PART ONE OF A THREE-PART SERIES

U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL:
JEWISH ENGAGEMENT AND
SOCIAL TENSION ON CAMPUS

THE SOCIAL COSTS OF BEING JEWISH AND SUPPORTING ISRAEL ON CAMPUS:

What a Before/After Survey Can Tell Us

Prepared for the Jim Joseph Foundation

FEBRUARY 2024
Eitan Hersh

INTRODUCTION

Do Jewish students on college campuses face a hostile environment? Particularly since the October 7, 2023 attack in Israel and subsequent tensions at universities around the United States, the Jewish community has been trying to answer this question.

But for at least two reasons, it's a hard question to answer. For one, people disagree on definitions of what amounts to a "hostile environment" and on the threshold for discomfort they expect students to be able to endure. The other reason is that it is genuinely difficult to make sense of the reality on the ground based on anecdotes in the news or social media feeds. Viral videos showing confrontations on campuses are not necessarily indicative of the experience of most students.

That's why surveys, which gather responses from a wide spectrum of individuals, provide a crucial tool to measure reality. In this article, as well as two other articles that I will write in this series, I report on a unique study that surveyed both Jewish and non-Jewish students in the spring of 2022, two school-years ago, and again after the October 7 attacks.

In this first essay, I will share findings about social tensions from the perspective of Jewish and non-Jewish students. In the next essays, I am going to focus on student learning, mental health, and activism in the aftermath of October 7th, as well as on attitudes about Israel.

METHODOLOGY

Before jumping into the results, here is some background on the study. The study was funded by the **Jim Joseph Foundation**, a national funder of Jewish education initiatives. The survey itself was administered by **College Pulse**, a survey and analytics firm specializing in the college student population. I am a social scientist and professor who has conducted a number of studies on civic engagement, young adults, and antisemitism. I worked with the Jim Joseph Foundation and College Pulse to organize this research project and analyze the results.

Back in the Spring of 2022, our team surveyed approximately 2,000 Jewish students and 1,000 non-Jewish students across the country who were attending 4-year colleges. I published a **report** in 2022 that details the methodology and results. That report analyzed several questions related to Israel and antisemitism that have become especially relevant in light of the recent turmoil on campuses.

Because there are no official benchmarks of what the true population of Jewish American students looks like in terms of demographics or attitudes, it's hard to know whether a sample of this kind is truly representative.[1] However, as explained in my 2022 report, the basic demographics of the students who were sampled look similar to other studies, such as the young adults surveyed in **Pew's 2020 study of Jewish Americans**, which gives us some confidence in the sample.

Between November 16 and December 21, 2023 – 40-75 days following the October 7th attack – we fielded a second survey. This survey was completed by about 1,000 Jewish students and 1,500 non-Jewish students. The Jewish students include those who consider themselves ethnically or culturally Jewish even if not Jewish by religion.

155 of the Jewish students surveyed in 2023 were among the students who were surveyed back in 2022. Back then, they were freshmen and sophomores. Now, they're juniors and seniors. This is called a panel design, and I'll refer to the students surveyed both years as "the panel." The full set of respondents in each year I'll refer to as the "cross-sections."

The panel of students surveyed both years provides a link between pre-October 7 Jewish life on campus and post-October 7 Jewish life on campus. If we observe attitudinal changes in the panel, we know it's not because of sampling variation but because students felt differently in 2023 than 2022. It turns out that the changes we measure are so big that they are highly statistically significant, even with a relatively modest sample size of 155 students in the panel.

One last note on the methodology. In the 2022 survey, the sample of non-Jewish students was designed to be representative of four-year college students across the country. In the 2023 survey, we made an adjustment. We focused the non-Jewish sample on schools that have substantial Jewish populations. To really understand social tensions and the campus climate as experienced by Jewish students, we didn't need to survey non-Jewish students in schools that have very few Jewish students. Instead, the 2023 survey pulls non-Jewish students mainly from 21 specific campuses. Those campuses are quite diverse. They include public schools (e.g., Binghamton, University of Michigan) and private schools (e.g., Columbia, Tulane); they are in northeast (e.g., Dartmouth, Northeastern), the south (e.g., Emory, University of Central Florida); the midwest (e.g., Washington University-St. Louis, Ohio State), and the west (e.g., University of California, San Diego, University of Arizona). But they are all campuses with sizeable Jewish populations.

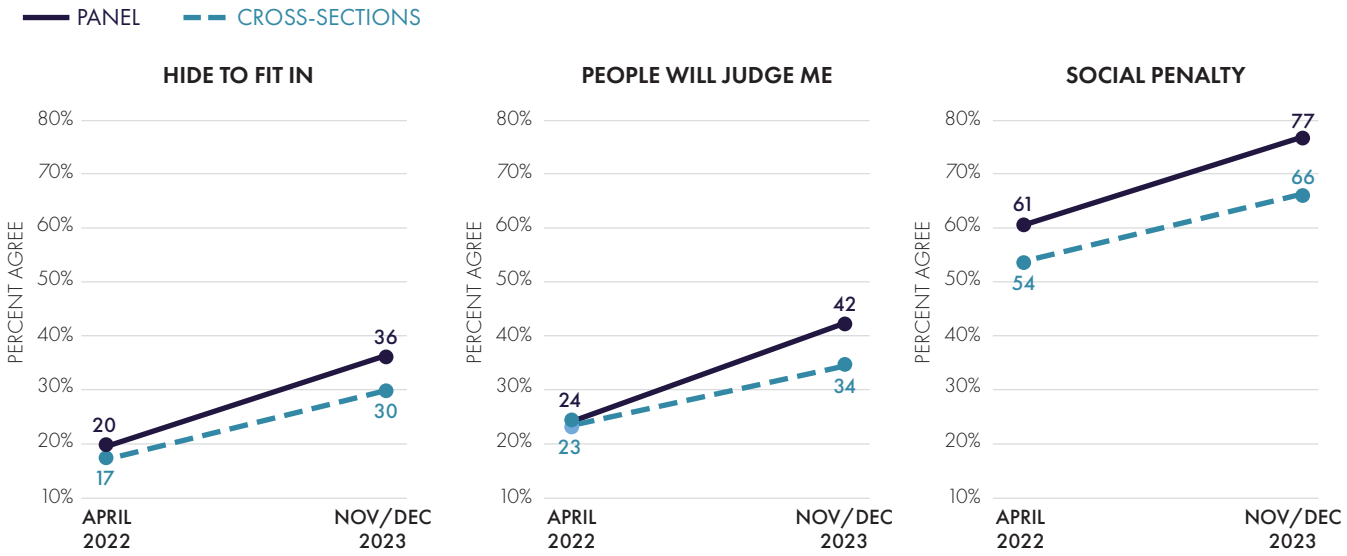
1. In typical representative surveys, researchers are able to use the United States Census and other official records to gauge the true population characteristics of a community. A survey sample is considered representative when it matches the true population on these characteristics. The typical sources used to gauge representativeness (such as Census information about the age, race, gender, and location of Americans, or election returns gauging the political views of communities) do not measure Jewish identity.

