

Testimony to Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism of Massachusetts

Ambassador Alan Solomont
June 9, 2025

Co-Chair Velis, Co-Chair Cataldo, and distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the serious work you are doing to understand and combat antisemitism in the Commonwealth.

Some of you know me well, but for those who do not, let me briefly share some of my background. Growing up in an Orthodox Jewish home in Brookline, I have been involved in Jewish communal and advocacy organizations, both at the local and national level, for most of my adult life. I am the past board chair of Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP), and I've been a supporter of JCRC, the ADL, Hebrew Senior Life and Hebrew College.

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On a national level, I've served on the boards of the New Israel Fund, the Jewish Fund for Justice, and the Israel Policy Forum. I'm especially committed to finding a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I was a founding board member of J Street, and I am the immediate past Chair of its national board. More recently, I became a founding board member of the Nexus Project, an organization dedicated to combatting antisemitism and to exposing its weaponization by those with their own political agenda. I was also appointed by President Biden to the Holocaust Memorial Museum Council, but I was recently terminated by President Trump along with several other Biden appointees.

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In the area of higher education, I have experience with both private and public institutions. I am a graduate of Tufts University, served on its Board of Trustees, and was Dean of the Tisch College of Civic Life for nearly a decade. I also attended the School of Nursing, at what is now UMass Lowell, served on its Board of Trustees, and chaired the Board when we merged with UMass to create, what is now, a five-campus institution serving over 75,000 students. I share this with you to demonstrate my experience, and presumed expertise, in the topics I am about to discuss.

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This Commission was created because antisemitism is on the rise in Massachusetts, across the country and globally. Today, the FBI is reporting the highest level of antisemitic incidents in decades. Just a few years ago, a right-wing extremist carried out the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, where eleven worshippers were murdered. In Charlottesville, Virginia, at a “Unite the Right” rally, demonstrators chanted antisemitic lines like “Jews will not replace us,” and at the Poway synagogue outside of San Diego, California, another gunman fatally shot one woman and injured three others, including the rabbi.

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The right-wing form of antisemitism, which gave rise to these tragedies, is rooted in conspiracy theories about Jewish control, replacement theory, and white nationalism. In my opinion, some of the rise of this type of antisemitism is linked to the current administration in Washington. According to one study, the rise of antisemitism since 2016 is largely because “people who hold antisemitic views now feel more free to express them.” Members of the Trump administration, including senior advisor Andrew Miller and former best friend and DOGE Director, Elon Musk, have supported white supremacist ideas or groups.

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Trump himself has dined with known anti-Semites and Holocaust deniers, and his own words have evoked right-wing antisemitic tropes, such as assuming American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States or that they are adept at making money. When political leaders traffic in conspiracy theories about “globalists” and “cosmopolitan elites,” when they amplify content from known anti-Semites, and when they fail to clearly condemn white supremacist violence, they create an atmosphere where antisemitism flourishes. These are real threats that endanger not only Jewish Americans, but our democracy itself, because antisemitism has historically served as both a warning sign

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and a tool of authoritarian movements seeking to undermine
pluralistic societies.

The rise of another brand of antisemitism, which escalated
after the horrific attack on Israel by Hamas terrorists on
October 7th, 2023, combines hatred of Jews with hatred of
Israel and Zionism.

The recent terror attack in Boulder, Colorado, where eight
people were injured by a flame-throwing assailant who
shouted “End Zionists,” and the horrific murder, in
Washington, of two young Israeli Embassy staff members,

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Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Lynn Milgrim, by a gunman who told police “I did it for Palestine, I did it for Gaza,” and the firebombing of Governor Josh Shapiro’s residence in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, all represent a level of violence, accompanied by anti-Israel rhetoric, that we haven’t seen before.

Make no mistake about it. These attacks were acts of violent antisemitism, directed at Jews because they were Jews, but they do beg the questions: why is this happening? What relationship is there to events in the Middle East, and how do we separate anger with Israel, and its government, from real

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Jew hatred and antisemitism? Most importantly, how do we put an end to it?

These questions are relevant to concerns about antisemitism on college campuses, where the question of what constitutes antisemitism is hardly agreed upon, and this connects to the misuse of antisemitism concerns and its weaponization to serve other purposes.

What I know best about antisemitism on college campuses is based on what I observed and experienced at Tufts University, during my eight years as dean, and since then.

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Tufts is a good example, because there has been an increase in antisemitic incidents over the last decade, and especially since October 7th, but it is not as pervasive as some believe. In the report card on antisemitism that the ADL published, Tufts initially received an “F,” and even though its grade was subsequently improved to a “C-”, it reflects, in my view, a difference between perception and reality, and a failure to understand the nuance and complexity of what is really happening.

