



AEN Statement Urging University Leaders to Exercise Moral Leadership

October 11, 2023, Washington, DC. As is now well known, on the early hours of October 7, as Israelis were observing the Sabbath and celebrating a Jewish high holy day, the Iranian-backed Hamas terrorist organization launched a massive premeditated surprise attack on the Israeli civilian population. The terrorists breached the border and quickly overran communities in Israel's south, massacring civilians and taking hostages while indiscriminately firing thousands of rockets and missiles at population centers throughout the country.

As more information and details have come to light in recent days, the sheer degree of unconscionable cruelty and barbaric brutality perpetrated against Israeli civilians this past weekend—including women, children, babies, and the elderly—has shaken us. Entire families have been tortured and slaughtered and infants have been slain in their cribs. Hundreds of young people attending an outdoor music festival were viciously murdered on the spot. Women have been raped, children killed in front of their parents, dead bodies have been mutilated and paraded on the street of Gaza, and the abuse of those in captivity continues.

Let us be clear. This was not “war as usual” or just “one more event” in the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There were not “good people on both sides.” The horrific violence unleashed by Hamas is reminiscent of the heinous crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS. To put this attack into perspective, more Jews were murdered this past Saturday than on any other single day since the Holocaust, with the death toll continuing to rise.

This willful and purposeful killing of civilians and the taking of civilian hostages must be thoroughly denounced.

World leaders from across the political spectrum have condemned these attacks, which have reopened wounds and deepened fear for Jewish people in the United States. Yet, we are appalled and sickened that in recent days, on hundreds of campuses across the United States, there have been initiatives undertaken by registered student organizations to support these heinous Hamas actions and to justify, condone, and even glorify them.

On some campuses, dozens of student clubs have issued inflammatory statements absolving Hamas from all agency while holding Israel “entirely responsible” for the unfolding violence; on others, pro-Hamas pronouncements have celebrated Hamas for its “historic win.” In addition to such vile materials, in recent days many student organizations have hosted vigils for Hamas “martyrs.”

Tomorrow, October 12, the National Students for Justice in Palestine (NSJP) organization has called for a “Day of Resistance” in support of the Hamas attack and “armed struggle” against the “Zionist regime.” At the time of this writing, SJP chapters on campuses across the country are sharing marketing materials for this campaign which shamefully depicts a cartoon drawing of a Hamas terrorist paragliding into Israel—an image that celebrates the murder of more than 260 young people at a desert rave. Dozens of these student groups are planning to hold rallies tomorrow which may promote and justify further calls for violence and Israel’s demise.

This hateful speech and activities on our campuses cannot be ignored. Regrettably, with few exceptions, most university leaders have not spoken out. Some have released anodyne and inadequate statements that fail to explicitly denounce Hamas or that seem to create a moral equivalence between it and Israel’s defense and security forces. Nor have they called out and condemned the pro-Hamas activities happening on their own campuses, which have left devastated Jewish and Israeli students feeling deeply alienated and disrespected. These students cannot feel safe and welcomed if it is considered acceptable to excuse and even glorify the deaths of Jewish children.

We commend the leaders of [The City University of New York](#) (Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez), [Columbia University](#) (President Minouche Shafik), [New York University](#) (President Linda G. Mills), [University of California](#) (Chancellor Michael V. Drake), [University of Illinois](#) (President Tim Killeen) and [University Michigan](#) (President Santa J. Ono) for taking a different stance. With their recent statements unequivocally condemning the carnage visited upon the Israeli people they have shown true leadership and moral clarity. In the days ahead, we encourage university leaders nationwide to consider these as model statements to emulate.

As the war intensifies, there have been deaths of innocent Palestinian civilians as well, placed in harm’s way by the Hamas terror organization which governs Gaza. Each and every innocent life lost is a painful tragedy. Yet, this must not mislead us into making false equivalencies between Hamas war crimes and Israel’s self-defense operations. This is a teachable moment to remind students that some actions are beyond political debate and difficult conversations, and are simply wrong. As a group of Harvard faculty noted yesterday in an [Open Letter](#), “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a long and complex history...However, the events of this week are not complicated. Sometimes there is such a thing as evil, and it is incumbent upon educators and leaders to call it out...”

At a time like this we urge university leaders to provide moral leadership for their campuses.

The [Academic Engagement Network](#) (AEN) is a national organization that mobilizes networks of university faculty and administrators to counter antisemitism, oppose the denigration of Jewish and Zionist identities, promote academic freedom, and advance education about Israel.