This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast ‘American Universities in the spotlight over reaction to Israel-Gaza war,’ published on December 14, 2023.

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Gemma Ware: Tensions have been running high at many universities around the world since the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 and the subsequent Israeli aerial and ground assault on Gaza.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: In the US, protests and solidarity events, both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian have been met with varied responses from university administrations. Some institutions are now facing federal investigation over incidents of alleged antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: In early December, the president of the University of Pennsylvania stood down after coming under pressure following her answers to a hearing in Congress. Across the world, academic freedom has also come under fire, and some staff have been suspended for their comments about the Israel-Gaza war.

I'm Gemma Ware, and you're listening to The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts. Today we're running the first of two episodes, exploring how the Israel-Gaza War is affecting life at universities. In this part one, we'll hear from the head of the Middle Eastern Studies Department about what's been happening at the campus at one public university in the US, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. And next week, in part two, we'll explore how the war is affecting academic freedom.
Gemma Ware: Naomi Schalit, welcome to the podcast. It’s been a long time since we’ve been trying to get you on. So, great to finally have you here.

Naomi Schalit: Yeah. Well, I like to play it, you know, hard to get.

Gemma Ware: Well, Naomi, while you’re here we should introduce you. You’re the politics and society editor at The Conversation in the US, and you're based just outside of Boston, and you and your colleagues on the politics desk have been really closely following, obviously, what's been going on at university campuses since the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and the Israeli offensive in Gaza. Tell me, how would you characterize quite generally what's been going on in reaction to the conflict on US campuses?

Naomi Schalit: Well, I'd say generally what's been going on is a lot of unrest. And that's what students do. They go outside, they protest, they block things, they yell, they do their thing, and that's all part of free speech and expression. The colleges’ and universities’ responses, however, there's a range. And the range is reacting strongly to what they believe is inappropriate behavior. Sometimes there have been campus arrests, all the way to: we are an educational institution and we are going to respond by doing what we do best which is promoting educational forums so that people can engage with this issue in the way we want them to on this campus as inquisitive people who want to learn. So that was the aspect that I wanted to focus on because you know, of course, we're in the news business. We understand the big noisy conflict-ridden things are the ones that end up in the news, not the quiet, we're going to help educate you about this, come to a meeting, and listen to our scholars talk.

Gemma Ware: And obviously, universities are there for debate. That's what they're meant to do, to spark it, to nurture it, and all wars spark some kind of debate on campus. But this Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems different for American universities, at least. Why do you think that is?

Naomi Schalit: I think because Israel's biggest supporter is the United States. I think because Biden from the get-go was very strongly in support of Israel to the level of he went there in the middle of a war, which is a highly unusual thing for
any head of state to do. I think that the generation of students that we see in college now has a particularly, kind of, Manichean view of the world. It's either the oppressed or the oppressors. And I think this fit very neatly into that view of the world and that meant that it was ready to blow pretty quickly. And I'm not saying that's inaccurate. I'm just saying that this was not an episode, an event, a series of events that were hard to make your positions clear on.

**Gemma Ware:** And you were interested in trying to find out, using one example, what was going on in campuses. So you began talking to one professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, about this. His name is David Mednicoff. Can you tell me a bit about him?

**Naomi Schalit:** So David Mednicoff teaches at a very large and highly regarded public university, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He runs the Near Eastern and Jewish Studies department. He's knowledgeable about the entire Middle East and about the international geopolitics that play into the Middle East and its conflicts and attempts to resolve those conflicts. He's also educated as an attorney and that particularly interested me because of his understanding of the values of free speech.

**Gemma Ware:** Thank you Naomi for reaching out to him to find out his view. We then also spoke to him to find out more about how students and staff at University of Massachusetts Amherst have been dealing with the conflict.

**David Mednicoff:** You know, my position is very interesting because I chair a department that has two undergraduate courses of study, right, Judaic studies and Middle Eastern studies. So we tend to have the students who are the most directly involved in issues around the Middle East and from different perspectives. And we also try very hard to model respectful discourse and disagreements. I mean, I don't actually know the politics of all of my faculty colleagues in very specific ways, but we're able to talk across the gaps. And I think that by modeling that kind of education, we've always sort of created space for there to be civil dialogue around this type of issue. And I would say generally, there are a lot of other things that have been felt more pressing to students prior to October 7, with you know, the caveat that Students for Justice for Palestine, has been involved in campus work for
a number of years. And of course, there are also a lot of students that feel an affinity or are directly connected to Israel, who follow the news very closely.

Gemma Ware: So on October 7, after the Hamas massacre and hostage-taking, what was the initial reaction on campus in the days that followed?

David Mednicoff: So three things happened initially. First, the administration moved very quickly to voice concern for any students, faculty and staff who might be affected. I mean, they issued what I thought was a useful kind of statement that was not a political statement about what happened but was, you know, a pledge to maintain our caretaking role and our role as an educational institution. That came out from the university chancellor.

