

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Middle East Scholars Are Under Pressure

Tensions on campus are real and intense.





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THE REVIEW | ESSAY

By *Marc Lynch and Shibley Telhami*

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Since October 2023, fierce arguments over the appropriate balance between free speech and campus security, the role of external advocacy groups and congressional intervention, and the real intentions of those protesting the Israel-Hamas war have consumed virtually all sectors of campus life. But faculty members and graduate students who work on the Middle East were among those most directly affected by the controversies.

In the [latest round](#) of the University of Maryland's Middle East Scholars [Barometer](#) survey of more than 750 mostly U.S.-based scholars, conducted

May 23 to June 6, 71 percent of U.S.-based scholars of the Middle East say that the challenges they have faced following October 7 are either the worst (26 percent) or among the worst (45 percent) challenges imposed by political events in their academic careers.

That should not come as a surprise. In the previous round, [conducted](#) last November, more than 80 percent of respondents said they felt the need to self-censor when discussing issues related to Israel and Palestine, with criticism of Israel being overwhelmingly (81 percent) the issue they felt the need to avoid (the percentages were almost identical for the same question in the new survey conducted six months later). In the intervening months, the political climate on campuses turned into a national issue as [student encampments](#) appeared on many campuses and college administrations responded with [draconian punishments](#). As one survey respondent put it, “the backlash is enormous and vicious.”

Our survey, which we have been administering for more than three years, seeks to measure the experiences of scholars of the Middle East by polling members of the American Political Science Association, the Project on Middle East Political Science, the American Historical Association, and the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). The majority of our list and our respondents are political scientists. Notably, we found few significant differences between political scientists and nonpolitical scientists, and between members of MESA and of the other organizations.

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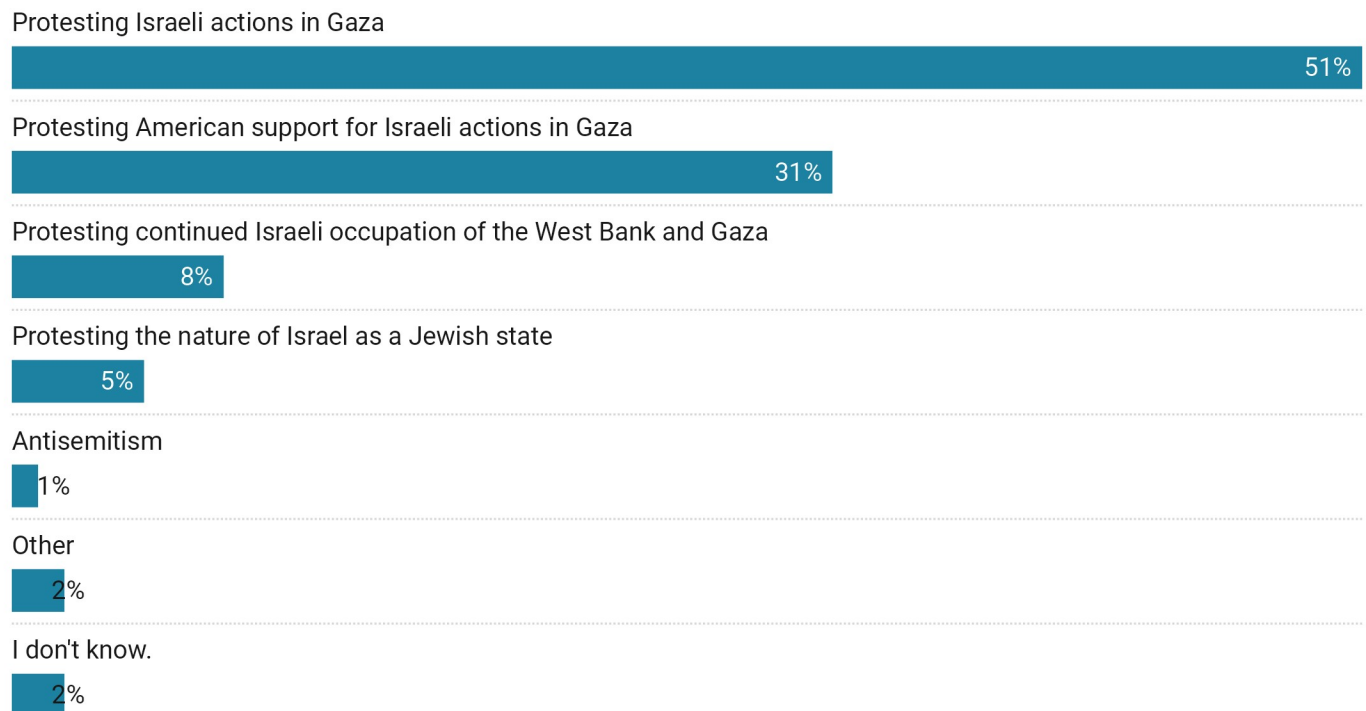
One of the key findings in the survey was a disconnect between how scholars evaluate the performance of their own institutions and how they see higher education at the national level. On a scale of one to five, where one is “indulgent” and five is “severe,” only 40 percent rank their own administration’s response to the protests as either four or five, but 77 percent rate American higher-education institutions as a whole at that level. Similarly, 47 percent of respondents rank their own institution’s response to the critics of campus demonstrations as “indulgent,” compared to 57 percent who say the same about the reaction of American higher-education institutions broadly.

