

UNIVERSITIES AS A PLACE FOR DIALOGUE? ANTISEMITISM ON CAMPUSES

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Antisemitism is an increasing concern across European universities, where Jewish students and faculty are often exposed to hostility, discrimination, and, at times, targeted harassment. Recent studies and reports indicate a steady rise in antisemitic incidents within academic institutions, bringing this issue to the forefront of discussions among European governments and universities.¹

Moving forward, governments and universities must collaborate to establish policies that prioritize student safety, promote educational initiatives fostering mutual understanding, and implement robust measures to distinguish legitimate discourse from hate-fueled speech. By adopting these new strategies, they can safeguard students' rights and uphold the integrity of academic spaces across Europe.

Context and Current Situation

European educational institutions over the last year have struggled to effectively address antisemitism, due to either a lack of stringent anti-discrimination policies or inconsistent enforcement of existing laws. Since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, Jewish students have been subject to harmful and discriminatory rhetoric both in class and around campus.

A report by Alums for Campus Fairness (ACF) revealed that 83 percent of Jewish students considered antisemitism to be a "very serious problem", with nearly 8 in 10 Jewish students avoiding places on campus over safety concerns. Additionally, 60 percent of respondents reported that a faculty member had made an offensive antisemitic remark to them or someone they knew, and 58 percent of Jewish students reported that they or someone they knew had been physically threatened on campus for being Jewish.²

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Escalating Antisemitism on Campuses

Antisemitism is rising in European universities, with Jewish students facing discrimination, harassment, and threats. Many avoid certain areas on campus, and a significant number feel unsafe expressing their identity. Clearer policies, like adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, can help distinguish legitimate discourse from hate speech and protect Jewish students.

Social Media as a Catalyst

Antisemitic rhetoric and misinformation spread rapidly through platforms like Instagram and X, fueling resentment and hostility on campuses. Universities should incorporate media literacy education to counter these narratives.

Mental Health Challenges

Hostile environments have caused Jewish students to experience anxiety, isolation, and fear of openly identifying as Jewish. Expanding mental health services and providing counselors trained in identity-based discrimination can address these issues.

Policy and Oversight Gaps

Ambiguities in anti-discrimination policies allow antisemitism to persist unchecked. Creating roles like antisemitism commissioners and implementing systems for tracking and addressing incidents can ensure accountability and proactive responses.

Current anti-discrimination policies struggle to tell the difference between criticism of Israel and discriminatory speech. Therefore, anti-Israel rhetoric which hides antisemitism is oftentimes shared openly. Such practice has created a legal loophole, allowing open discrimination against Jewish students on campus, where attacks on Israel often spill over into hostility towards Jewish individuals and organizations.³ Free-

dom of speech is a cornerstone of academic discourse; however, when it is weaponized to propagate antisemitism, it ceases to be freedom of speech and becomes hate speech, undermining the fundamental principles of equality and mutual respect. Without clear policies that distinguish between legitimate critique of Israeli policies and antisemitism, universities inadvertently enable a hostile environment, leaving Jewish students vulnerable to targeted prejudice and exclusion. Strengthening these frameworks is crucial to protecting both academic freedom and the personal safety of all students. This can include measures such as adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism as a guiding standard.

Key Drivers of Antisemitism on Campus

While critical analysis of colonialism and state power rightfully belongs in academia, some campus movements focused on Palestinian solidarity have increasingly used post-colonial theory to demonize Israel, fostering a hostile environment for Jewish students and staff. Organizations such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) have been accused of intimidation, alienation, and hate speech, all under the guise of legitimate political protest.⁴ University administrations must recognize anti-Jewish sentiments in these movements and deal with them appropriately.

A best practice example to raise awareness among future educators is the Center of Critical Education on Antisemitism in (Religious) Education at the University of Wuerzburg. The center focuses on antisemitism education and didactics for students entering the teaching profession. Additionally, it works to establish structures within universities and schools to combat antisemitism and foster inclusive educational environments.⁵

Social Media and Misinformation

Social media has been a key driver in spreading antisemitic content following October 7, with misinformation and biased narratives proliferating across platforms. In particular, platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok have seen a surge in inflammatory content that conflates Jewish identity with political stances on Israel, often perpetuating

harmful stereotypes and falsehoods. These narratives, reaching students and faculty alike, fuel a sense of resentment toward Jewish individuals on campus, exacerbating hostility and fostering an environment where antisemitism can flourish.⁶