SOCIAL TENSION: THE VIEW FROM JEWISH STUDENTS

Both in 2022 and in 2023, we asked Jewish students these three agree/disagree questions that gauge whether they perceive a social cost for either being Jewish or for supporting Israel.

- *In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.*
- *People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.*
- *On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.*

Notice that only the third question here has anything explicitly to do with Israel. And this question is purposefully worded so that it doesn't reference support for the current government in Israel or for any particular political view other than the right of a Jewish state to exist in the land. The first two questions speak to social costs that may be indirectly related to Israel, but these social costs do not necessarily come from the students holding any view at all.

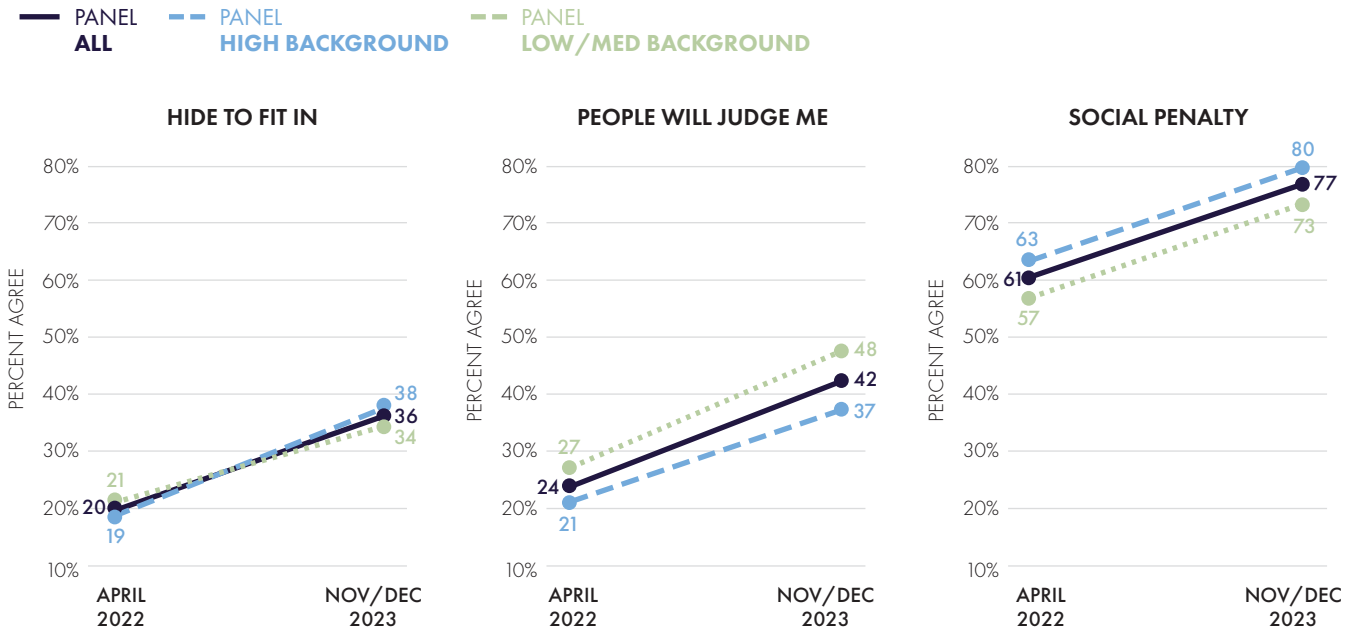


AGREE/DISAGREE...
1. In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.
2. People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.
3. On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

In the first figure, I show the change in how Jewish students answered this question between April 2022 and Nov/Dec 2023. The dashed line shows the full sample of Jewish students surveyed in each year. The solid line shows just the panel of 155 students. The pattern is similar whether we observe just the panel or the full samples: we see a massive increase in students agreeing with all of these statements. A third or more of Jewish students in 2023 said they must hide their Jewish identity in order to fit in and that they are judged if they participate in Jewish activities. That's about double what it was when we asked this in 2022. And this school year, two-thirds to three-quarters of Jewish students agree that they pay a social penalty if they support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

Jewish students are not a monolith. Some Jewish students come from backgrounds where they are very engaged in Jewish life and others have almost no background in Jewish education, culture, or religion. Do both kinds of students experience these feelings of social isolation or just one or the other? One might reasonably think that the students from more robust Jewish backgrounds (who also tend to be more positively predisposed toward the state of Israel) might have felt an increase in social isolation following October 7 whereas students from other backgrounds felt no difference.

But that isn't the case.



AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. In order to fit in on my campus, I feel the need to hide that I am Jewish.
2. People will judge me negatively if I participate in Jewish activities on campus.
3. On my campus, Jewish students pay a social penalty for supporting the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.