The contrast between respondents' perception of their own institution's response compared with other institutions may be a function of the media attention paid to crackdowns at institutions like Columbia University and the University of California at Los Angeles. In fact, [data](#) suggest that the vast majority (up to 99 percent) of campus demonstrations at American institutions have been peaceful.

While there has been a great deal of national media discussion about the alleged extremism of campus protesters and their real goals, few U.S.-based scholars believe that the pro-Israel and the pro-Palestinian demonstrations are primarily driven by prejudice toward Muslim, Arabs, Palestinians, or Jews. Less than 1 percent believe antisemitism is the primary reason for the pro-Palestinian demonstrations, while about 5 percent see them as primarily protesting the nature of Israel as a Jewish state and another 8 percent consider them as primarily protesting Israel's ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Instead, more than half (51 percent) of the respondents say that the pro-Palestinian demonstrations are primarily about protesting Israel's actions in Gaza, and 31 percent say the students are primarily protesting American support for Israel's actions in Gaza.

Racism is not seen as the primary driver of either pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian protests.

Q. In your opinion, what is the PRIMARY reason for people participating in pro-Palestinian campus demonstrations? (Among U.S.-based respondents)



Q. In your opinion, what is the PRIMARY reason for people participating in pro-Israel campus demonstrations? (Among U.S.-based respondents)

Showing support for Israel's response

30%

Protesting anti-Israel sentiments on campus

27%

Protesting anti-Zionism on campus

13%

Protesting antisemitism on campus

7%

Prejudice against Muslims, Arabs, and/or Palestinians

7%

Protesting Hamas's October 7 attack

6%

Other

2%

I don't know.

8%

These results are from the Middle East Scholar Barometer survey fielded May 23 to June 6, 2024, online using the University of Maryland's Qualtrics platform.

[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

That near consensus about the protests' primary focus being the immediate war in Gaza is not matched by perceptions of the counterprotesters. Only about 30 percent of respondents view the pro-Israel demonstrations to be primarily about support for Israel's response to the October 7 attack. Instead, nearly half (46 percent) believe that the demonstrators are primarily protesting anti-Israeli sentiments (27 percent), anti-Zionism (13 percent), or antisemitism (7 percent) on campus. That disconnect between the avowed goals of the protesters and what the counterprotesters believe their actual goals to be lies at the heart of the polarization that many outside observers

believe is consuming our campuses.

Middle East scholars view the prevalence of hostile attitudes toward Jews quite differently than do the national media or [recent congressional hearings](#). Only 17 percent say that antisemitism is prevalent at their institutions, and only 4 percent say it occurs “a lot.” In contrast to efforts to define criticism of Israel as antisemitism, the surveyed scholars clearly distinguish between antisemitism and criticism of Israel: More than 50 percent see anti-Israel attitudes as somewhat or very prevalent. What’s more, the scholars see hostile attitudes toward Muslims (50 percent) and Palestinians (59 percent) as being far more prevalent on their campuses.

Sixty-nine percent of U.S.-based Middle East scholars say they support the campus encampments protesting the war and the primary goals of the protesters. Only 6 percent say they oppose the protests but support the goals, suggesting relatively little concern about the tactics being employed by students. At the same time, 14 percent support the protests but not their goals, a constituency whom we assume are motivated primarily by academic freedom and the right to peaceful activism.

Amidst the pressure to present as either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine, some mourn the disappearance of a space to be “pro-peace.”

We have been surveying scholars for years about several of the key demands of many of the protest encampments. Only 23 percent support the call for boycotts of Israeli academic institutions unconditionally, while just over 40 percent support it under certain conditions and 32 percent oppose it unconditionally. While we did not ask about specific demands for divestment, we did ask about support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in general: 32 percent support BDS unconditionally, 51 percent support it conditionally, and 13 percent oppose it unconditionally.

