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## Latitudes: Why an Israeli college president is speaking out about campus protests in the United States

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Karin Fischer <newsletter@newsletter.chronicle.com>

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Reply-To: newsletter@newsletter.chronicle.com

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# Latitudes

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## This Israeli college president says American campus protests have crossed the line

Pro-Palestinian protests on American campuses have drawn criticism from

[politicians](#), [parents](#), and even some college leaders — including the presidents of Israel’s top research universities.

In a [joint statement](#), the presidents called the demonstrations disturbing, saying they had created a climate in which Jewish students and faculty members felt unsafe.

It’s uncommon, even unorthodox, for college leaders in one country to weigh in on campus controversies in another. Yet the Israeli presidents have [repeatedly spoken out](#) about American higher education’s response to the Israel-Hamas war, in public messages and in [letters](#) urging their American counterparts to be more forceful in condemning Hamas’s attacks last October.

Ron Robin, president of the University of Haifa, felt he could not be silent. Robin’s expertise is in American history; he earned a Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley and was a top administrator at New York University before being named the Haifa president.

Robin was back in California on college business when we talked last week. He said he supported the right to protest but that the environment on some American campuses had become “toxic.” He also called criticism of Israeli universities, and the movement for [an academic boycott](#), misplaced. Last month, he noted, Haifa appointed Mouna Maroun, an Arab neuroscientist, as rector, the equivalent of provost. She’s the first Arab academic to take on the influential role at an Israeli institution. “I don’t think you could make a stronger statement,” Robin said.

The conversation has been edited for space and clarity.

### **Why take the unusual step of weighing in, repeatedly, on events on campuses in a different country?**

What we see now in the United States impinges directly on us, and we feel that we need to voice our opinion. The only way to address

these issues is to use our personal ties. Israeli academia is a force for reconciliation in the Middle East, a force for a society that is equitable to all, and an example of the speciousness of the call that Israel is an apartheid state. Folks who are calling for breaking with Israeli universities are doing this because we spoil the narrative.

I would beseech my colleagues to understand what is happening on university campuses in Israel before making rash moves, before being sucked under by fake news and misinformation. We are here; please approach us.

**In your recent letter, you and your colleagues write, “Freedom of expression and the right to demonstrate are vital to the health of any democracy and especially crucial in academic settings.” But you feel that the latest protests have crossed a line. How?**

Recently at the University of California at Los Angeles, for one example, there was a [roadblock](#) near the main quad. People were asked at the entrance, “Are you a Zionist or not?” Let me be very clear about this: The use of the word Zionist is just a subterfuge. They were asking, “Are you Jewish or not?”

Look, there’s no one reason for the demonstrations on campus. There are some who support the Palestinian cause, and that’s just fine. There are some who are shocked by what they see in the media. And there are some who are adamant about purging Jews from these campuses. These forces have joined together in a toxic mix. Many people who have had noble reasons for supporting the Palestinian cause have been sucked in to this toxic combination of protests.

**The demonstrations themselves have [largely been peaceful](#), and reports of violence have often come when campus administrators or law enforcement have tried to force them to end. Why not just allow students to speak their minds?**

Once freedom of speech turns into blocking access to buildings, building encampments which don't allow people to move around freely — once they move out of discourse into actions which impede freedom of movement, freedom of religion — they cross the line. There are legitimate concerns that people have, but they have moved beyond discourse to manners which are intimidating and, at the extreme sides of this, are tremendously antisemitic as well.

**The University of Haifa is a uniquely mixed institution, where 40 percent of the students are Arab. What has the climate at your university been like?**

This is a time of great tension between Arabs and Jews, who may be on different sides of this conflict. We should be cognizant of that and respectful of that. Whatever forums we have to express these opinions should be in a manner which is respectful of others. We're back to having having one or two small demonstrations at the entrance to the campus.

We teach our students how to think. We don't tell them what to think. And that is a very important distinction.