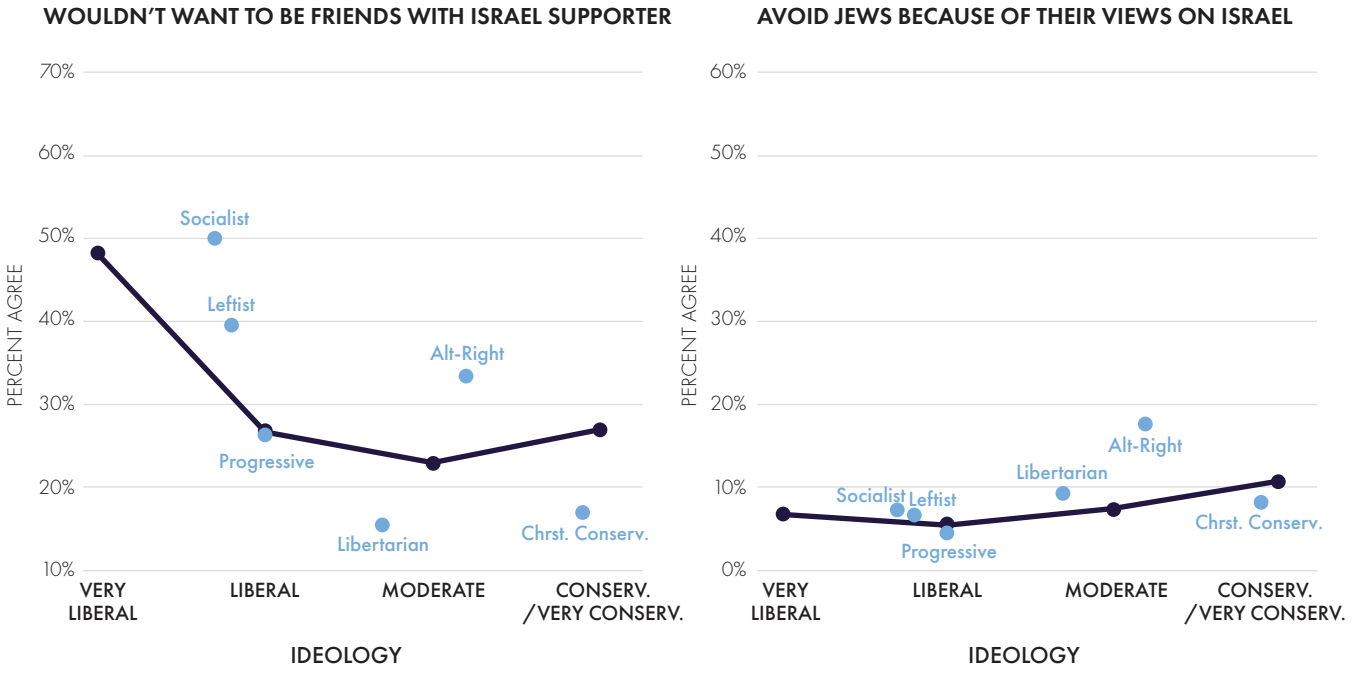
The second figure addresses this nuance by dividing the panel survey into two groups. I divided the sample by creating a statistical model that takes in information about how much "Jewish stuff" the students did growing up, like attending a synagogue, having a bar mitzvah, etc. Dividing the sample based on those from more or less robust Jewish backgrounds, we see that the increase in feelings of social penalties is present for both kinds of students.

THE VIEW FROM NON-JEWISH STUDENTS

Do non-Jewish students corroborate that Jewish students and Israel-supporting students are socially stigmatized? To answer this question, consider these two agree/disagree questions that were asked of the non-Jewish students both in 2022 and 2023.

- *I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.*
- *I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.*

Recall that the non-Jewish samples from 2022 and 2023 are not directly comparable because the first was representative of all college students whereas the second is focused on campuses where there is a sizeable Jewish community present. The caveat aside, of those who agreed or disagreed (i.e., they did not answer, "I don't know"), 13% of students agreed with the first statement in 2022, which more than doubled to 29% in 2023. Similarly, 2% of students agreed with the second statement in 2022. That more than tripled to 7% in 2023.



FROM THE NON-JEWISH PERSPECTIVE: AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.
2. I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.

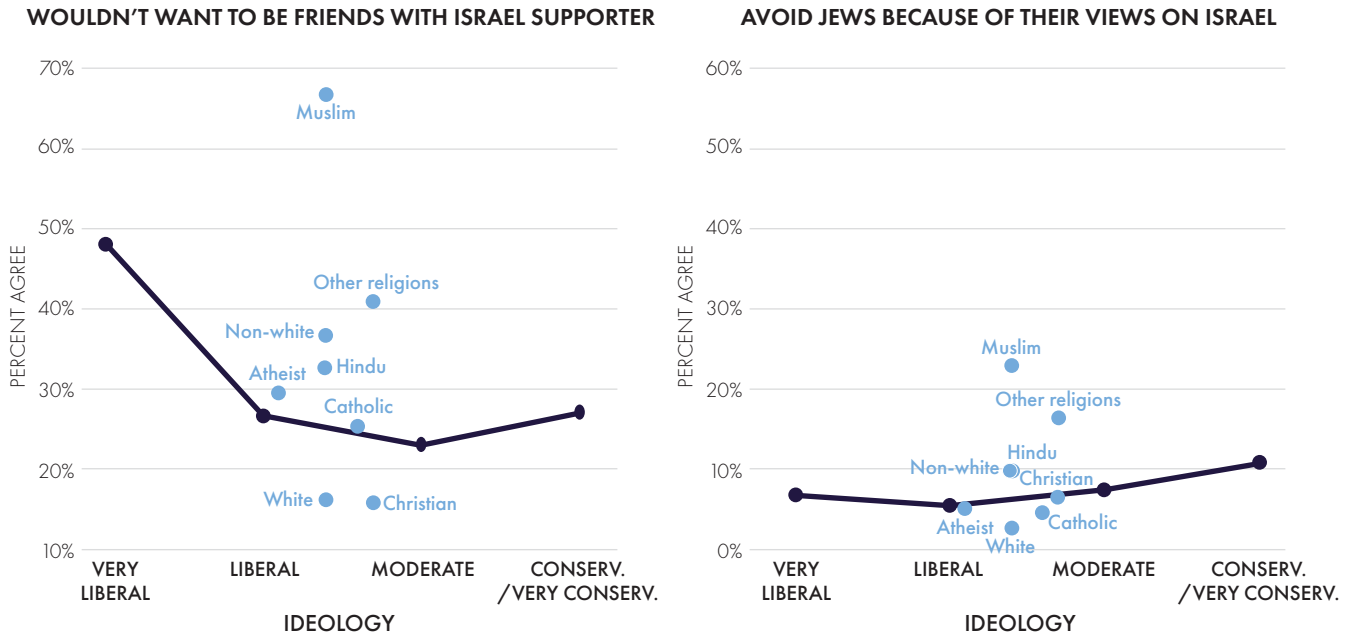
Digging into the 2023 data reveals some interesting nuances. In the next figure, I measure agreement with these two statements on the vertical axis by political ideology on the horizontal axis. Students were asked to identify their ideology from very liberal to very conservative on a 5-point scale. The plurality of non-Jewish students identify as liberal (43%), 16% say they are very liberal, 28% say they are moderate, 9% identify as conservative and 3% as very conservative. Because the number of very conservatives is small, I combine them with the conservatives in the graph.

The survey also asked students to describe their ideology in different terms. Do they consider themselves leftists, socialists, progressives, and so forth? Students could identify with more than one of these terms, or with none of them. The rate of agreement with the statements for each ideological group is also depicted in the graph. The identities are positioned on the horizontal axis according to how the average student with that identity rates their ideology. For instance, the average student who considers themselves a progressive marks themselves as liberal on a five-point ideology scale, whereas the average student who identifies as alt-right marks themselves as a little to the right of moderate on the ideology scale.

