

The War on Israel: The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

by Shale Horowitz

Since October 7, 2023, the date of the brutal attack by Hamas on the State of Israel in which roughly 1,200 Israelis were killed and 250 taken hostage, 120 illegal anti-Israel encampments have been set up at universities.¹ The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) is the second largest public university in Wisconsin with 23,000 students (2024). UWM's leadership went beyond the typically limited collusion with radical protesters to full-throated endorsement of their rhetoric and methods. The story of how UWM leaders embraced the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to destroy Israel provides an instructive lens through which to see how universities today are corrupted to support far-left and allied ideologies and agendas. There are important lessons both for the defense of the classical-liberal mission of universities and for the future of American Jews.

What Happened at UWM

On October 16 UWM chancellor Mark Mone made the university's first public statement in response to the October 7 attacks by Hamas,² summarizing events without naming Hamas as the aggressor and without discriminating among the methods used by the two sides: "The violence against children and other innocent people, the shocking brutality unleashed, and the significant escalation of hostilities must be recognized as one of the great tragedies of modern times." He then described reactions at UWM: "Students rallied for Palestinian freedom in Spaight's Plaza, and others gathered at Hillel to grieve with one another."

The full rallying cry chanted by pro-Palestinian anti-Israel protestors at UWM is the well-known, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free"—an open call for at least the erasure of Israel's sovereignty as a nation-state and possibly the destruction of Israel

and its Jewish population. Mone thus followed the standard tactic of white-washing protestor-endorsed Palestinian demands, making them seem reasonable and moderate, especially to the uninformed. Mone's statement is one of moral equivalence, in which there is no significant difference between the goals and methods of the two sides.

One anti-Israel protestor demand is to rename UWM's Golda Meir Library, named after the late Israeli prime minister who lived in Milwaukee before going on to serve in Israel's top post in 1969 through 1974. On March 16, 2024, the library was vandalized when a window was broken and "Free Palestine" spraypainted on the façade. UWM responded: "The library has been a focal point of protests, due to the current conflict in the Middle East and concerns by protesters over the library's namesake.... this is neither speech nor peaceful protest, and UWM will not tolerate vandalism or other illegal acts."³ The statement went on to say that "neither antisemitism nor Islamophobia has any place on our campus,"—though there had been no anti-Muslim incidents up until that point. While claiming to uphold the law and rules of the university, UWM respectfully rewords the protestor demand to rename the library and falsely implies that both sides of the conflict are similarly likely to use threatening or hateful tactics and vandalism.

On April 17, the campus Jewish student group Hillel staged an event featuring Israeli culture—food, music, and art. Hillel's rabbi, Joshua Herman,

describes what happened: "protestors surrounded us and began screaming a variety of slogans, including 'From the river to the sea' and calling for 'intifada.' I made the decision to get everyone out, and the UWMPD [campus police] and our Federation security accompanied us to safety off campus."⁴ The protestors' slogans and behavior threatened students, but the university said and did nothing.

On April 29, anti-Israel student groups set up an illegal encampment at UWM. UWM responded not by removing the encampment and disciplining the protestors, but by praising them as mostly "peaceful and lawful."⁵ UWM respectfully recounted protestor demands for academic and economic boycotts using moderate language, while stating obsequiously that UWM had no study-abroad programs in Israel, that academic boycotts would "stifl[e] academic freedom or free speech," and that the UWM Foundation "has no investments in weapons manufacturers," nor can its mutual funds "disinvest from individual companies." The university protected itself by hiding behind financial regulatory restrictions and said nothing about the incongruence of a public university singling out Israel of all the countries in the world for criticism and boycott. Needless to say, pro-Israel viewpoints that might counterbalance the demands of the pro-Palestinian protestors did not appear in the statement.

In a May 8 statement,⁶ Chancellor Mone lauded the anti-Israel protests and protestors: "We are bearing witness

to history, not just at UWM, but across the nation and the world. For the past ten days, UWM's portion of this historic chapter has unfolded as an encampment on the lawn outside of Mitchell Hall." Mone went on to say: "I appreciate that the protests have remained peaceful and have not disrupted daily campus operations. And it is laudable that so many learning opportunities have been incorporated into life inside the encampment." Then: "We are actively negotiating with representatives of the protest group and have addressed the protesters' demands as much as state laws and policy allow. We've also explained how UWM, as a public university, cannot take political stances or infringe on academic freedom." Repeating statements by elected leaders that the illegal encampment must end, Mone emphasized that he was trying to accomplish this "peacefully" by making the maximum allowable concessions to protestor demands.

On May 10, UW-Madison, Wisconsin's largest and most prestigious public university, made an agreement to end its own illegal encampment.⁷ In exchange for ending the encampment and not disrupting graduation ceremonies or violating university rules in the future, Madison leadership made a series of sympathetic statements and agreed to "facilitate[e] access for SJP [Students for Justice in Palestine] to relevant decision-makers"; to review and promote more campus activities related to "war, violence, and displacement"; to "invite to campus at least one scholar from a

Palestinian University for each of the next three academic years, with possible extension"; and to show restraint in taking action against those violating the law or university rules.

