annie Ma & Collin Binkley, "Columbia's President Rebutts Claims She Has Allowed the University to Become a Hotbed of Antisemitism," *Associated Press*, 17/4/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3QGN6HA>

⁴ Kathleen Foody et al., "Striking Deals to End Campus Protests, Some Colleges Invite Discussion of their Investments," *Associated Press*, 3/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3UV7qHo>

⁵ Michael T. Nietzel, "After Grilling College Presidents, Congress Takes Aim at their Funding," *Forbes*, 5/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3V6Czj>

⁶ "Working Definition of Antisemitism," International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 8/10/2020, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3WEsbZs>

⁷ Kathryn Watson, "Biden Condemns 'Antisemitic Protests' and 'Those who don't Understand What's Going on with the Palestinians'," *CBS News*, 22/4/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3UGdgem>



seemed to be trying to express sympathy for the goals of the demonstrators without supporting their methods.⁸ Two days after the NYPD dispersed the student encampment at Columbia University, Biden said that the ongoing protests are “putting to test two fundamental US principles. The first is the right to free speech and for people to peacefully assemble and make their voices heard. The second is the rule of law. Both must be upheld.” He added, “There should be no place on any campus, no place in America for antisemitism or threats of violence against Jewish students. There is no place for hate speech or violence of any kind, whether it’s antisemitism, Islamophobia, or discrimination against Arab Americans or Palestinian Americans.”⁹ Yet he continued to lean in favour of the Israeli narrative, by painting the protests as disruptive, chaotic, and antisemitic, an image that does not hold up to reality given that most of the violence has been perpetrated by security forces and Zionist counter-protesters.

Within the Democratic Party, the tensions are more evident. Congress leaders, such as Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, have adopted defamatory rhetoric against the student protests. Indeed, the latter urged the House Speaker, Republican Mike Johnson, to expedite the introduction of the draft “Antisemitism Awareness Act,” on the basis that “the effort to crush antisemitism and hatred in any form is not a Democratic or Republican issue. It’s an American issue that must be addressed in a bipartisan manner with the fierce urgency of now.”¹⁰ Meanwhile progressive representatives, such as Rashida Tlaib, Jamal Bowman, Cori Bush, and Ilhan Omar strongly support the student protests on the basis that “dissent is a fundamental American value.”¹¹

The dilemma for Biden and Democratic leaders, in general, is how to deal with youth groups in American society. A Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted in March 2024, for example, showed that Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 preferred Biden over Donald Trump by only 3 points (29 percent for Biden compared to 26 percent for Trump), noting that Biden had won the youth vote by 24 points in 2020.¹² According to a second poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in April, 33 per cent of 18 - 29 year olds sympathize with the Palestinians, compared to 14 per cent who sympathize with Israel, and 21 per cent who sympathize with both parties. The percentage of those who sympathize with Palestinians leaps to 47% within the same age group among Democrats or those who lean blue, with only 7 per cent expressing sympathy with Israel, and 23 per cent with both parties.¹³ Similarly, a third opinion poll conducted by Quinnipiac University in April showed that of registered American voters between the ages of 18 and 34, only 25 per cent of them supported the military aid provided by the Biden administration to Israel, compared to 66 percent who opposed it.¹⁴

8 Patrick T. Brown, “Opinion: Biden Needs to Disavow the Protesters,” *CNN*, 1/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4bzyP7n>

9 “Remarks by President Biden on Recent Events on College Campuses,” The White House, 2/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3y8o8Kv>

10 Ewan Palmer, “Joe Biden, Top Democrats Turn on Pro-Palestinian Protesters,” *Newsweek*, 3/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4byw5qL>

11 Ibid

12 Trevor Hunnicutt & James Oliphant, “Campus Protests Challenge Biden Re-election Campaign and Democrats,” *Reuters*, 2/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4b4Mctx>

13 Laura Silver, “Younger Americans Stand out in their Views of the Israel-Hamas War,” Pew Research Center, 2/4/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4bflgtV>

