

# **A YEAR OF CAMPUS CONFLICT AND GROWTH:**

**An Over-Time Study of the Impact of the  
Israel-Hamas War on U.S. College Students**

Report to the Jim Joseph Foundation

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# Introduction

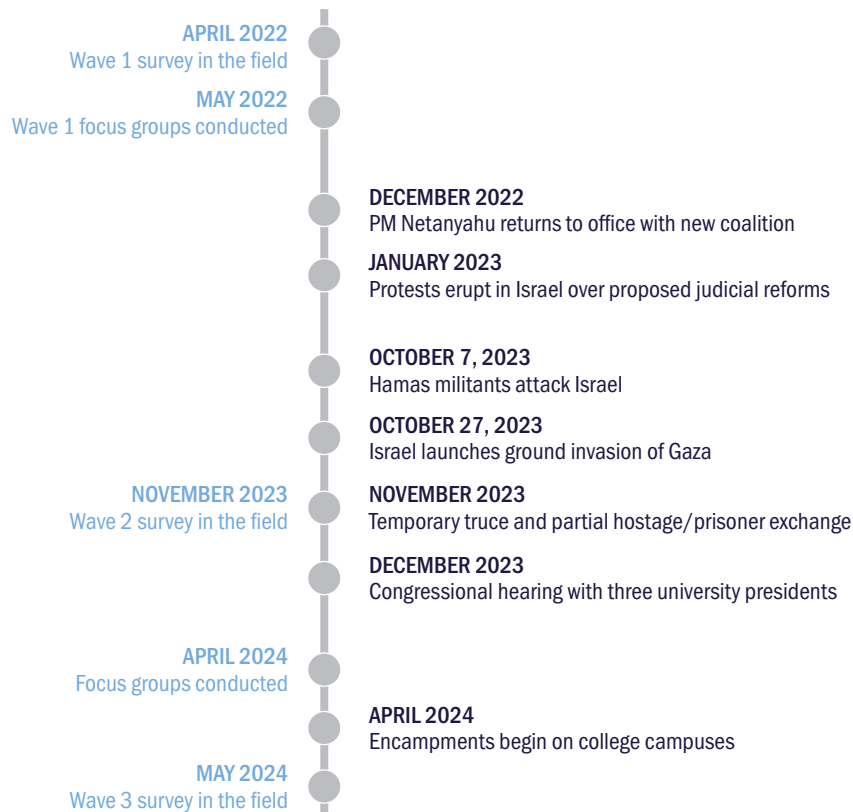
The October 7, 2023 attack on Israel set off a devastating war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas. The attack also set into motion a turbulent year in American higher education. As Jewish Americans began learning of the brutality of Hamas's strike, they simultaneously learned that activists on college campuses were blaming Israel for Hamas's rampage.<sup>1</sup> Some activists went so far as to praise Hamas's tactics.<sup>2</sup> Israel's subsequent ground invasion in Gaza galvanized pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel protesters on campuses across the United States. According to our data, by the end of the school year, about 1 in 5 college students participated in a pro-Palestinian protest or event.

Depending on their campus, students navigated demonstrations, arrests, and media presence throughout the school year. Jewish students confronted chants calling for intifada, signs alleging that Zionism is evil, hostility in classrooms and social settings, and protests targeting Jewish organizations on campus. Many Jewish students processed these events while also trying to develop their own thoughts on what Israel means to them and what to make of the politics of the Middle East.

The activism on campuses led to major turmoil in university communities, as students, faculty, administrators, and boards of directors disagreed about the nature of antisemitism, the limits of free speech, and whether universities had created toxic activist cultures inhospitable to those holding minority viewpoints, including many Jews.

These disputes garnered significant press coverage, particularly as political leaders entered the fray. In a high-profile hearing in Congress, a U.S. Representative asked university presidents of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania whether "calling for the genocide of Jews" was allowed under the codes of conduct of their universities.<sup>3</sup> Two of the three presidents subsequently resigned from their offices after the fallout from their qualified responses.

The tensions on campus persisted through the end of the school year. In April, pro-Palestinian activists set up around-the-clock encampments in central locations on many campuses. As commencement ceremonies approached, university leadership used various tactics, including mass arrests, to remove the encampments, which generated a new round of controversy.



Eighteen months before any of these events transpired, the Jim Joseph Foundation commissioned a study of college students using surveys and focus groups. That study, published in 2022, came on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic and examined the preferences, attitudes, and behaviors of Jewish American college students.<sup>4</sup> The study was not particularly focused on attitudes about Israel, antisemitism, or campus social tensions, though it asked several questions on these topics. Rather, the study aimed to understand who Jewish students are, what motivates them, and the degree to which they engage in Jewish activities on campus.