Although Madison's statement used relatively even-handed language, it followed a broader national pattern of informally colluding with anti-Israel protestors. Protestors were allowed to maintain illegal encampments for significant periods of time, while university leadership engaged in protracted negotiations over concessions to end the encampments voluntarily. This had the effect of not only legitimizing the anti-Israel movement's ideology, but probably privileging it as well: it is hard to imagine that other interests—say, an anti-abortion group or any group advocating the destruction of another country—would have received similar treatment.

UWM's own May 12 agreement to end the illegal encampment did not, as most expected, follow the precedent of UW-Madison. Instead, UWM leaders endorsed a long list of falsehoods and defamatory statements and openly supported the movement to boycott Israel.⁸ UWM's statement:

- Claims that "34,000 innocent Palestinians" have been killed, while citing only a UN estimate of the total number killed. As those who follow the news know, this figure is based on Hamas statistics, which do not distinguish combatants from civilians. Israel claims (as of May 2024) that about 30,000 people had been

killed in Gaza since Oct. 7, but that 14,000 of those were combatants.⁹ So unreliable are figures coming out of Hamas controlled organizations that between May 6 and May 8, the United Nations, which has voted repeatedly to halt Israel's military operations in Gaza, cut previous estimates of the number of women and children killed by half.¹⁰

- “Condemn[s] genocide,” citing a UN “expert” and the notoriously anti-Israel International Court of Justice asserting that Israel committed a “plausible genocide.” According to urban warfare expert John Spencer,¹¹ the ratio of civilian-to-combatant casualties in Gaza likely ranges from 1-to-1 to 1.5-to-1—better than that achieved by the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq and far better than that of Israel's enemies in similar wars. A commonly cited estimate for modern wars is 9-to-1. Spencer found that “Israel has implemented more precautions to prevent civilian harm than any military in history—above and beyond what international law requires and more than the U.S. did in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” UWM's statement places no blame on Hamas for civilian casualties in Gaza. Yet, in addition to starting the war, Hamas intentionally embeds fighters around and under the civilian population and refuses to designate uncontested safe areas to which civilians can flee.
- Equates the situation of the hostages taken by Hamas on October 7 to Palestinians arrested and put under Israeli administrative detention according to the rules of Israel's justice system.
- Accuses Israel of “scholasticide”—intentional destruction of educational institutions—based on the damage sustained by schools and universities in Gaza; and similarly denounces destruction of “heritage sites” and mosques. UWM ignores the fact that Hamas intentionally fortifies and fights from civilian facilities such as schools, hospitals, and mosques. This violates the laws of war and leaves Israel a choice between fighting amid these facilities and giving Hamas virtually unlimited safe havens within the war zone.
- While noting that “UWM is prohibited by [Wisconsin] law from cutting ties with private companies and organizations that do business in Israel,” Chancellor Mone made efforts to get Wisconsin's Water Council, a water industry non-profit organization, to boycott two Israeli water companies: “At the Chancellor's urging, the Water Council no longer has relationships with these entities, and they have been removed from the global listing on the Water Council's website.” By taking this action, Mone takes part in the BDS movement, which seeks Israel's destruction. UWM did not attempt to discern whether any companies aiding Israel's enemies,

or otherwise involved in supporting terrorism elsewhere in the world, merited similar boycotts.

- Agrees to involve protest group representatives in planning a future “series of campus conversations and educational opportunities.”
- “agree[s] to forgo relevant citations or conduct violations for the Coalition and the student group” if the protestors shut down the illegal encampment by May 14 and do not disrupt graduation ceremonies.

Overall, UWM’s statement joins the anti-Israel movement’s campaign to use slanders and boycotts to destroy Israel and its Jewish population. The most widely recognized definition of antisemitism is that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an organization of thirty-five member countries including the United States. It includes the following type of antisemitism: “Applying double standards by requiring of it [Israel] a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.”¹² UWM’s statement, which accuses only Israel of genocide and other crimes, without comparing Israel’s behavior to that of the U.S. or other democracies, is an example of this type of antisemitism.

On May 14, three local Jewish organizations responded to UWM’s May 12 Agreement:¹³

Chancellor Mark Mone capitulated to protesters who violated UWM codes of conduct and state law, vandalized university property, and used harassment and intimidation to fuel antisemitism on campus.... Chancellor Mone’s

agreement with protesters comes after seven-plus months of him refusing to meet with Jewish students.

Also on May 14, University of Wisconsin System President Jay Rothman reacted on X:¹⁴

Maintaining viewpoint neutrality on challenging public issues is critically important, especially in situations where students and other university stakeholders on multiple sides of an issue are in vehement disagreement.... I am disappointed by the course taken by UW-Milwaukee, and I am continuing to assess the decision-making process that led to this result.

