



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Decline in reputation of the leading US universities – will replacing the presidents be enough to suppress antisemitism?



Facing the House Committee on Education sounded like a good occasion for the administrations of 3 leading US universities to remove much of the criticism about them tolerating hate speech and antisemitism, or to put an end to the **crisis of reputation**, which has followed them since the launch of Israel's war against Hamas.

However, it was not that simple. The leaders of the 3 largest and most "problematic" universities decided to deepen the controversy even more rather than resolve it.

The presidents of 3 universities - Harvard, UPenn and MIT - angered the members of the US Congress with their statements before the Committee on Education, so the head of this committee, Virginia A. Foxx, **announced** the opening of a formal congressional hearing.

"The testimony we received earlier this week from Presidents Gay, Magill, and Kornbluth about the responses of Harvard, UPenn, and MIT to the rampant antisemitism displayed on their campuses by their students and faculties was absolutely unacceptable. Committee members have deep concerns with their leadership, and their failure to take steps to provide Jewish students the safe learning environment they are due under law", said the Republican representative.

The 3 leading universities and any other universities the congressional committee requested information from will now have to provide comprehensive details about their antisemitism policies and disciplinary procedures.

In the event that they do not provide a thorough and prompt answer to Congress, they will also be expected to produce documentation pertaining to actions taken against hate speech and antisemitism, including coercive measures like subpoenas.

There is no end to the troubles

However, this is not the end of the troubles for the university leadership. In one of the rare

bipartisan initiatives, a group of 74 members of the US Congress asked the governing bodies of Harvard, UPenn and MIT "to immediately" remove female presidents who testified before a congressional committee.

"Their failure to unequivocally condemn calls for the systematic murder of Jews is deeply alarming. It stands in stark contrast to the principles we expect leaders of top academic institutions to uphold", wrote the members of Congress.

Several members of Congress called on the government to review the justification of federal grants to these universities, that is, "not to support, financially, action against any group of persons", said John Duarte, the Republican representative from California.

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The disappointing testimony given before Congress by the presidents of 3 prestigious universities may very well mark a turning point in the unstable atmosphere that has emerged on US university campuses as a result of the Israel-Hamas war.

Universities have been under attack from the very start for excessive tolerance of anti-Jewish hate speech and physical incidents where supporters of the Palestinians interrupted lectures and even physically assaulted Jewish colleagues.

Major universities have lost hundreds of millions of dollars in donations from corporations and individuals. This reaction to their tolerance of anti-Jewish campaigns was rather painful for universities.

The latest in a series of punished parties was the University of Pennsylvania, when Ross Stevens, the founder and CEO of Stone Ridge Asset Management, revoked a donation of as much as \$100 million immediately after the disappointing statement of the university's

president, Liz Magill, before the Congressional Committee.

A wave of donation withdrawals

Primarily individual withdrawals of large university donations may grow into an avalanche after the congressional hearing. It will now be even more difficult for major donors to participate in sharing the burden of the reputational crisis with the universities they sponsor.

This will be even harder after the official launch of the congressional investigation, requests from the Capitol to the administration to evaluate federal grants, and notably after the uniform public condemnation of 3 university presidents due to their unclear responses before the congressional committee.



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Subsequent explanations and **apologies** for refusing to condemn anti-Semitic behaviour on their campuses will not do much to keep female university presidents in their positions, particularly after a large group of members of Congress called for their removal.

University administrations now have a rather delicate task - to bow to the pressure of politicians and the public and to comply with their angry demands to remove the heads of their universities.

If they do that, they will reduce the pressure and somewhat eliminate the reputational crisis they have faced for 2 months. However, they will have to answer uncomfortable questions from their communities about why they sacrificed the university's autonomy and allowed someone else to influence their decisions, particularly politicians.

Anti-Semitism remains present in universities

They have found themselves in a storm, and any decision they make will not solve the ongoing issues in the organisation and rules of conduct at universities.

Obsession with discussions about the limits of freedom of speech and its development into hate speech, and more recently into antisemitism, have atrophied the universities' ability to demonstrate in practice respect for the values they declaratively stands for.

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The crisis in which their reputations have found themselves have come at a time when research has shown a worrying trend about the attitude of young people towards the Holocaust.

As many as one in 5 Americans between the ages of 18 and 29, that is, in the group that includes students, believes that the Holocaust is a myth. More than 20% of them think that the Holocaust had been exaggerated.

University presidents may be forced to step down very soon. However, there will remain a large number of young intellectuals in universities with strong convictions that

antisemitism is not a bad thing.

University administrations will need to find a long-term solution to this issue. A congressional investigation by itself will not be sufficient to motivate them.