Aftermath

Since the events of October 7, the mental health impact on Jewish students has intensified, with a notable rise in feelings of isolation and anxiety as antisemitic rhetoric surges on campuses. Data from recent studies show that around 44 percent of Jewish students and recent graduates feel unsafe openly identifying as Jewish, with 81 percent avoiding certain campus areas and events due to concerns over antisemitic incidents.^{7/8} For many, the psychological toll is considerable as they face hostile narratives in classrooms, on social media, and in casual discussions. This fear has led some students to conceal their Jewish identity altogether, contributing to a deepening sense of exclusion and a growing mental health crisis among Jewish students in educational institutions.⁹

The increasingly hostile environment has hindered many Jewish students from fully engaging in campus life.¹⁰ The high rate of students concealing their Jewish identity highlights a climate where openly expressing one's heritage or religious beliefs is met with suspicion or hostility. Fear of backlash or misinterpretation makes Jewish students hesitant to voice their views, particularly on topics related to Israel, which has led to a withdrawal from academic discussions and campus activities. This marginalization not only affects the individual students but also reduces the diversity of perspectives in campus discourse, impacting the inclusivity and richness of the academic community as a whole.¹¹

Following the Hamas attack on October 7 and the following events, the University of Strasbourg experienced a surge of antisemitic offenses, including graffiti and physical assaults. Le Monde notes that "one morning in April, students on the University of Strasbourg campus discovered a new series of tags that had appeared overnight, including the phrases '40,000 dead in Gaza, France complicit, stop arming Israel', 'once a settler, always a settler', and 'Palestine will live'."¹² University president Michel Deneken added that "we've

been finding them every morning since October 7". In response, the university administration actively combated this rise by emphasizing the need to maintain a forum for debate on contentious topics like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without fostering hatred. President Deneken insisted on supporting all students and addressing expressions of hate promptly. The administration introduced reporting mechanisms for antisemitism or racism, aiming to encourage openness and to create a safe environment for all students.¹³

Call for Change

Universities should adopt or strengthen policies that clearly define antisemitism, ensuring that faculty, staff, and students understand that antisemitic behavior will be met with disciplinary action. Adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism would help universities to recognize and fight antisemitism on campus.¹⁴

Universities should provide secure, anonymous reporting channels for students and staff to report antisemitic incidents while openly publicizing them so that all staff and students are aware of their existence. Furthermore, the introduction of positions such as an antisemitism commissioner can help universities address Jewish students' concerns.¹⁵ Universities and governments should also create a database to track and analyze antisemitic incidents across campus, using the data to draw necessary conclusions.

Education and awareness training on antisemitism, possibly as part of a broader training on diversity and inclusion for all students and staff, can not only convey knowledge but also open channels of dialogue to prevent hateful comments and protests in the future. Education should include the historical roots of antisemitism and how modern forms, like anti-Zionism, can impact Jewish students on campus.¹⁶

Universities should employ Jewish chaplains so that Jewish students on campus have a safe space to voice their concerns. Additionally, mental health services should be expanded to include support for students dealing with trauma from antisemitism, with counselors specifically trained in handling religious or iden-

tity-based discrimination. The University of Wuerzburg has implemented several measures to combat antisemitism on campus. For example, the university established an anti-discrimination helpdesk to support university members experiencing discrimination, including antisemitism. This service offers confidential counseling and outlines possible steps and support mechanisms. Individuals can report incidents anonymously online or seek in-person consultations. Furthermore, the university appointed Dr. Isabel Fraas as the antisemitism commissioner to provide specialized support and address antisemitic incidents within the university community. Measures like these can significantly help fight antisemitism on campuses.¹⁷

Universities across Europe could benefit from exploring a range of approaches to address the rising tide of antisemitism on campuses. One key area of focus might be the development of clear and comprehensive policies that explicitly define antisemitism, for example, the IHRA definition. This would facilitate the discussion on legitimate political discourse versus hate-fueled rhetoric, ensuring that antisemitic behavior is recognized and addressed appropriately.¹⁸

Finally, investing in research and data collection could provide universities with a deeper understanding of antisemitism's manifestations on campuses. Regularly and transparently sharing these findings could encourage meaningful dialogue and inform the development of evidence-based policies. Together, these measures could help universities balance their commitments to freedom of speech and academic debate with the urgent need to create safe and inclusive environments for all students. Universities should include Jewish organizations across Europe in developing their measures in their fight against antisemitism.

Antisemitism at European universities demands immediate action from policymakers, educators, and university administrators. By strengthening policies, fostering education, and ensuring accountability, institutions can protect Jewish students and reaffirm their commitment to inclusivity. Universities must remain places of safety, learning, and diverse perspectives—values that are fundamentally threatened by antisemitism.¹⁹

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This project is supported by:

Federal Chancellery
Republic of Austria

Federal Ministry
of the Interior
and Community

ZukunftsFonds
der Republik Österreich

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