The Middle East scholars who responded to the survey do not necessarily see themselves as typical of the broader campus environment, however. Almost 40 percent say that the faculty at their institution is equally divided over the protests, though more are assessed to be supportive (38 percent) than opposed (7 percent). They see students as even more supportive: 51 percent say that their student body mostly supports the protests, compared to 8 percent who assess their student body as being opposed to the protests; 23 percent see them as equally divided. But when it comes to their administrations, they see the opposite: 61 percent say their administration mostly opposes the protests, and only 4 percent say their administration is mostly supportive. That gap between faculty and students on the one side and the administration on the other helps explain why American campuses today are experiencing a crisis of faculty governance.

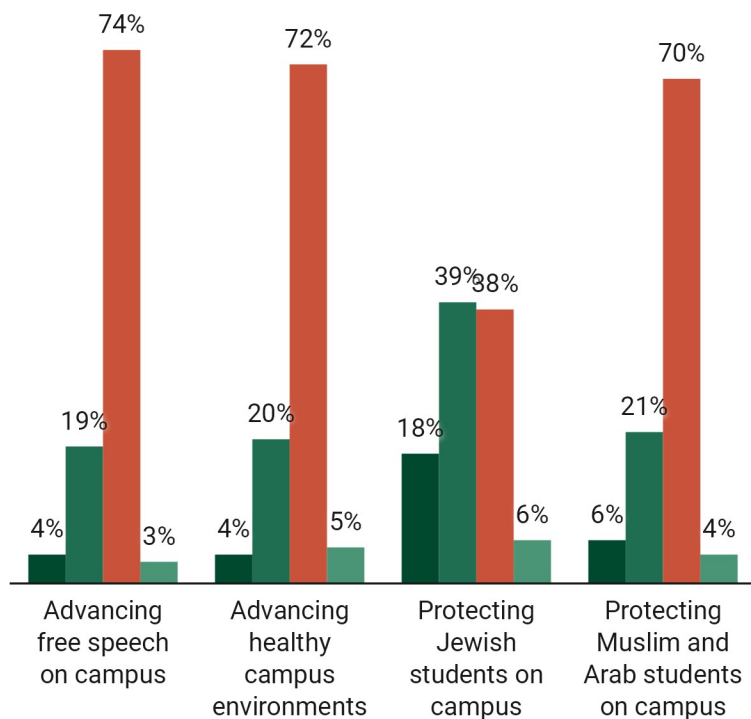
When we turn from campus politics to the national political scene, we find that scholars are not impressed with the Biden administration's response to the campus crisis. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of U.S.-based scholars say Biden has had a negative

impact on advancing free speech on campus, and 72 percent rate him negatively when it comes to advancing healthy campus environments. Even on the question of protecting Jewish students on campus, more than twice as many see Biden's response as negative (38 percent) than as positive (16 percent). Seventy percent of scholars feel that Biden's response to the campus crisis has had a negative effect when it comes to protecting Muslim and Arab students on campus.

A majority of U.S.-based scholars say Biden's response to campus protests has had a negative impact on students and the campus environment.

Q. How do you assess the effect of Biden's response to the campus protests on each of the following: (Among U.S.-based respondents)

■ Positive ■ Neither positive nor negative ■ Negative ■ I don't know.



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With the Republican-controlled House of Representatives aggressively going after colleges for perceived pervasive antisemitism and allegedly insufficient crackdowns on protesters, and with a tense presidential campaign on the horizon, scholars of the Middle East face a highly challenging environment.

Some of those challenges, of course, come from their own students and colleagues. The open-ended responses to our survey questions portray a troubling evolution over the last six months, with polarization driven by extremists on both sides silencing many in the middle. The escalating institutional weaponization of the criticism of Israel as antisemitism is increasingly matched by pressures from students and faculty members to adhere to a pro-Palestinian narrative. Amidst the pressure to present as either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine, some mourn the disappearance of a space to be “pro-peace.” There are many accounts of being attacked by activists on both sides. One faculty member describes students and colleagues as feeling the need to know “if I am morally ‘on the right side,’ before engaging with me academically.”

The pressures faced by Middle East scholars are not abstract. Respondents to our survey share a wide range of accounts of talks and events being canceled, institutional pressure to be silent or cautious, and appalling campaigns against them by external actors. A large number of respondents describe colleagues losing jobs or facing severe institutional punishment after being accused of antisemitism. One respondent says, “I was doxxed and attacked for benign Facebook posts, with outsiders organizing to get me fired. I teach on the subject and had no issues inside the classroom. The outside agitators were the problem.” As a result, “it is generally curious, open-minded, well-intentioned undergraduates who don’t actually get to learn when taking MENA classes that get hurt.” Preserving the space for serious, informed discussion of contentious issues should be the lodestar of our institutions of higher education, and right now that ideal is under threat.

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