

[Dr. Zunes was also quoted in the University of San Francisco student newspaper, The Foghorn](#) May 9, 2024 ,during the peak of the protests to give a historical perspective: “The big difference [between encampments then and now is that] we’re seeing is that the pushback from the government and from university administrations and state governments in some places has been much, much more severe,” USF professor and expert Stephen Zunes said. “I’m thankful that, thus far, both the protesters have not been provocative, and that the administration has been pretty mellow... I think [encampments] can be quite effective in keeping an issue front and center because [they’re] quite visible. This is a tactic that was first used on [college campuses](#) back in the 1980s during a previous divestment campaign targeting apartheid South Africa.”



“[The apartheid protests] took an issue that was far away and brought it close to home, and it got people talking about it. The majority of American colleges and universities never divested from South Africa, but the movement gave rise to a broader movement across the country demanding sanctions against [the apartheid],” Zunes continued. “Eventually, after several years of these protests in college campuses, the United States finally imposed sanctions in South Africa.” Photo by Samantha Avila Griffin/SF Foghorn.

Americans for Middle East Understanding, Sept. 28, 2024, By Stephen Zunes

[Gaza War Prompts Attacks on Academic Freedom](#)



During the wave of campus protests opposing the US-backed war on Gaza and calling for divestment from Israel, students weren’t the only demonstrators to face arrest; supportive faculty members were also caught up in the crackdown.

At Columbia University, where president Minouche Shafik [was pressed](#) to resign by members of Congress for being too lenient toward the protesters, the university’s School of Public Health [blocked](#) a South African faculty member from teaching about the health impacts of settler colonialism. Shafik [has also placed](#) professors who have used terms like “settler colonialism” or “apartheid” in the context of Israel under investigation for alleged anti-Jewish discrimination, and has removed professors from teaching assignments in response to complaints by right-wing students.

When Shafik [testified](#) before Congress in mid-April 2024, she announced that Middle Eastern Studies professor Joseph Massad [had been removed](#) as chair of the university’s Academic Review Committee following claims by Republicans that he had said Hamas’s murder of Jews was “awesome, astonishing, astounding, and incredible” – even though he [never said](#) anything of the sort. She also failed to correct false claims by Republican committee members regarding Columbia Law Professor [Katherine Franke](#), stating that she and Massad were under investigation for discriminatory remarks.

As Irene Mulvey, national president of the American Association of University Professors, [told](#) The New York Times, “We are witnessing a new era of McCarthyism where a House committee is using college presidents and professors for political theater. President Shafik’s public naming of professors under investigation to placate a hostile committee sets a dangerous precedent for academic freedom and has echoes of the cowardice often displayed during the McCarthy era.”

And Columbia isn't the only university where faculty feel their academic freedoms are being steadily revoked.

Indiana University faculty have [overwhelmingly endorsed](#) a vote of no confidence in their president, provost, and vice provost for suspending a tenured political science professor for a full year from teaching or advising – without the normal review process – after he hosted a talk by an Israeli-American peace activist that the university [tried to ban](#).

Jodi Dean, a tenured professor at Hobart & William Smith College and a noted political theorist, has been [suspended](#) from teaching duties as a result of writing a [blog post](#) supportive of the Hamas attack. Although there had been no complaints from students about their interactions with Dean, the college's president [claimed](#) that she had led students to feel “threatened in or outside of the classroom.” While her essay was widely condemned, even by pro-Palestinian faculty, there has been no such disciplinary action against professors who have defended the far greater violence against civilians by US-backed Israeli forces.

Professor Sang Hea Kil, an associate professor of justice studies at San Jose State University, who was serving as a liaison between pro-Palestinian campus protestors and university administration, has been suspended and is under investigation for disciplinary action following false charges that she was actively encouraging students to violate university policies.

At Texas Tech University, Jairo Fúnez-Flores, an assistant professor of curriculum studies and teacher education, had [criticized](#) US policy toward Israel-Palestine on social media and was [suspended](#) after unsubstantiated claims of antisemitism appeared on a right-wing website. Similarly, at New York University, a popular adjunct who is critical of Israel was [suspended](#) due to complaints that were not revealed to him or the public. At the University of Arizona College of Education, an assistant professor and community liaison were [placed on leave](#) for leading a discussion about civilian casualties in Gaza. An adjunct professor in American cultural studies at Washington University was [“relieved of all job duties”](#) and “prohibited from being on any part of the University campus” after taking part in a pro-Palestinian demonstration in which he and other peaceful protesters were arrested.

At Smith College, an adjunct lecturer in dance, Olive Demar, was fired because her syllabus – which had been prepared the previous summer – included a reading on the relationship between concert dance and settler colonial violence and displacement.