Note, the two side-by-side plots are on the same 60-percentage-point scale, but one runs from 0-60 and one from 10-70 to help "zoom in" on the patterns in the data.

Which kind of students say they wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state? The highest agreement comes from those on the far left or who identify as socialist. Among those students, about 50% agree with the statement. There isn't much of a difference in how progressives, moderates, or conservatives answer; about 25% of each agree with the statement. On the center and right, we see that agreement is lowest among libertarians and Christian conservatives and higher among the students who identify as alt-right (a total of 43 respondents, or 3% of the sample, identifies as alt-right).

To the second agree/disagree question, about avoiding Jews, agreement is slightly higher on the right than the left, with alt-right identifiers most likely to agree. The relationship between ideology and this second survey item is borderline statistically significant. For the first survey item, it's highly significant.



FROM THE NON-JEWISH PERSPECTIVE: AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.
2. I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.

The next graph swaps out the ideological identities for race and religion categories. The categories are placed on the horizontal axis according to where the average student with that identity places themselves ideologically. For instance, white students and non-white students have about the same ideological position (somewhere between liberal and moderate), but the non-white students are more than twice as likely to say they wouldn't want to be friends with an Israel supporter and that they avoid socializing with Jews. Among non-white students with sufficiently large sample sizes, it is African-American students who are particularly likely to agree that they avoid socializing with Jews. Among white students, 1 in 40 (2.5%) say they avoid socializing with Jews. Among black students, 1 in 7 (14%) agree.

By religion, Muslim students are by far the religious group that wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. A total of sixty-four Muslim students took the survey. Two-thirds wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state and a quarter say they avoid socializing with Jews. The study did not ask a parallel question of Jewish students – would Jewish students avoid socializing with Muslims because of their views on Israel or Palestine? – but that would make for a useful comparison in a future study.

Race, religion, and ideology are among the strongest predictors of opinions on these questions, but other factors are strongly predictive as well. Namely, controlling for the other factors (e.g., race, religion, ideology), gender and sexual orientation are highly predictive of agreement with the statement about not wanting to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel. Students who are LGBT and especially those who are non-binary are most likely to agree with this statement.

CAN PRO-ISRAEL AND PRO-PALESTINE STUDENTS BE FRIENDS?

One final survey item to discuss here. The questionnaire asked the non-Jewish students:

Thinking about the atmosphere on your campus, how difficult do you think it would be for pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students to be friends?

The students could answer: not at all difficult, not so difficult, somewhat difficult, and very difficult. It's worth pointing out that this question wording, though common, lacks nuance: people can be both pro-Israel and pro-Palestine, but the question uses these over-simplified terms to proxy for students' general dispositions. The majority of students (77%) chose one of those latter two categories, with 28% saying it'd be very hard. Students on the far left – the socialists, the very liberals – as well as Muslim students, non-white students, LGBT and non-binary students are most likely to say it'd be very hard for pro-Israel and pro-Palestine students to be friends.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

The Jewish students on four-year campuses perceived a major change after October 7. More than a third of Jewish students, including students from different kinds of Jewish backgrounds, are reporting they are hiding their identity in order to fit in and are being judged if they participate in Jewish activities. Those numbers have doubled from before the conflict. Will they stay elevated? We don't know, but we are planning on surveying students again in the spring to find out.

Jewish students overwhelmingly perceive a social penalty for supporting the right of Israel to exist. And the non-Jewish students corroborate this. Particularly on the far left and among specific identity groups (Muslims, LGBT, non-white students), a large share of students say they don't want to be friends with anyone who supports the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. This isn't a fringe position on campus. About a third of non-Jewish students do not want to be friends with students who support the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. As we'll see in a future essay in this series, over 80% of Jewish students support the existence of a Jewish state. That's quite a large share of the Jewish population that other students intend to ostracize.

Let's return to the original question of this essay: are campuses hostile environments for Jewish students? Again, people may disagree about whether social isolation amounts to a hostile environment. People may also disagree about what share of the Jewish students would have to feel burdened in order for it to be considered a serious problem. But a panel survey like this one gives us a much clearer picture beyond anecdotal evidence that a substantial share of the Jewish population feels they incur a social penalty for being Jewish, for attending Jewish programs, and for supporting the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish country. A substantial share of the non-Jewish population endorses that social penalty.

PART TWO OF A THREE-PART SERIES

U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL:
JEWISH ENGAGEMENT AND
SOCIAL TENSION ON CAMPUS

A SURVEY PORTRAIT OF JEWISH LIFE ON CAMPUS IN THE MIDST OF THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

7 Key Findings

Prepared for the Jim Joseph Foundation

FEBRUARY 2024

Eitan Hersh

INTRODUCTION

The October 7th attack in Israel and its aftermath created an intense atmosphere for Jewish communities worldwide, including on university campuses. But how, exactly, did the war affect Jewish students on these campuses? And what can the Jewish community learn from the unexpected changes in Jewish students' lives during this tumultuous time?

In this essay -- part two of a series -- I discuss seven ways that American Jewish college students have been impacted by the war. This portrait emerges from a survey of approximately 1,000 Jewish students conducted in November and December of 2023 and a companion survey of about 1,500 non-Jewish students.

As discussed in the first essay in the series, this data comes from a project funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation and implemented by the survey firm, College Pulse. I helped to organize the project and I conducted the analyses. More details about the methodology can be found in the earlier essay, as well as in **a related report** on Jewish and non-Jewish college students that I published two years ago and build upon here.

In case you haven't read the first essay in this series, there are a few important points to know about the methodology. First, in some of the analyses below, I focus not on the full set of students surveyed in 2023, but specifically on the 155 Jewish students who took *both* the 2022 survey (when they were freshmen and sophomores) *and* the 2023 survey (when they were juniors and seniors). I refer to this group as the "panel." This group shows us changes in attitudes in the same students over time.

Second, the sample of non-Jewish students is not meant to be representative of all non-Jewish four-year college students. Rather, we sampled non-Jewish students who attend colleges and universities that have large Jewish populations. Also related to the non-Jewish sample, there are a few questions for which we analyze Muslim students, of whom 64 took the survey. The Muslim student sample is small but revealing because in some ways these students were affected similarly to Jewish students.

Third, I analyze how results vary by Jewish background. To do so, I created a statistical model that measures how much "Jewish stuff" these students did when they were growing up (e.g., a bar mitzvah, a shabbat practices, cultural activities). Some students did a lot of that, while others did none at all. This background score is a simple way to summarize their Jewish upbringing.