Secondly, many Jewish students, faculty, and staff, including me, were shocked by this initial moment because of its status as the largest single killing of Jews in one place since the Holocaust. And so there was kind of a numbness. There was an immediate sense, I think, within the campus Jewish community of grieving and fear and nothing to do with the campus or the campus environment, but just this is awful and we need to grieve. And so there were a few vigils in solidarity as a result. The chancellor came fairly quickly to the Jewish student organization to sort of pay his respects.

And then the third thing was that Students for Justice for Palestine quite quickly started organizing and rallying. You know, I think obviously for anybody that knows anything about this like myself, the sadness and shock of what happened was immediately accompanied by fear and concern for what would happen next, and specific worry that this would also lead to a lot of deaths to Palestinian civilians, right? So, I think, obviously, Students for Justice for Palestine who are very concerned on that issue, thought that both in terms of opportunity and you know, genuine concern, this was a moment to really get out there and show their presence, and they did it loudly and that was also quite a noticeable reaction, which led fairly quickly to the student organizers being targeted from outside groups, and some of them got doxxed themselves.
**Gemma Ware:** So, then a couple of weeks later, on October 25, 57 people were arrested at a sit-in at a campus administrative building following a pro-Palestinian protest that was demanding a ceasefire in Gaza. And there have been regular protests since then, including some voicing criticism of the way the university brought in the police, that initial protest, and people were arrested. So how is that all being felt across campus?

**David Mednicoff:** So I think that speaking as somebody with a political science background and a policy background, Students for Justice for Palestine have done a good job as organizers. That is to say that I think that they have seized a moment and they've been effective at engaging a reasonably large number of students around Palestinian rights and the future of Palestine. And I think they clearly are taking cues and guidance from the national student for Justice for Palestine. So, you know, the protests were part of a plan of trying to gain visibility. I mean, I think that as harrowing as being arrested was, for many of these students and some of them are, in fact, my advisees, many of them went with the intention of being arrested, to show what they were willing to risk for Palestinian rights.

So what's been happening on campus has been, I would say, a pretty strong show of support from a subset of campus and a growing one in favor of Palestinian rights because as SJP does have a specific script, their activism has certainly also led a number of students on campus to feel concerned, sometimes scared themselves.

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**Gemma Ware:** On November 3, a student was arrested and charged after allegedly attacking a Jewish student. Has anything happened in the aftermath of that to calm tensions?

**David Mednicoff:** I think that there are a lot of people at the university, including me, who are working behind the scenes to find ways of bridging divides. A number of us you know, on the academic side are putting together learning events that are very deliberately designed to make space for people to get intellectual background rather than just kind of reify a particular slogan or political position.
Gemma Ware: Among events organized by David's department were a talk by Ahmad Khalidi, a Palestinian academic and activist who lives in the local area, and another by a local Israeli, Jesse Ferris, who runs the Israel Democracy Institute, an Israeli think tank. He told me that whatever American universities decide to do at a moment like this, it doesn't happen in a vacuum, and universities are currently facing a lot of hostility.

David Mednicoff: Universities, I think, all over the world, but certainly in the United States, are themselves under a good bit of attack by outside groups who think that universities either should push a particular perspective, or they shouldn't be places where broad free speech is allowed if it goes against what they would conceive as particular guardrails. It's really a very interesting and important moment on American campuses because whether it's SJP or some groups affiliated with Israel, there are outside groups that you know, have an agenda that is not particularly about community well-being and community building, but rather pushing politics in a particular direction. And you know, they're entitled to that, as are the students that subscribe to those politics on campus. But I think many of us here are concerned with maintaining everybody's rights, doing everything that we can to keep the atmosphere as conducive as possible to difficult conversations. That is to say, not everybody's going to be comfortable with perspectives, but we should be able to argue about them without fear of personal safety.

Gemma Ware: Where do you draw the line between what's acceptable for students and what's an unsafe environment? Because what should students be expected to accept as part of free speech on campus?

David Mednicoff: Yeah, I mean, I think that students need to be able to accept a fair bit of voicing of perspectives that can challenge them sometimes even to the core of their identity. I mean, I think that it is reasonable for a Palestinian Arab to hear an Israeli Jewish student share their sadness and fear in light of the October 7 massacres. It is reasonable for a pro-Israeli activist to appreciate that there's a long history of demeaning of Palestinian rights, particularly in the occupied territories, that is hard. So I think that coming into contact with perspectives, even if they're hurtful, is reasonable. And there's no exact line here. But I think that the other side of that line, the line where you know, I would be concerned, is if people feel sort of
trapped or harassed, like if somebody's walking around campus and they walk by somebody tabling on behalf of a cause, and then the person runs after them and screams at them, “You're a killer” or something like that. That’s where I think the university would say no. When people rip each other's posters for events down, that's when the university will step in.

**Gemma Ware:** Universities have come under fire from those both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian who think that their leadership should take a stronger stance during the Israel-Gaza war. But David thinks that's not a university's role.

**David Mednicoff:** In general, I think that it is ill-advised for universities to take political positions on global issues as a matter of course. I'm not the only one who thinks this, and I understand that for people who are really, at this moment, heartbroken by the over 11,000 Palestinians that are dying, that, you know, the slogan “silence has complicity” feels very, very compelling.