Virtually all of what has been labeled as antisemitic at Tufts is related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and more recently, to the war in Gaza.

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There is probably no issue more contentious on college campuses today than the conflict in the Middle East. It has aroused passions on both sides of the issue, and it has spawned a protest movement among students and faculty who oppose the policies of the Israeli government and which reflects very strong views about Israel's treatment of Palestinians and Israel's prosecution of the war in Gaza.

There are elements of this protest that are very ill informed, rhetoric that is inflammatory and behavior that is, at best, insensitive and unfair to Jewish students on campus.

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It bleeds into antisemitism when it blames Jewish people for the actions of the Israeli government or when it denies the Jewish people the rights that it correctly perceives are denied to the Palestinian people: the right to a homeland and self-determination. It also reflects antisemitic behavior when it ostracizes or excludes other students because they are Jewish and are therefore deemed responsible for Israel's actions. But this protest movement is, at the same time, a legitimate exercise of free speech and civic engagement that is protected in a democracy. Some allegations about Israel, both those that are true and those that are false, may make Jewish students uncomfortable, but the exercise of free

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speech should not make Jewish students on campus unsafe.

And certain actions associated with this protest movement, such as disrupting classes or even interrupting speakers, can be totally inappropriate and in violation of university policy without necessarily being antisemitic.

The activities of this protest movement at Tufts have ranged from student government resolutions and referenda that support BDS to protest marches and demonstrations outside the President's House and in the Campus Center. There is an active and vocal chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine at Tufts.

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I don't believe they represent a large number of students, but they do attract support from other student groups, and they engage in inflammatory and hostile actions like celebrating Israel apartheid week. The Tufts chapter of SJP led a successful student referendum, urging the University to end its participation in a U.S.-Israel policy exchange program dubbed the "Deadly Exchange." Their campaign alleged that this program contributed to the militarization of campus policing, even though the only known participation of the university in this exchange was the attendance, three years prior, of a former Tufts Police Chief at a counterterrorism training in Israel.

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There is no question that the level of pro-Palestine and anti-Israel protest activity intensified after October 7th, and the subsequent war in Gaza, and if Hamas' barbaric attacks on Israel were not traumatizing enough to Jewish students, the Tufts chapter of SJP responded to the attacks by praising the "creativity" of the "liberation fighters from Gaza."

The university administration has adopted a number of measures to quell the rise of antisemitism on campus, ranging from education and bias awareness programs to the creation of a university-wide council of faculty and staff to advise the university's senior leadership team.

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Tufts joined Hillel International's Campus Climate Initiative to learn best practices from peer institutions and to develop plans to improve their campus climates with the goal of eliminating antisemitism.

Following the October 7th attack, Tufts spoke out strongly against the violence perpetrated by Hamas, denounced the terrorist attack on Israel and expressed concern for the violence and tragic loss of innocent civilians in both Israel and Gaza. The university also reaffirmed its position that it would not divest from holdings in Israel, and it denounced the message that Tufts SJP had sent out glorifying Hamas's attack on October 7th.

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It is important to note how vastly different the experiences and attitudes are of different students on campus, including Jewish students. Some Jewish students at Tufts report that many campus clubs, even those that are not explicitly political, have taken a hard line on Israel, which creates an obstacle, if not a litmus test, for some Jewish students' participation. On the other hand, a Jewish student wrote to me, in response to my query about campus life: "There is a lot of buzz about how hostile the campus is towards Jewish students right now. I don't doubt that there have been some antisemitic comments or instances, but it's not anything that I (or any Jewish student I know) have experienced."

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Another Jewish student at Tufts observed that: “...the loudest voices about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on college campuses are those who do not believe in a future where Israelis and Palestinians can live beside one another in peace.” If we don’t offer an alternative vision, this student went on to say, “students risk sliding into apathy or extremism.”

The views from outside college campuses about what is happening are even more divided. According to Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League and a Tufts alumnus, “what we are seeing on campuses across the country is a kind of virulent anti-Zionism that purports to be

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about Palestinian rights, but in reality, results in the marginalization and demonization of all Jewish students.”

Others disagree. According to the social psychologist

Jonathan Haidt, “college is quite possibly the best

environment on Earth in which to come face-to-face with

people and ideas that are potentially offensive or even

downright hostile.” And maybe, as The Forward’s senior

contributing editor Rob Eshman wrote: “I think the anti-

Zionists are doing our kids a favor. They are provoking those

who disagree to marshal their best arguments, to figure out

ways to inform and persuade others, and maybe, just maybe,

to consider the merits of other points of view.”