REACTION #1: JEWISH STUDENTS FEEL A HEIGHTENED SENSE OF JEWISH IDENTITY

In April of 2022, we asked students, "How close do you feel to a Jewish community right now?" Only 17% said they felt very close. Two school-years later, in the midst of the war, we asked a new sample the same question. The percent saying they felt very close to a Jewish community doubled to 35%.

Just among the students in the panel (who we surveyed both in 2022 and 2023), we see a similar pattern. These students tended to already be more engaged in Jewish life back in 2022 compared to the typical student who took the survey – 26% of these 155 students said they felt very close to a Jewish community in 2022. But, by 2023, 43% of them answered that way. The increase in the panel suggests that the change in student attitudes is real, and not just some artifact of the kinds of students who took the survey in different years.

Is the heightened sense of Jewish community concentrated among students from more robust Jewish backgrounds? As the figure shows, students with high and low background scores both felt closer to a Jewish community in 2023. It isn't the case that Jewish students from less traditional backgrounds felt *less* close in the midst of the war. At the same time, the biggest change between 2022 and 2023 is concentrated among the students from more robust Jewish backgrounds.

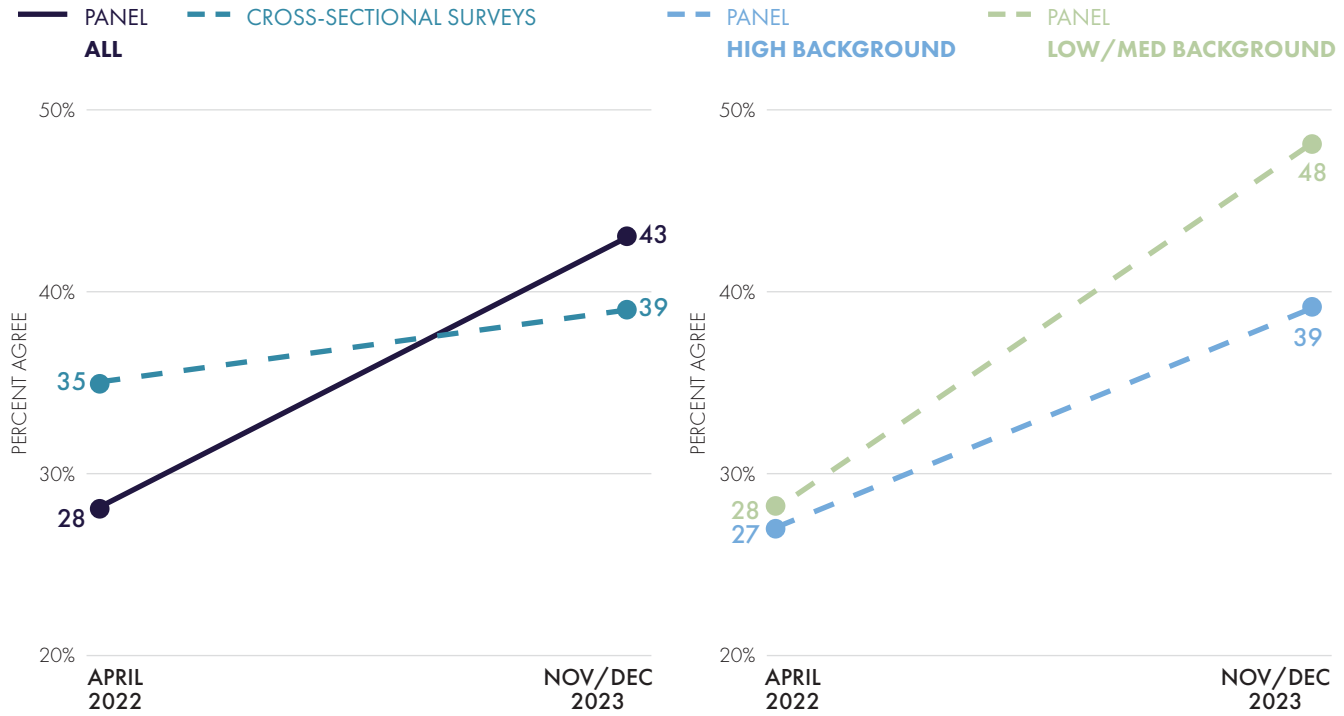
REACTION #2: PARTICIPATION IN JEWISH LIFE IS HIGH BUT FRAUGHT

Did more students start attending Jewish activities and programs on campus since the war? When we asked students in 2022 how often they attend Jewish programs on campus, almost half of them (46%) said seldom or never. In 2023, a quarter answered that. In the aftermath of the Hamas attack on October 7, there appears to have been a substantial increase both in students who were occasional attendees and an increase in those who attend events weekly or more.

But the increase in participation does not mean that these spaces were always comfortable for all Jewish students. Consider this agree/disagree survey question:

In order to fit in at Jewish activities on campus, I feel like I need to hide some of my opinions.

As evidenced in the next figure, we see an increase from 2022 to 2023 in students agreeing that they need to hide some of their opinions during Jewish activities. The increase is especially notable among the students in the panel, who in 2022 expressed more comfort in Jewish spaces than the typical student who was surveyed. Crucially, this increase in needing to hide opinions in Jewish spaces is present among students from more robust Jewish backgrounds (who tend to feel more connected to Israel) as well as students from less robust Jewish backgrounds (who tend to feel less connected to Israel), as the right side of the figure shows.