College administrators are not immune either. At Sonoma State University, President Mike Lee was placed on administrative leave on grounds of insubordination and later forced to resign for agreeing to a deal with pro-Palestinian protesters. The University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts canceled its search for a new associate dean of diversity, equity, and inclusion and decided to leave the position vacant rather than allow Professor Sima Shakhari, who had been personally invited to apply for the position by colleagues, to assume the position following false charges by outside groups that they supported Hamas.

Graduate student instructors and teaching assistants have been particularly vulnerable and, in several instances, have been [removed](#) for simply noting the humanitarian consequences of Israel's war on Gaza.

Administrations have been interfering with curriculum as well. At Albany Law School, a professor was [ordered](#) to unpublish a law review article by a prominent US legal scholar and a legal briefing issued by a respected US civil rights organization related to Israel-Palestine.

Unfortunately, the Biden Administration, rather than fighting this crackdown on academic freedom, has been supporting it. The Department of Education has opened a [Title VI investigation](#) into the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill because a Black professor in the Department of Communication said in a class that

“Israel and the United States do not give a shit about international law or war crimes.” Such criticism of US policy, according to the Biden Administration, may constitute discrimination against Jews.

Biden also [launched](#) an investigation against a George Washington University psychology professor for alleged antisemitism for critical comments about Israel days after an independent investigation found [no evidence](#) to support the charges.

Faculty, however, are fighting back, particularly in defense of their students. At [Columbia](#), [Barnard](#), the [University of Texas](#), and elsewhere, there have been walkouts and work stoppages. Faculty senates have condemned administrations for their violations of academic freedom, issued [no confidence](#) resolutions against their administrations, and have provided support – such as food deliveries – for students in their encampments.

Scores of faculty members have also been arrested, risking their careers and even physical safety.

At Indiana University, four professors [were detained](#) trying to protect students engaged in peaceful protests in a recognized free speech zone on campus, and have since been banned from campus for one year. At Washington University, historian Steve Tamari was [brutally beaten](#) by police while supporting peaceful demonstrators and [was hospitalized](#) with multiple broken ribs and a broken hand. Even faculty observers who were not participating in the protests themselves have become targets, such as at Emory University, where economics professor Caroline Frohlin was [body slammed](#) during her arrest and Noelle McAfee, philosophy department chair, [was also arrested](#). At Dartmouth, Annelise Orleck, the 65-year-old head of the Jewish Studies program, was twice [pushed to the ground](#) while being arrested and initially banned from campus for six months, although that was later rescinded.

The crackdown is having an impact. A survey of Middle East Studies faculty [revealed](#) that “82 percent of all US-based respondents, including almost all assistant professors (98 percent), said that they self-censor when they speak professionally about the Israeli-Palestinian issue.”

While US faculty have long been outspoken on controversial issues, these attacks on academic freedom are the worst in nearly 60 years. While they are in part related to pressure from right-wing Zionist groups and donors, these actions can best be understood in light of the broader attack by the right against higher education as a whole.

Representative Elise Stefanik, Republican of New York, for example, has [refused](#) to condemn Donald Trump’s antisemitic comments and associations and has touted the Great Replacement Theory and other antisemitic tropes; she is now leading the charge against anti-war and pro-Palestinian faculty for alleged antisemitism. The attacks that led to the forced resignation of Harvard University president Claudine Gay were orchestrated not by Zionist groups, but by figures like conservative activist [Christopher Rufo](#), who was also behind the assault on critical race theory.

And it is no accident that a disproportionate number of faculty targeted have been female, queer, and people of color.

It is also part of the right’s anti-intellectual agenda: Just as the overwhelming majority of Latin American scholars and other university faculty back in the 1980s opposed Reagan’s support for the Salvadoran junta and Nicaraguan Contras, most Middle Eastern scholars and other faculty have opposed Biden’s support for Israel’s war on Gaza, as they did his previous support for the US invasion of Iraq. The reason for this is simply that intellectuals tend to be more knowledgeable about their subject matter and less motivated by ideology than policymakers. This is why, for example, climate scientists are more concerned about climate change than officials in Washington. By claiming that it is the scholars who are biased rather than the US government, supporters of US backing of Israel’s war and occupation, like supporters of weaker environmental legislation, can sow doubt among the public as to who to trust. And, by using antisemitism as a wedge, they can sometimes get moderates and liberals to naively believe them.

So, while the right may be taking advantage of concerns of antisemitism, this disturbing trend should not be seen in isolation. What’s happening on campuses may only be the beginning.

Stephen Zunes is Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco. This piece is based largely on the article, “The New Assault on Academic Freedom,” which appeared on the website of The Progressive magazine on May 15, 2024.