After October 7, 2023, the Jim Joseph Foundation re-engaged this work. Many of the students we had surveyed in the spring of 2022 were still in college in the 2023-2024 school year. The 2022 survey provided an opportunity to learn how attitudes and behaviors changed over time in reaction to events in the world and on campus.

We decided to embark on an ambitious effort during the 2023-2024 school year to assess attitudes about Israel, antisemitism, and campus unrest. We surveyed Jewish and non-Jewish students in November and December of 2023, soon after the start of the war. Then, in April of 2024, we conducted a dozen focus groups with Jewish and non-Jewish students to dig deeper into their perceptions and experiences. Finally, we conducted a third survey from late April through June of 2024. The surveys included panel designs that enabled us to measure the change in attitudes of students who were surveyed multiple times across years.

The study provides among the most detailed and comprehensive accounts to date of what happened on campuses during this school year from the perspective of students. We hope that the report will be helpful in the short-term by offering guidance to universities, organizations, parents, and governments that are tasked with addressing challenges that surfaced on campuses nationwide. We also hope the report will serve as part of the historical record of this defining moment for both the American Jewish community and higher education in the United States.

## Executive Summary

The report below begins with a detailed summary of our focus groups that we conducted in April 2024. We start with a review of the focus groups to emphasize that behind the summary statistics from thousands of survey participants are real young adults with complex personalities and developing ideas. We strongly encourage readers to read the students' own words from these focus groups. Following the focus group summary, we describe the survey methodology and then present the survey results.

Here, we offer eighteen highlights from the analysis.

1. We measure significant changes in attitudes through the 2022-2024 surveys. The percentage of Jewish students who said their Jewish identity is very important to them increased significantly from 2022 to 2023 to 2024. About half of Jewish students feel their identity is very important. The percentage of students who said they feared antisemitism also increased between 2022 and the 2023-2024 school year. We measure a significant increase in students reporting they had been directly exposed to antisemitic slurs in classrooms as well.
2. We find a persistent, elevated rate at which Jewish students say that they hide their Jewish identity to fit in on campus, that people judge them negatively for participating in Jewish activities, and that Jewish students broadly pay a social cost for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Agreement with these statements was 50-100% higher in 2023 than 2022, with no evidence of decline by the end of the 2023-2024 school year.
3. Between 2022 and 2023, we find elevated rates of Jewish students saying they need to hide some of their opinions to fit in at Jewish activities on campus. Although this trend was true for Jewish students regardless of their Jewish backgrounds, students with less robust Jewish backgrounds were most likely to feel they needed to hide their opinions in Jewish spaces.
4. Jewish organizational programs focused on the Israel-Hamas War were not especially popular draws for students. Most Jewish students, even those from robust Jewish backgrounds, did not attend any programs

directly related to the Israel-Hamas war during the 2023-2024 school year. Jewish students who attend Jewish programming on campus primarily participated in Shabbat/holiday or social events.