**Yet, your institution is not without conflict. Students were [suspended](#) for allegedly making pro-Hamas posts on social media.**

Would you like to know what happened to those students? Out of those eight students, one was suspended indefinitely. One decided to leave the school, and all the rest received suspended sentences. I believe when you look at Ivy League campuses, a few more students have been suspended than at Haifa.

**Do you worry about the potential for conflict or unrest bubbling just under the surface on your own campus?**

I would be foolish not to worry. It can change any day. We have to be vigilant. We have to be attentive to our students and faculty. The fact of the matter is that no university is an island and definitely not our university. Therefore, we have to be constantly vigilant, because things can spiral out of control any day. Of course I worry.

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## Bill would revoke protesters' student visas

Former President Donald J. Trump called to “immediately deport” international students who take part in anti-Israel campus demonstrations, while a Republican congressman has introduced legislation to revoke the student visas of arrested protesters.

The [bill](#), filed by Rep. Andrew Ogles of Tennessee, would cancel the visas of international students arrested “for rioting or unlawful protest” or while “establishing, participating in, or promoting an encampment” on a college campus. It does not appear to take into account whether students are convicted.

(In a separate bill, Ogles proposed sentencing those who are convicted to six months of community service in Gaza.)

At a [rally](#) over the weekend, Trump said he would take similar action if returned to office. “If you come here from another country and try to bring jihadism or anti-Americanism or antisemitism to campuses, we will immediately deport you,” he said. “You’ll be out of that school.”

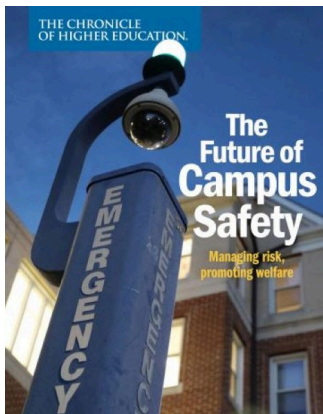
But legal experts say such rhetoric tramples on international students’ [First Amendment rights](#). While breaking the law can jeopardize students’ visa status, noncitizens legally in the United States have the same free-speech protections as Americans do.

Also in the past week:

- Police broke up pro-Palestinian encampments at [Canadian](#), [Dutch](#), [and German](#) campuses, while demonstrators at [Trinity College Dublin](#) dispersed after the institution agreed to divest from three Israeli companies that the United Nations said have ties to settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.
- Rishi Sunak, the British prime minister, [met with college leaders](#), urging them to combat antisemitism and do more to protect Jewish students.
- Spanish universities will [review academic ties](#) with Israel.

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## FROM THE CHRONICLE STORE



### The Future of Campus Safety

Colleges can't foresee and avoid every possible safety concern. Yet students, parents, and others are demanding that colleges do more to keep campuses safe. [Order this report](#) to explore strategies colleges are employing to counter threats to their communities' well-being.

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## China accused of surveilling overseas students

Chinese students studying in the United States and elsewhere overseas face harassment and surveillance as part of a “campaign of transnational repression,” according to a [new report](#) from Amnesty International.

In in-depth interviews, students at European and North American colleges said they felt frightened or intimidated about discussing sensitive or political topics when abroad, concerned that they or their families could be punished under Chinese national-security laws. Such behavior undercuts the goals of intellectual exchange and international freedom, but host countries and colleges are not doing enough to protect Chinese students and researchers, the report said.

“The failure to meaningfully address the fears of international students and the resulting chilling effect on university campuses risks the

perpetuation of a system in which the ability of some students to exercise their rights is more secure than others,” it reads.

Many of the students said they self-censored because they thought they were being monitored, particularly around other Chinese classmates. A number said their fears led them to change the focus of their academic study or research. Nearly half said they worried about returning home. The uncertainty about what statements, activities, or associations could draw authorities’ attention led to anxiety and stress.

Students also said they were concerned that their actions while overseas could affect their families back in China. One student said that just hours after she took part in a commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, security authorities contacted her father, telling him to “educate his daughter who is studying overseas not to attend any events that may harm China’s reputation in the world.” The student said she had not shared her real name with anyone involved in the protest or posted about it online.