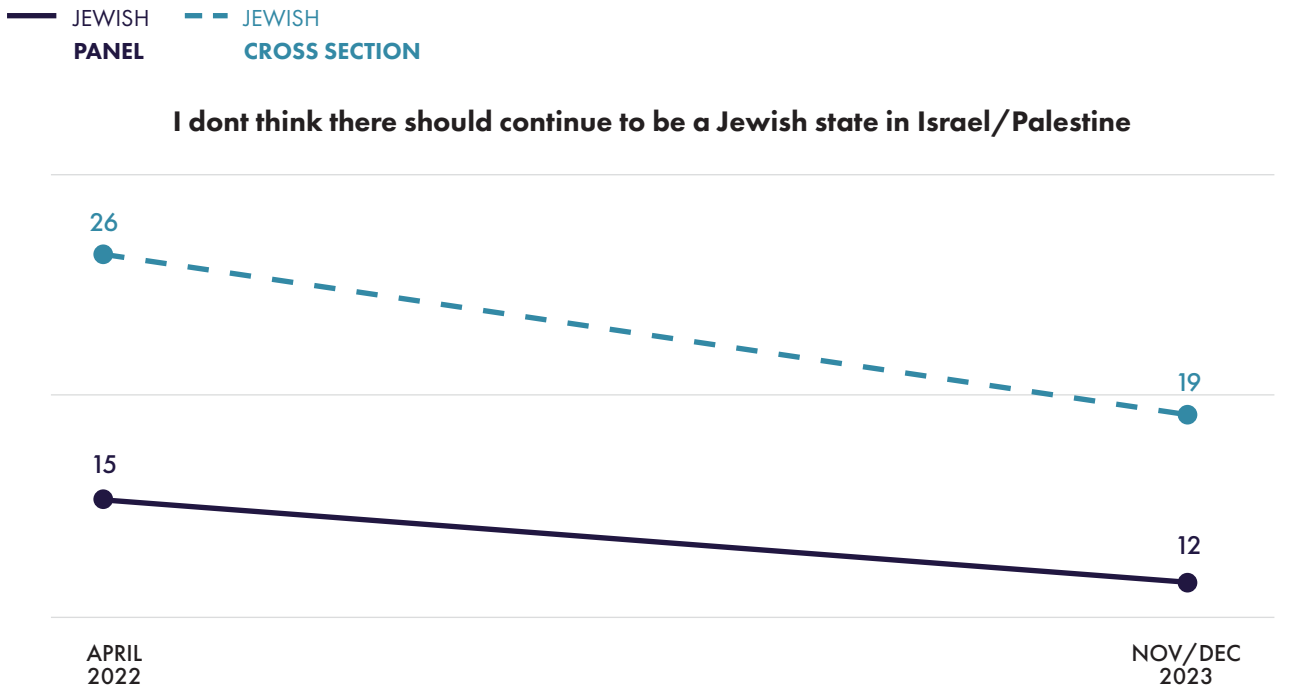


Why do students feel they need to hide their opinions? One possibility is because of the tone set in Jewish activities by Jewish professionals or student leaders. But when we asked about the what organizations should be doing differently, students seemed generally satisfied with Jewish organizations, which suggests this top-down explanation does not explain the change.

The more likely explanation is a bottom-up story of the inherent tensions arising from students with diverse political views sharing a space. Jewish spaces can be a refuge for students, but they can also be a source of anxiety as a social environment where the war in Israel is a constant topic of conversation and students find themselves disagreeing with one another.

REACTION #3: STUDENTS ARE FORMING OPINIONS ABOUT ISRAEL AND HAVE INCREASED THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE STATE

A major change from when we surveyed students just two years ago is that more of these young people have formed opinions. For instance, when we asked Jewish students in 2022 if they thought there should continue to be a Jewish state in Israel/Palestine, over a third (36%) said they didn't know. That number of "don't knows" dropped to 15% in 2023.



Of those who gave an opinion, we see in the third figure that Jewish students have become more likely to think there should be a Jewish state (as they are more likely to disagree with the negative statement).

REACTION #4: JEWISH STUDENTS ARE FOLLOWING THE NEWS AND DRAWING ON DIFFERENT SOURCES THAN NON-JEWISH STUDENTS

Eighty percent of Jewish students reported following news about the Israel-Hamas conflict somewhat or very closely. Even among Jewish students who were raised with less robust Jewish backgrounds, 70% still say they were following the news. That compares to only 48% of non-Jewish students.

Jewish students were also much more likely than non-Jewish students to say they posted on social media about the conflict (37% versus 21%). Posting online, however, is more common among the students from engaged Jewish backgrounds: 50% of students with robust Jewish backgrounds posted online, versus 27% of those from less robust Jewish backgrounds.

One key difference between the way that Jewish students and non-Jewish students are learning about the conflict is in the sources they are turning to. We asked students this open-ended question:

In your opinion, which news sources or social media influencers are currently providing the most informative, trustworthy, and unbiased news about the war between Israel and Hamas?

Jewish students were more likely to name a news source: 68% of Jewish students versus 58% of non-Jewish students answered the question, which is expected given the Jewish students' higher attention to the news on the conflict. Among students who named a news source, Jewish students were more likely to name mainstream American news sources (e.g., *New York Times, Fox News*) than non-Jewish students (61% versus 52% named such a source). Non-Jewish students were more likely to report they followed the news on social media, compared to Jewish students.

A small number of students named specific influencers when answering this question. These students reveal an asymmetry between the influencers more aligned with Israel and the influencers more aligned with Palestinians. For instance, 40 students mentioned Bisan Owda, 32 mentioned Motaz Azaiza, and 13 mentioned Plestia Alaqad, all Palestinian journalists. No Jewish or Israeli influencer was mentioned at a similar rate. Five students mentioned conservative American pundit Ben Shapiro, the most of any "pro-Israel" influencer mentioned. Four students mentioned the Israeli Hen Mazzig. Three mentioned Israeli Noa Tishby.

REACTION #5: JEWISH STUDENTS, AND ESSENTIALLY ONLY JEWISH STUDENTS, ARE ATTENDING PRO-ISRAEL EVENTS

A third of Jewish students (32%) said they had attended an "event sponsored by a pro-Israel group" since the outbreak of the war. Among the students with high Jewish background scores, 52% attended such an event. Among the students with low Jewish background scores, only 15% attended such an event.

Even though the non-Jewish students who were surveyed are on campuses with sizeable Jewish communities where pro-Israel events have been organized, almost no non-Jewish students report that they attended a pro-Israel event. Across the sample, only 3% of non-Jewish students ever attended a pro-Israel event.

What about events sponsored by a pro-Palestine group? 10% of Jewish students attended a pro-Palestine event. Of the sample of Muslim students, 44% attended a pro-Palestine event. And 10% of students neither Muslim nor Jewish attended such an event.

REACTION #6: JEWISH STUDENTS, AND MUSLIM STUDENTS, SAY THE WAR AFFECTED THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Borrowing language from Gallup, we asked: *How would you describe your own mental health or emotional well-being at this time?* We then asked a follow up: *How would you have rated your mental health before hostilities between Israel and Hamas broke out?*

Jewish and Muslim students answered this question similarly: 44% of Jewish students and 41% of Muslim students indicated a decline in their self-assessment of their mental health on account of the war. In contrast, only 15% of all other students indicated any decline.

Of those who felt affected, the most common repercussion was a decline in their ability to focus on schoolwork. Two-thirds (65%) of students who identified a specific way the war affected them focused on the ability to focus on schoolwork. Fifty percent mentioned a feeling of alienation on campus. Forty-four percent mentioned difficulty relating to friends. Twenty-two percent reported needing extra help from a mental health professional.