5. For several survey items, we measure a temporary spike in attitudes or behaviors in the immediate aftermath of the Israel-Hamas War, but then a reversion back to pre-October 7 levels by the end of the year. The percentage of students who said they feel very close to a Jewish community increased in fall 2023 but then fell back to 2022 levels by spring of 2024. The percentage of students saying they attended Jewish events on campus rose and then fell. Jewish students also self-assessed their mental health much lower in the immediate aftermath of the war, but their assessment reverted to a healthier state by the end of the school year.
6. We find the percentage of Jewish students who believe there should not be a Jewish state in Israel-Palestine to be fairly constant, at around 10-15%, in all three years. We see no change in Jewish student opinion after October 7 on the basic question of whether a Jewish state should exist, except for a significant number of students who had said they had no opinion in 2022 forming an opinion in support of a Jewish state by the end of 2023. About a quarter of Jewish students aren't sure whether Israel as a Jewish state should continue to exist.
7. Several demographic characteristics are correlated with Jewish students' views on Israel, including their political ideology, their sexuality, and their family's Jewish background. Among the biggest predictors, however, is the students' socioeconomic class – students from wealthier families are much more supportive of a Jewish state than those from less wealthy families. This pattern is especially strong among students without robust Jewish backgrounds. The same relationship is visible in non-Jewish students too. Jewish and non-Jewish students from upper class homes are twice as likely to believe a Jewish state should exist in general and twice as likely to blame Hamas rather than Israel for the current war, compared to students from lower- or working-class homes.
8. Most non-Jewish students who are from upper-middle-class and upper-class homes personally know Israelis and have at least a few close Jewish friends. Most lower-class and working-class non-Jewish students do not personally know Israelis or have any close Jewish friends. Students who have at least a few Jewish friends and who know Israelis are more likely to blame Hamas rather than Israel for the war.
9. Jewish students blame Hamas for the war more than they blame Israel. Conversely, non-Jewish students blame Israel for the war more than Hamas. Non-Jewish students who are very liberal overwhelmingly blame Israel. Very liberal Jewish students blame Israel more than Hamas, but not at the same rate as non-Jewish students. Across several measures, we find that Jewish students who are very liberal have views somewhere between the views of other Jewish students and the views of non-Jewish students who are very liberal.
10. Non-Jewish students overwhelmingly sympathize with Palestinians rather than with Israelis in the current war. Jewish students mainly sympathize with Israelis. Jewish and non-Jewish students alike believe that their campus community is far more sympathetic to Palestinians. The views are particularly lopsided on elite campuses, such as Ivy League schools.
11. Jewish students are equally likely to follow news about the war, regardless of whether they support or oppose the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. The pattern, however, is different for non-Jewish students. Non-Jewish students who oppose the existence of Israel as a Jewish state are much more engaged in the topic than non-Jewish students who support a Jewish state. They follow the news more, and they are far more likely to have gone to a pro-Palestine event than non-Jewish supporters of Israel went to a pro-Israel event.
12. Students who oppose the existence of Israel as a Jewish state are much more likely to be in social bubbles in which their friends all agree with them compared to those who support a Jewish state. Across all survey waves (including the survey we conducted in 2022 before the current conflict) we see that students who support Israel's existence are in more diverse friend groups in which some people agree with them about Israel and some do not.

13. Jewish activists who oppose a Jewish state and attended pro-Palestine events during the school year have different backgrounds and demographics than Jewish activists who support a Jewish state and attended pro-Israel events during the school year. The former group mostly grew up with less robust Jewish backgrounds. The majority identify as LGBTQ+ and as very liberal. They are also mostly lower/working and middle class. Conversely, the latter group of activists overwhelmingly come from families affiliated with denominations and had many Jewish experiences growing up. They are mostly heterosexual, upper-middle or upper class, and do not identify as very liberal.
14. Most non-Jewish students do not have an opinion about whether Jewish people are indigenous to the land of Israel. Of those who have an opinion, more say that Jews are not indigenous. Christian students are the one group more likely to believe that Jews are indigenous to Israel. Christians make up a minority of non-Jewish college students: they are a smaller share of the sample than those who identify as agnostic, atheist, or having no religion.
15. Between the fall and spring of the 2023-2024 school year, we see a large increase in non-Jewish students saying it would be very hard for pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students to be friends. When asked if they personally lost friends because of conflicting views on the war, a third of Jewish students said they have. A third of Muslim students also reported having lost friends, compared to only 9% of all other students. Almost half (45%) of Jewish students on elite campuses said they lost friends.
16. In 2024, one in five non-Jewish students say they wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Forty-five percent said they were not sure. Eight percent said they avoid socializing with Jews because of Jewish students' views on Israel. Agreement with these statements is highest among students who identify as very liberal, students of color, Muslim students, and LGBTQ+ students.
17. Consistent with the survey finding that at least one in five non-Jewish students would not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, the focus groups reveal that, indeed, many non-Jewish students deliberately aim to socially ostracize Jewish peers who support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. They see students who support Israel as endorsing a hateful position, and they do not want to be friends with people who have bad values. Jewish students recognize this social isolation and largely blame a toxic culture of social media and polarization.
18. There is a profound difference between Jewish and non-Jewish students in how they perceive the political orientation of their schools. The Jewish students see the schools as overwhelmingly aligned against Israel, evidenced by the opinions expressed by faculty, staff, and students. The non-Jewish students tend to see the schools as overwhelmingly aligned with Israel, as evidenced by opinions expressed by their schools' senior leadership.

## ENDNOTES

1. J. Sellers Hill and Nia L. Orakwue, "Harvard Student Groups Face Intense Backlash for Statement Calling Israel 'Entirely Responsible' for Hamas Attack," *Harvard Crimson*, October 10, 2023.
2. Travis Anderson, "Tufts University Student Group Faces Criticism for Commending the 'Creativity' of Hamas Militants," *Boston Globe*, October 11, 2023.
3. Annie Karni, "Questioning University Presidents on Antisemitism, Stefanik Goes Viral," *New York Times*, December 7, 2023.
4. Eitan Hersh, "Jewish College Students in America," Report to the Jim Joseph Foundation, 2022.