The human-rights group also contacted 55 colleges in eight western countries about what policies they had in place to protect students from transnational repression. Often, it found, institutions were unaware of, or ill-equipped to handle, such incidents.

The organization recommended that colleges adopt policies and procedures to protect academic freedom and human rights, including from transnational repression; put in place mechanisms to monitor threats to students and professors; and ensure that support is available to all students. National governments must also be proactive in dealing with such concerns, the report said.

Amnesty International is not alone in warning of the risks of international engagement. In a report earlier this year, Freedom



House called transnational repression an “[everyday threat](#)” to foreign students and scholars.

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## Congress investigates Georgia Tech’s China ties

A congressional select committee on China has asked the Georgia Institute of Technology for details on its partnership with Tianjin University, which is alleged to have links to China’s military and national-security organizations.

In a [letter](#), lawmakers asked Georgia Tech about “sensitive research with military applications.” They mentioned an announcement in January that the two institutions had created the world’s first functional graphene-based semiconductor. While the technology is only in the research stage, there are concerns that it could eventually have military applications.

This isn’t the first time the committee has investigated academic partnerships: Last summer it looked into a joint research institute run by the [University of California at Berkeley](#) and another Chinese university.

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## Around the globe

The U.S. Department of State issued [115,000 student visas](#) in the first half of the current fiscal year. Nearly 134,000 visitors got U.S.

visas for academic, cultural, and other exchanges.

**Sen. Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, is** a co-sponsor of legislation that would give legal protections to undocumented young people, but said during a [recent hearing](#) that he would not work on the bill until the border is “secured.”

**Professors and other academic staff at Brazilian colleges are on** [strike](#) in protest of low wages and crumbling campus infrastructure.

**Applications for [British student visas](#) fell** 44 percent in the first quarter of the year, partially due to new restrictions on bringing dependent family members.

**The British government’s top science adviser said** she is “[profoundly worried](#)” about research security and that many scientists are unaware of the problem.

**Research, innovation, and education are** key to Britain’s economic revitalization, Sunak, the prime minister, said in an [election speech](#).

**The presidents of national science academies across Europe signed** a [joint statement](#) urging European Union policymakers to support open research collaboration and increase funding for science and education.

**Some female professors in Afghanistan have turned to** [domestic work](#) after they lost their jobs when the Taliban took control of the country, imposing severe restrictions on women’s and girl’s education.

**Australia is raising** the amount of [savings](#) prospective students must have on hand to get visas. [Canada](#) has done the same.

**Some 40 universities in Indonesia are** under investigation for alleged [human trafficking](#) under the guise of placing students in overseas apprenticeships.

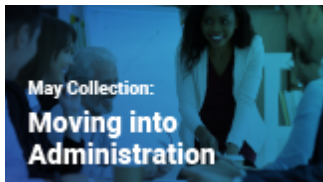
**Authorities in the Philippines are [looking into](#)** a large number of visas issued to students from China who are not enrolled in classes.

**Eleven virtual-exchange programs were awarded [grants](#)** from the Stevens Initiative to provide cross-cultural experiences to young people in the United States, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Thanks for reading. I always welcome your feedback and ideas for future reporting, so drop me a line at [karin.fischer@chronicle.com](mailto:karin.fischer@chronicle.com). You can also connect with me on [X](#) or [LinkedIn](#). If you like this newsletter, please share it with colleagues and friends. They can [sign up here](#).

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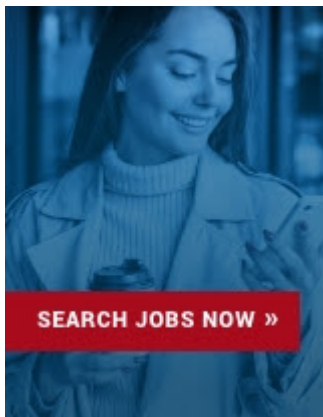
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