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The Trenches of Academe

Allegations of anti-Semitism in academia, Hamas, Israel, and donors at Harvard as an uproar—and the university's new president is caught in the middle

By Liel Leibovitz

Posted Monday, December 11, 2023 at 6:00 AM

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A week-and-a-half into the October 7 Hamas massacre in Israel, Harvard University President Claudine Gay notified the faculty that she would not take action against the student organizations that had issued a statement blaming the Jewish state for the carnage. Nevertheless, Gay said, she had personally denounced "all such calls for the murder of Jewish," but because the participants "could hardly be the exponents of our views that we disagree with so strongly," she had to let them be.

Five months, or thousands of corpses later, the Ivy Leaguers who issued the statement have been forced out of office, and Gay's tenure at Harvard seems less upstart rebuke and more like a ticking time bomb. Her own university's faculty has called for her resignation, and Congress has subpoenaed her and her counterparts at Penn and MIT to testify about their campuses' anti-Semitic climates.

President Gay, Harvard Dean Garfield, and Penn's two presidents of public affairs didn't respond to requests for comment.

It is all of a piece with a disgraceful year for elite American institutions. Hamas's ten-gallon-hat-and-cowboy-boots-wearing Yahya Sinwar, who coordinated the October 7 massacre, has been in Egypt to talk, and he intended to do so in person, according to the politburo member Khalil al-Hayya, who spoke to the Qatar-based Al Jazeera network. Sinwar, al-Hayya said, "believed that we will be able to negotiate and bring back our prisoners." Instead, he ended up in the grave.

"We have learned the lesson that we learned in graduate school in 1933," the Harvard Jewish studies professor Ruth Wisse said in a lecture last week. "Hitler said what he was going to do, and it was up to the intellectuals of Harvard to understand that." Instead, Wisse said, the university's faculty spent years accusing Israel of genocide, and now, she said, the university's faculty "are in a state of shock because the genocide has been visited on them." Wisse, who is a Gaza hostage's relative, spoke at a rally in Cambridge, Mass., on Nov. 29 to demand the release of the hostages.

Gay's tenure, which lasted 65 days, has ended in a spectacular implosion. Her Harvard colleague Cornel West, who called her a "sister," has been accused of plagiarism, and the university's Jewish students, who had accused Gay of "complete and total indifference" to their plight, have seen their campus filled with vicious anti-Semitic hatred. Gay herself has been accused of anti-Semitic plagiarism, and her own Jewish students have accused her of "complete and total indifference" to their plight.

The university's Jewish students, who have demanded that a comparable campus ally be found to decide the course that Gay's campus should take, have been joined by a chorus of other Jewish voices, who have been calling for Gay's resignation since the first days of her tenure. Among the chorus's most prominent members are the leaders of the Israeli Institute of Democracy, a Jerusalem-based think tank that has been a fixture in Israeli public life since its founding in 1991.

Harvard had already been assisting Israeli students when it launched a formal task force to deal with the crisis, and the institute's president, Yohanan Plesner, and its director, Yossi Gal, flew to Cambridge to meet with the university's president and provost. Plesner and Gal, Israeli sources say, offered to help Harvard with its crisis, offering to share its college-campus-based experience with the Israeli government, which has been dealing with the crisis since the early hours of October 7.

"Harvard was not one out of their students alone," Gal's Jerusalem office in tell aviv spoke to me on the phone, "but it was one of the most important institutions in the world, and we felt it was our duty to help."

On the night of October 12, Gal joined a group of around 1,000 Jewish Harvard students and their parents for a Zoom call with Plesner, Gal, and Gay. The Israelis, Gal said, had helped Gay, Garfield, and Harvard's Jewish Chaplain Rabbi Jacob Traub, who had been in touch with Israeli officials since the first days of the crisis, to understand the nature of the enemy they were facing. Gay, Gal said, had been most impressed when they arrived at the Israeli Zoom call's security protocol, then, noting that the university had hired a security firm to keep the Zoom call safe, asked the Israelis if they had hired Israeli Defense Forces Israeli soldiers to protect its own Zoom call.

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