REACTION #7: FOUR IN TEN JEWISH STUDENTS SAY THEY WERE PERSONALLY TARGETED WITH ANTISEMITIC MESSAGES

The survey asked Jewish students: *Since the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas, have you personally been targeted by antisemitic comments, slurs, or threats?*

The students could select "No" (59%), "I don't know" (8%), or one or more of the following options: on social media (17%), off-campus (12%), in a campus social environment (11%), or in a campus academic environment (6%).

We don't have a measure like this in the 2022 study, so we cannot tell from this survey whether 41% of Jewish students saying they have been personally targeted is higher than before the war, but it seems quite high.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

This survey portrait gives us a unique window into a moment of historical significance to the Jewish people. The question is what happens next. Will feelings of Jewish connection and increased participation in Jewish activities inspire a generation of students to continue to develop their Jewish identity? Will attitudes and behaviors revert to their pre-October 7th levels? Does the spike in negative outcomes – in mental health, in antisemitic harassment – have long-term negative consequences? Does life return to normal?

On the one hand, these are empirical questions, and our research team will be able to answer some of them; we plan to continue surveying students and learning how things develop. But on the other hand, the answers depend on what leaders inside and outside the Jewish community do next to build on a heightened sense of identity and community while fighting antisemitism, social disharmony, and a drain on mental health.

U.S. COLLEGE STUDENTS
AND THE WAR IN ISRAEL:
JEWISH ENGAGEMENT AND
SOCIAL TENSION ON CAMPUS

THE COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND ATTITUDES ABOUT JEWS AND ISRAEL

Prepared for the Jim Joseph Foundation

FEBRUARY 2024

Eitan Hersh

INTRODUCTION

There has long been a debate about whether antisemitic attitudes are more common on the political left or the right, and about which variant of antisemitism the Jewish community should be more worried about.

Four years ago, I waded into this debate along with my colleague, Laura Royden. We conducted a major study of antisemitic attitudes among young American adults. Royden and I identified three overarching patterns in the data. **First**, young adults who identify as very conservative had much more negative attitudes toward Jews than young adults who identify as very liberal. **Second**, antisemitic views were much higher among Black and Hispanic Americans compared to White Americans. **Third**, while young people on the left did not agree with antisemitic statements, they did hold very negative views toward Israel.

The Hamas-Israel war following October 7th and the accompanying protest movements sparked a new public conversation about the extent to which young people, particularly on the left, harbor antisemitic views. The activism on university campuses showcased social-justice oriented students embracing slogans like "globalize the Intifada" and **in some instances** engaging in physical aggression targeted at Jews. Spillover of anti-Israel attitudes into anti-Jewish attitudes became a national news story.

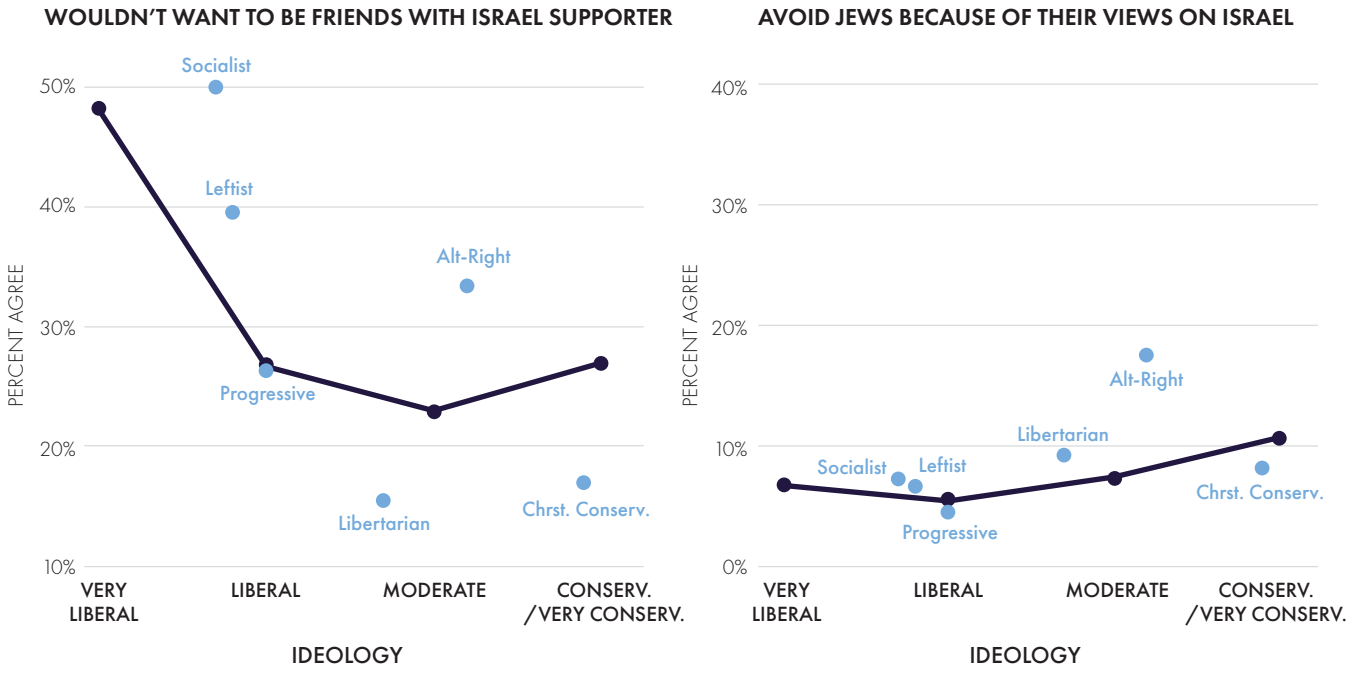
Does this new wave of campus activism suggest the epicenter of antisemitism has shifted from the right to the left?

In this essay, I'm going to showcase survey data collected in November-December of 2023 – the height of campus tensions – to answer this question. My goal is to explain why the answer is quite nuanced.

The survey I'll discuss is part of a study funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation and implemented by College Pulse, which I helped to organize. In two preceding essays in this series, I looked at Jewish students' responses to the survey about their experiences on campus. Here, I am now going to focus on the 1,549 non-Jewish students in our survey. These students were selected because they are on college campuses that have sizeable Jewish populations. The survey is not meant to be representative of all college students, but rather it is meant to assess views of Jewish and non-Jewish students who occupy the same spaces.

THE LEFT VERSUS THE RIGHT

To begin, I want to reexamine a graph that I showed in the first essay of this series, because it illustrates an odd but recurring pattern of how liberals and conservatives answer questions about Jews and Israel differently. When we asked non-Jewish students soon after October 7th if they wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, we found a lot of support for this on the far left (see the left plot). The highest level of agreement comes from students who identify as "socialist" or as "very liberal", about half of whom agree with this statement.



