US Congress launches investigation of antisemitism at elite universities

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Lawmakers launched an investigation Thursday into antisemitism at three of the top US universities after their leaders [quibbled](https://www.timesofisrael.com/university-leaders-grilled-by-us-house-on-campus-antisemitism-amid-israel-hamas-war/) over whether student protests calling for the genocide of Jews amounted to harassment and violated the university’s policies.

The probe comes with the presidents of Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology facing a backlash over their testimony Tuesday on rising antisemitism on campus since the shock October 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas-led terrorists who killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took some 240 hostages.

The trio were pressed during a hearing in the House of Representatives on whether pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel student activists calling for ‘Jewish genocide’ violated their codes of conduct on harassment but all three equivocated, claiming it would depend on the context. All three universities have made headlines for speech and actions on campus that a range of critics have called antisemitic or inappropriate.

‘After this week’s pathetic and morally bankrupt testimony by university presidents when answering my questions, the Education and Workforce Committee is launching an official congressional investigation with the full force of subpoena power into Penn, MIT, Harvard and others,’ Elise Stefanik, the fourth-ranking House Republican, said in a statement.

‘We will use our full congressional authority to hold these schools accountable for their failure on the global stage,’ she said.

During the tense, five-hour hearing the presidents told Stefanik that calling for the genocide of Jews would only violate their schools’ rules if it led to individuals being bullied.

A video of the exchange was widely circulated following the session, bolstering mounting criticism against the school heads for appearing to equivocate on the matter, with both the White House and the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum joining a chorus of condemnation over the remarks Wednesday.

Stefanik, who studied at Harvard, has called for the presidents to resign.

Harvard president Dr. Claudine Gay sought to [clarify](https://www.timesofisrael.com/heads-of-harvard-penn-condemn-jewish-genocide-calls-after-appearing-to-condone-speech/) her comments Wednesday, arguing in a statement that critics were confusing ‘a right to free expression with the idea that Harvard will condone calls for violence against Jewish students.’

[During the hearing](https://www.timesofisrael.com/university-leaders-grilled-by-us-house-on-campus-antisemitism-amid-israel-hamas-war/), Stefanik asked Gay directly whether ‘calling for the genocide of Jews’ is against the code of conduct at Harvard.

She pointedly refused to answer affirmatively, saying, ‘When speech crosses into conduct, we take action.’

Penn president Magill also refused to give a straight answer when asked by Stefanik on Tuesday whether calling for the genocide of Jews constitutes bullying or harassment at the university.

‘It is a context-dependent decision,’ Magill responded, leading Stefanik to reply, ‘Calling for the genocide of Jews is dependent on the context? That is not bullying or harassment? This is the easiest question to answer ‘yes,’ Ms. Magill.’

Magill later said in a video statement that she should have been focused on the ‘irrefutable fact that a call for genocide of Jewish people is a call for some of the most terrible violence human beings can perpetrate.’

MIT president Sally Kornbluth, who did not issue a clarifying statement, said Tuesday that language calling for genocide of Jews would only be ‘investigated as harassment if pervasive and severe.’

The backlash to the hearing has been bipartisan, with the White House joining the condemnation.

‘It’s unbelievable that this needs to be said: calls for genocide are monstrous and antithetical to everything we represent as a country,’ a spokesman for President Joe Biden said in a statement.

Virginia Foxx, the education committee’s chairwoman, warned that other universities should expect to be caught up in the investigation.

Following Hamas’s October 7 atrocities, Israel launched a military campaign to remove the terror group from power in Gaza, but the offensive has ignited worldwide protests, including by groups on college campuses.

Demonstrations have included calls for the elimination of the Jewish state and Jewish students have reported being harassed or fearing for their safety.

In recent weeks, the US Department of Education has opened investigations into several universities, including Penn and Harvard, regarding antisemitism and Islamophobia on campus.

Schools have faced legal action and have lost out on donations from Jewish and pro-Israel advocates for their response to anti-Israel activism on campus, leading some to suspend pro-Palestinian student groups.

None of the three universities represented on the panel have suspended such groups.