I mean, I get that there are power inequities in the Middle East conflict and in the United States connection to it, that encourage many of my students to feel activist. But what I feel like I need to do is create the environment for students to sort of figure these things out for themselves. And by not putting the weight of my department behind a particular statement with which some people would doubtlessly disagree. And I've got to tell you that the university is getting a lot of pressure to ban Students for Justice for Palestine, which has happened at some campuses now, and is getting a lot of pressure to divest from military companies that supply arms that might be used against Palestinians and all of those are potentially valid political positions. And I think the administration is doing the right thing, trying to treat them all even-handedly and say, 'our mission as a university, just as it's my mission as chair of a unit with a variety of students and a variety of missions, to keep as much space as open for other people to push their political ideas in the public space.'

**Gemma Ware:** So, around 40% or so of the money that the universities in the US get comes from the state, from the government. The rest comes from donations and from investment portfolios. Do you think that this can interfere with universities’ ethos as a space for free expression?
David Mednicoff: Yeah. I mean, I think that we all need donors. One of the things that's happened in the American University system in recent decades is that the corporate model has really established itself here. And that means that budgeting kind of, bottom lines and accounting have really taken a very large shape in how universities are managed. Yes, state universities do get a good bit, but not as much as we used to of our budgets from public taxpayer allocation. I mean, most of our funding does come from private sources and research grants and things like that. Any university has to be thinking about that. And again, I think this is very hard. I can say honestly, in my personal knowledge, UMass has not taken a position or pushed its learning in a way that I think is inappropriate for an open institution of higher education because of donors. And of course, we've seen at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania, among others, major donors pulling out because of a combination of statements seeming not tailored in the way they wanted at this moment, and then other concerns that they voiced over the past.

Gemma Ware: What about academic freedom? Do you know of any colleagues who've stopped themselves from saying something or writing something because of the way they think it might be viewed or have been attacked for something that they have said? Are there any particular groups you have seen that are getting or are more likely to face censorship than others at this moment?

David Mednicoff: Again, this cuts to what I'm really concerned about. I see as a political scientist and a lawyer working on challenging issues at this moment in the United States, universities to really be in the firing line from outside political groups that are not only not interested in what we do, but trying to shut down this discourse. I'm mostly concerned about this as sort of a right-wing authoritarian part of broader autocratic politics that's happening worldwide. I mean, so I don't think that people on the left are trying to shut down the basic missions of universities. I do think that there are people on the right that don't want there to be open discourse around a variety of important things, structural racism, or for that matter, issues in the Middle East.

And in that context, I think that many, if not most, faculty members probably do exercise some self-censorship on controversial issues. I think it's common and I
think it's fair to say that Students for Justice for Palestine have been louder than, say, pro-Israel folks in terms of campus political discourse. And that's, you know, that's fine. I mean, that speaks in part, I think they're a good organization. But when you look outside of the campus I think that the outside organizations that have been quick to condemn pro-Palestinian speech you know are pretty strong.

So, I can see how some Jewish students on my campus feel sort of beleaguered by the loudness of pro-Palestinian voices at the moment. I can also see how pro-Palestinian students feel that they have so much to fear because there are national organizations that are quick to dox them. I mean, one of my students on the SJP side was ambushed by Fox News and found herself in a couple of Murdoch newspapers the next day. So it's really important that we look at these kinds of issues around Palestine, Israel, or contentious issues on campus generally, that there can be parallels of pain and concern and even unsafety, but they're not symmetric. Organizations that push back against sort of left-wing or progressive ideas on the outside, do tend to be stronger than organizations more to the left.

Gemma Ware: So at moments like this, do you think it's actually a political choice for universities in the U.S. to try and foster well-informed, open debate on their campuses?

David Mednicoff: I think that it is a political choice because the politics of higher education are an unfortunately contested issue, at the moment, in the United States and I think that there's so much disinformation, smearing even, about what universities do that really standing up for the idea that in fact we do not ourselves, faculty, administrators, staff, compel in any way students and others in our community to take a position on something but rather that we really seek to give them the tools to ask hard questions and to be informed citizens, you know, that needs political defense and I will certainly fall on a sword defending that position.

Gemma Ware: Well, thank you so much, David, for your insights and considered thoughts on this. We really appreciate your time.

David Mednicoff: Sure.
Gemma Ware: That's it for this week's episode. In part two, which will be out on Monday, we'll be speaking to Neve Gordon, a law professor at Queen Mary University of London in the UK, about the threats the Israel-Gaza war is posing to academic freedom. Thanks for this episode, go to our colleague Naomi Schalit in Boston and to David Mednicoff at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. We'll put a link in our show notes to an article that he wrote for The Conversation about the need to defend a space for free discussion on campus.

This episode of The Conversation Weekly was written and produced by me, Gemma Ware, and Mend Mariwany with assistance from Katie Flood. I'm also the show's executive producer. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. You can connect with us on Instagram, @theconversationdotcom on X, formerly known as Twitter, @tc_audio, or email us directly at podcast@theconversation.com. If you like what we do, please support our podcast and The Conversation by going to donate.theconversation.com and please give us a rating or review wherever you listen to your podcast. It really does help. Thanks for listening.