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In addressing antisemitism on college campuses, and elsewhere, understanding complexity and nuance is crucial because it is precisely this gray area, where legitimate political discourse intersects with genuine concerns about antisemitism, that has become fertile ground for manipulation and weaponization. This is an area to which I suggest the Commission pay careful attention. It began as an effort to squash debate about Israel, but it has evolved into a tool to undermine democracy and attack higher education.

This is not something brand new.

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Figures like Kenneth Marcus, who served in both the Bush and Trump administrations, and founded the Brandeis Center (Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law), have been working on this strategy for years. But it is now part of a clear, coordinated plan involving a Heritage Foundation initiative, named Project Esther. This initiative explicitly calls for rebranding all critics of Israel as Hamas supporters and using anti-racketeering laws to break up pro-Palestinian advocacy groups. It coordinates with operations like Canary Mission, which doxes students and faculty who criticize Israel. This is part of a systematic campaign that has evolved into using antisemitism as a pretext for broader authoritarian

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goals: defunding universities, eliminating diversity programs, restricting academic freedom, and silencing dissent.

The current Israeli government has actively contributed to this dynamic by characterizing opposition to the war in Gaza, or criticism of policies like the expansion of settlements and tolerance of settler violence in the West Bank, as inherently antisemitic, effectively using claims of antisemitism as a shield against international accountability. This pattern extends to silencing Palestinian voices and their supporters, especially on campuses and in human rights organizations, who are frequently labeled antisemitic for supporting equal

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rights for Palestinians or describing their lived experiences under Israeli occupation.

Let me cite one concrete example that I am sure you are familiar with. Rümeyssa Öztürk is a Tufts PhD student who was recently abducted and detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE agents. Her "crime" was co-authoring an opinion piece, in the Tufts student newspaper, a year before, criticizing the university's president for not supporting student demands for the university to divest from Israel. She isn't an activist or a protest leader.

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She is a Fulbright scholar from Turkey, pursuing her PhD in child study and human development, and despite her status as a foreign student, she chose to exercise her right of free speech. The Canary Mission picked up her student newspaper article and profiled her on their website of students and faculty who have criticized Israel. That's how she was flagged, by the Department of Homeland Security. For criticizing the university's anti-BDS policy, she was labeled by the Canary Mission as an anti-Semite. This became grounds for her to be handcuffed outside her apartment in Somerville, on her way to an Iftar dinner, and taken off the street by masked federal agents and transported to a

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detention facility in Louisiana, despite a federal court order to keep her in Massachusetts. Under a separate court order, she was released after six weeks in detention and returned to campus, but her student visa is canceled, and she still faces deportation proceedings.

The government doesn't rely solely on collaborators like the Canary Mission. Recent Politico reporting reveals that the State Department is now subjecting, the visa applications of foreign students at Harvard, to reviews of their social media accounts for any criticism of Israel or support for Palestinian rights.

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We are witnessing the creation of a surveillance apparatus that uses antisemitism as an excuse to monitor, target, and punish political dissent.

These actions by agencies of the federal government are carrying out explicit policies of the Trump administration. The President's Executive Order 13899 directed the federal government to use Title VI of the civil rights law to investigate campus antisemitism, labeling certain criticisms of Israel as antisemitic. This approach gives cover to the President's strategy of attacking institutions of higher education.

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While masquerading as a tool against hate, the President's Executive Order has been weaponized far beyond its stated purpose. It is being used to cut off federal support for university activities unrelated to protecting Jewish students, and the same cudgel is applied to attacking entire academic enterprises. Universities are facing the termination of federal funding for cancer research, climate science, and other medical studies, areas that have nothing to do with campus protests about Israel-Palestine.

New York Congressman Jerry Nadler, the senior-most Jewish member of the House of Representatives, commenting about

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the government's response to antisemitism at Columbia

University had this to say: "Let's assume there is

antisemitism. How does taking hundreds of millions of dollars

from medical research help that? Because there is

antisemitism at Columbia, we're going to say more people

should die of cancer, more people should get Alzheimer's?"

In some cases, even outside of academia, the

administration's response to actual antisemitism bears no

relationship to the problem it purports to address. After the

horrific Boulder attack, Trump responded by banning entry

to this country from a variety of countries, none of which

included the attacker's country of origin, which is Egypt.

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This disconnect between problem and response reveals how antisemitism concerns are being exploited to advance other, unrelated objectives.