Mone responded on May 21¹⁵—after graduation ceremonies were completed without incident:

UWM should not have weighed in on deeply complex geopolitical and historical issues. And for that, I apologize. I acknowledge that it is an increasingly difficult time for many Jewish students at UWM and across America.... UWM resolutely condemns antisemitism, just as we do Islamophobia and all other forms of hatred.

This statement does not disavow any of Mone’s May 12 slanders or the agreement to end the illegal encampment. After officially supporting the antisemitic movement to malign and destroy Israel and its Jews, Mone claims to oppose antisemitism and defaults back into DEI-speak.

On July 3, 2024, Mone announced that he is resigning as of July 1, 2025— noting that the delay “allows for a smooth transition to a new leader.”¹⁶ While statements by Mone and other UW System officials make no mention of the controversy over Mone’s man-

agement of the illegal encampment, news reports highlight how Mone's announcement came soon after the controversy erupted.¹⁷

What Is to Be Done

Vandalism, intimidation, and illegal encampments signal transition from law-abiding speech and protest to intimidation and violence. Yet, under the false flag of peace and safety, university leaders use university resources and prestige to promote and reward such law-breaking when they approve of the cause or when they prefer not to punish this behavior.

UWM's case is worse than many of the other campuses experiencing similar disruptions in the past academic year. Mone and other UWM leaders violated their public commitments to enforce Wisconsin law and university norms and rules and to maintain institutional neutrality on controversial issues.¹⁸ They endorsed an antisemitic movement controlled by far left and Islamic extremists at a time of exploding anti-Jewish intimidation and violence around the country¹⁹ and on their own campus—while piously claiming to uphold diversity and inclusion. It isn't immediately clear why UWM went so far beyond what was said and done by other protestor-friendly universities. But incompetence, ideological bias, and groupthink all seem to be necessary parts of the explanation. Such leadership cannot be left in control of public universities. Mone's resignation sends

an important message to other university leaders.

Unfortunately, responsible officials did not acknowledge that he was forced to resign for violating university norms to serve campus extremists.

Fallout

UWM's May 12 agreement to end the illegal encampment shows that ideological uniformity and privilege allow the most extreme and active elements to assert their own worldview as fact and to impose their preferred policies. Necessary remedies include leadership of public universities by politically accountable outsiders and more reliable commitments to uphold university values and rules.

At the University of Florida, former-Senator Ben Sasse upheld free speech while not tolerating "unlawful action"; enforced three-year suspensions against lawbreakers; and supported "real education" rather than "quasi-religious fanaticism."²⁰ University leaders cannot reliably be chosen by insiders with unrepresentative worldviews and goals. Elected leaders should adopt the norm that public universities be led by outsiders with records of effective leadership. Like other political appointees, such leaders should be removable at the pleasure of elected officials. This should extend to the entire top leadership team, and this team should have similar discretion to replace lower-ranking administrators.

To maintain non-profit status and access to state funding, university lead-

ers could be required to accept commitments to uphold core university values and rules, such as freedom of speech, academic freedom, and free inquiry, protection against harassment and intimidation, reliable and equal enforcement of laws and university rules, and institutional neutrality on controversial political issues that are not part of core educational norms. These commitments could be enforceable outside the university, through the legal system, as existing non-discrimination laws are.

Remedies might include firing and civil fines. Such remedies are a double-edged sword and must be designed carefully, but, under current circumstances, the benefits may outweigh the drawbacks. This is particularly true for private universities, which are unaccountable to the public and more readily taken over from within. Another, complementary approach is to give elected officials—preferably governors and legislatures independently—the power to compel failing university leaders to uphold core university values and rules and, again, to dismiss leaders for such failures.

The systemic anti-Israel collusion of extremists and university bosses also has important implications for American Jews. For the far left, Jews are white Westerners, while Palestinian and other Muslims are non-white, non-Westerners, whose more radical segments are part of the anti-Western coalition. It doesn't matter that the racial elements of this worldview are false and repugnant. The far left has now reached a

level of power and influence within the Democratic Party sufficient to mainstream scapegoating of Israel and Jews. Such scapegoating, of course, is most effective when the target group is numerically small and others are not well-informed. The campaign has achieved particularly frightening proportions in K-12 schools and universities. It threatens to end a period in American Jewish life characterized by unprecedented security, freedom, and opportunity—the “golden age of American Jewry” —and relegate Jews to the besieged status prevailing in some Western European countries.

Longstanding Jewish loyalty to the Democratic Party and leftist causes no longer provides Jews with fair treatment and reliable protection, whether via informal social norms or equal application of rules and laws. It is time to demand fair treatment and reliable protection or, otherwise, “exit.”²¹

Recent events may have the effect of encouraging more liberals, perhaps Jews especially, to mobilize in support of classical-liberal educational values, strict and equal enforcement of rules and laws, and other non-discriminatory, meritocratic norms and institutions. Within the universities, those defending classical-liberal norms and values and supporting Israel's existence and right to self-defense realize that a reactive, behind-the-scenes approach is no longer sufficient. The road will be long and hard, but there is no acceptable alternative.

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