14 Hunnicutt & Oliphant



This was reflected in the behaviour of the College Democrats of America, the student wing of the Democratic Party, which is trying to win over voters of generation (Z). It supported the student protests because, according to the organization, it has “the moral clarity to see this war for what it is: destructive, genocidal, and unjust,” condemning university administrators for relying on the police to disperse them and arrest students. It also condemned President Biden and the leaders of the Democratic Party in Congress for not committing Israel to an immediate and permanent ceasefire, completing a prisoner exchange deal, and pushing for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The organization said in a statement, “As young voters, we are well aware that come November, our votes will determine who wins the White House. The White House has taken the mistaken route of a bear-hug strategy for Netanyahu and a cold-shoulder strategy for its own base and all Americans who want to see an end to this war.”¹⁵

In contrast, the Biden camp argues that the repercussions of the war in the Gaza Strip on his chances of winning a second presidential term are being exaggerated. They point out that the small numbers of demonstrators do not reflect the 41 million eligible voters from Generation Z to vote in November 2024.¹⁶ Others argue that anger over the crackdowns on US universities is directed more toward university presidents and local officials than Biden himself.¹⁷ The Biden team believes that the majority of young people will not vote on the basis of the position on the Gaza war, but rather on the basis of domestic issues, such as the economy, climate, and abortion.¹⁸ They allude to a several opinion polls that they say support their analysis, such as the one conducted by the Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School, which found that 51 per cent of 18 - 29 year olds support a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. In contrast, 10 per cent oppose a ceasefire and only 18 per cent support Biden’s handling of the war. However, the poll also found that this segment of the population will not vote on the basis of Biden’s policy on the Gaza Strip or any other foreign policy issue, as they are more concerned with domestic issues, such as inflation, health care, and housing.¹⁹

According to another opinion poll conducted by *The Economist/YouGov*, 63 per cent of young people said that they did not attend any type of political protest, gatherings, or demonstrations.²⁰ On this basis, in recent weeks, the White House has launched a series of measures trying to court young people, such as announcing new student loan relief measures and moving forward with steps to reduce criminal penalties on marijuana.²¹

However, some warn of a flaw in the Biden presidential campaign’s calculations if it underestimates the impact of his complicit policy with Israel in its war in the Gaza Strip. For example, Senator Bernie

15 Maggie Astor, “College Democrats Back Protests and Criticize Biden’s Israel Policy,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3wyHjge>

16 Hunnicutt & Oliphant.

17 Gregory Krieg & Michelle Shen, “Young Democrats Face Gaza Blowback as they Try to Mobilize Students for Biden,” *CNN*, 4/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4dAUrSy>

18 Hunnicutt & Oliphant.

19 “Harvard Youth Poll,” Institute of Politics at Harvard Kennedy School, 47th Edition, Spring 2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3ygOdHw>

20 “The Economist/ YouGov Poll,” *YouGov Today*, 28-30/4/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3UXy2HK>

21 Hunnicutt & Oliphant.



Sanders warned that Biden is risking his presidency if he continues his approach of supporting Israel without limits, and that the war in the Gaza Strip might become “Biden’s Vietnam.”²² Many Democrats fear that the continued unrest on US streets and college campuses will cast a shadow on the Democratic National Convention, to be held in Chicago in August 2024, where Biden will be formally nominated for the position of president. After all, many progressive young people consider the protests against Israel as part of the wider struggle for social justice; for them, the Palestine question is linked to local issues such as racial discrimination.²³

Conclusion

Although the student protests are not expected to successfully put an end to US complicity in the Israeli genocide in Gaza and force universities to divest from Israel, they have managed to stir up a public debate about the limitless US support for Israel and its crimes. In addition, transformations within the ranks of the Democratic Party appear profound, especially among young people, and this is what most worries Israel and its US support base. From here, Netanyahu’s condemnation of and incitement of the student protests is understandable. The Zionist lobby and its allies in the US have lost the hearts and minds of the American youth, and their attempts to intimidate this generation and force them to choose between their future careers and their moral convictions and humanity have not succeeded. For the first time since the establishment of Israel, there seems to be potential for a change American Zionist bias, as long as this momentum is properly maintained.

²² Seung Min Kim, “Bernie Sanders Says Gaza may be Joe Biden’s Vietnam. But he’s Ready to Battle for Biden over Trump,” *Associated Press*, 7/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3QivKdg>

²³ Daniel Block, “Will Biden have a Gaza Problem in November’s Poll?” *The Atlantic*, 1/5/2024, accessed on 12/5/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4bC2tsP>