The weaponization of antisemitism concerns is having other serious negative effects. In addition to cutting off grant funding for important scientific research, it's causing institutions to self-censor, threatening legitimate academic inquiry in Middle East studies, international relations, and conflict resolution. It also threatens to create a significant brain drain by blocking the entry of foreign students who wish to study here and by prompting international scholars to avoid American universities entirely.

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The very people whose diverse perspectives and expertise could contribute to greater understanding will be driven away by fear of political targeting. These tactics are contributing to rather than solving the antisemitism problem. When legitimate criticism of government and institutional policies get conflated with antisemitism, it undermines the ability to recognize and combat real antisemitism. When Jewish students see fellow students being labeled antisemitic for political beliefs, it creates division rather than the solidarity needed to fight genuine hate.

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This has the effect of chilling academic freedom for everyone. It weakens democratic discourse, and it sets dangerous precedents for how government power can be used against dissent. As Amy Spitalnick, CEO of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs and another Tufts alumna, said: “Antisemitism is real, and it requires robust, constructive solutions. What’s happening now, though, is exploiting the Jewish community’s legitimate and real concerns about antisemitism to undermine the rule of law, due process, educational institutions and our democracy.” This concern is shared widely within the Jewish community itself.

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I recently joined dozens of other Jewish leaders, including former presidents of major Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, in signing an open letter, warning that certain actors are using “purported concern about Jewish safety as a cudgel to weaken higher education, due process, checks and balances, freedom of speech and the press.”

Polling by the Jewish Voting Resource Center from May 2025 shows that most Jewish Americans don't support this approach.

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64% of Jewish Americans disapprove of Trump's job combatting antisemitism, and 61% believe that arresting and deporting pro-Palestinian protesters actually increases antisemitism rather than reduces it. Additionally, 49% believe that withholding federal funding from colleges and universities increases antisemitism. These numbers show that the Jewish community recognizes that these actions are counterproductive. They understand that creating an atmosphere of fear and repression doesn't make Jewish students safer. It makes everyone less safe.

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I will conclude by suggesting some action items for this Commission. Regarding higher education, make a careful and accurate assessment of what is actually happening on the campuses of Massachusetts colleges and universities.

Examine the entire universe of higher education, including state and community colleges, and not only the schools that attract the media's attention. It is important to define the problem accurately and to recognize that each campus and its culture is unique.

I hope you will strongly call out the ways that antisemitism concerns are being used and abused to pursue other agendas and to attack an industry that is so important

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to Massachusetts and its economy. It would make an important statement for the Massachusetts legislature, in addition to condemning real antisemitism, to explicitly oppose using antisemitism concerns for unrelated purposes like cancelling funding for medical research or barring foreign students from studying here.

I also suggest that in addition to raising concerns about the welfare of Jewish students, that the Commission recognize the pain and trauma felt by Palestinian, Arab and Muslim students and the relative lack of support that these students receive.

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The challenge of defining antisemitism is controversial, and I encourage the Commission to support the use of multiple frameworks, including the IHRA Working Definition, the Nexus Document, and the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism. This will help to better identify and understand antisemitism in different contexts and situations. Each definition has benefits and limitations. The IHRA Definition provides broad institutional adoption and recognition, but it is easily abused, especially in today's polarized environment. Nexus offers nuanced guidance for distinguishing between antisemitism and legitimate political discourse, and the JDA emphasizes the importance of context and intent.

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Rather than relying on any single definition, it would be wise to use various definitions as educational resources to foster informed dialogue without restricting political speech or academic inquiry.

Finally, recognize that each college campus is unique and that addressing the problem of antisemitism can best be handled at the campus level. But also recognize that one common denominator is the lack of training and preparation that students receive, even before they enter college, to engage in civil discourse and dialogue across differences.

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One concrete step that the legislature can take is to build on the improvements that Massachusetts has already made in the area of civic education and to pay particular attention to teaching students not only about democracy but how to do democracy as well.

In the end, we're really fighting for democracy itself.

Democracy protects Jewish Americans; authoritarianism endangers us. Throughout Jewish history, we've learned what happens when democratic societies cast aside due process and civil liberties.

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When governments start labeling certain groups as dangerous and unworthy of basic rights, it rarely stops with the first target.

I tend to agree with a member of this Commission, Jeremy Burton, when he said: "It's not our job as Jews to defeat antisemitism. Rather, it must be the work of faith and civic leaders beyond the Jewish community, our elected officials, our Christian neighbors, and others to eradicate this virus.

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But I also think it is our job as Jews to insist that the fight
against this age old hatred is not abused or exploited to serve
the interests of those who have no real interest in
eradicating antisemitism.”