AGREE/DISAGREE...

1. I wouldn't want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state.
2. I avoid socializing with Jews because of their views about Israel.

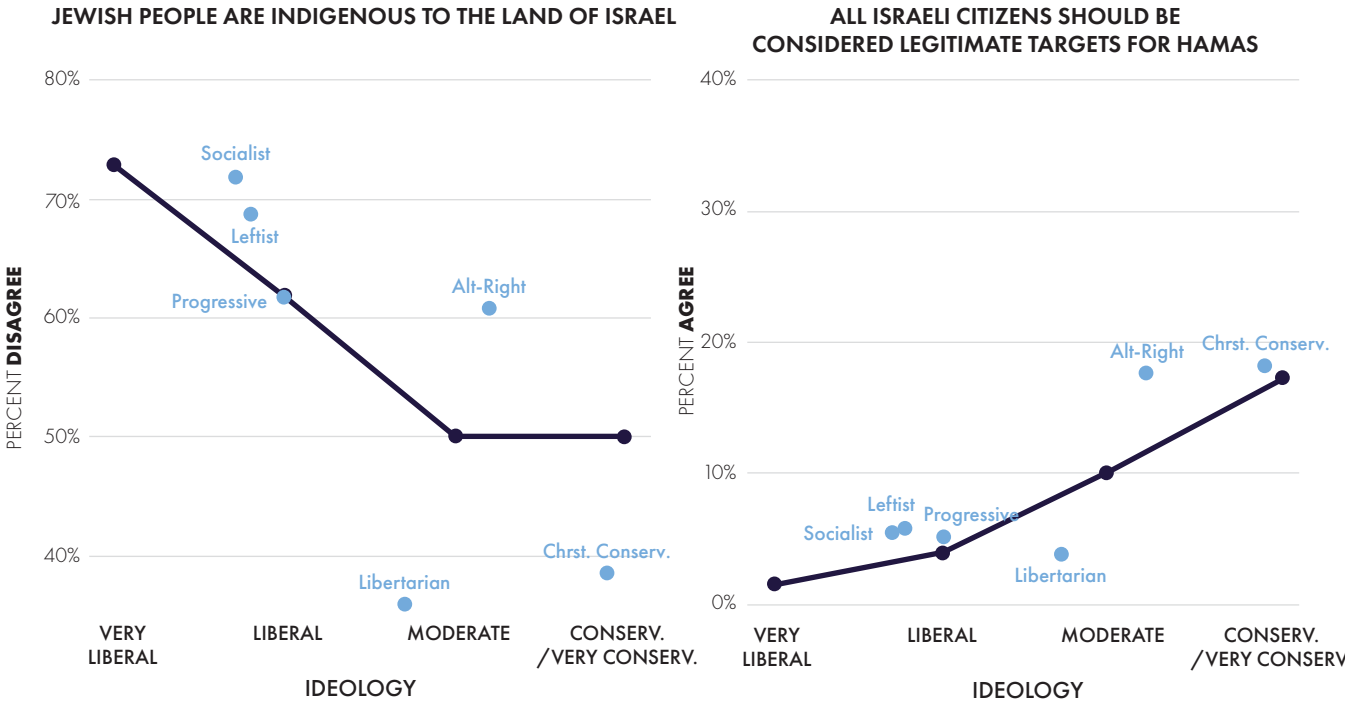
The right side of this first figure analyzes a survey question more directly targeted at the question of ostracization: do students avoid socializing with Jews because of their views on Israel?[1] Notice two things: first, many fewer students agree to the statement about avoiding Jews; second, the relationship with ideology changes between the two questions even though both are measuring ostracization related to views about Israel. The small number of students who identify as "alt-right" (43 such students are in the sample) have, by far, the highest agreement with this second statement.

1. The two plots are both on 40-point scales, but one runs 10-to-50 and one 0-to-40 to zoom in on the patterns.

This graph may seem puzzling: why are students on the left much more likely to agree to the first statement but comparatively less likely to agree to the second statement? This pattern is not an anomaly related to these particular survey questions. We can see the same pattern in all sorts of questions. Consider these two agree/disagree questions that were also asked to non-Jewish students in Nov/Dec of 2023.

1. *Jewish people are indigenous to the land of Israel.*

2. *All Israeli civilians should be considered legitimate targets of Hamas.*



AGREE/DISAGREE...
1. Jewish people are indigenous to the land of Israel.
2. All Israeli civilians should be considered legitimate targets for Hamas.

About half of the students (53%) said "I don't know" to the first question. For those who gave an opinion (N=722), 41% agreed with the statement. The left-side plot in the next graph shows the rate of *disagreement* (i.e., denying Jewish indigeneity) by ideology. The more "anti-Jewish" position is held by those on the ideological left.

When asked if all Israeli civilians are legitimate targets for Hamas, 29% said they didn't know. Of those who gave an opinion, 7% of the non-Jewish students agreed. The right-hand plot in the graph above shows rate of agreement by ideology.[2] As with graphs depicting social ostracization, agreement with the more extreme statement here is less common overall, but it is more common on the ideological right than on the ideological left. Here we have two questions that gauge delegitimization of Israel, but the left is more likely to agree with one of them and the right is more likely to agree with the other.

2. Both of these of side-by-side plots are on 40-point scales, but one runs 40-to-80 and the other 0-to-40 in order to zoom in on the patterns.

EXPLAINING THE PATTERN

It seems counterintuitive that conservative students are the ones taking more extreme anti-Israel positions given that we generally associate anti-Israel attitudes with the left. The left-to-right pattern on the question of civilians targeted by Hamas may seem especially odd, as the right-leaning students appear to be taking a position more sympathetic to Hamas. On college campuses, it was groups associated with the left that were more defensive of Hamas's strategies on October 7th. So why are 20% of conservative students saying that Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas?

In my research with Laura Royden, we consistently found this same left-to-right pattern back in 2020. Consider these two agree/disagree questions we asked young adults (18-30 year olds):

1. *It is appropriate for opponents of Israel's policies and actions to boycott Jewish American owned businesses in their communities.*

2. *Jewish Americans should be held accountable for Israel's actions.*

For both of these questions, young conservative adults (aged 18-30) were much more likely to agree than young liberal adults. About 10% of respondents on the left agreed with the first statement versus 40% of respondents on the far right. For the second statement, it's 4% for the far left and 28% for the far right.

But why? The young left opposes Israel's policies more than the young right does, so why is the young right more likely to approve of boycotts or collective punishment of Jews on account of Israel? And why do more conservatives say Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas?

A plausible answer is that a sizeable minority of young adults on the right endorses statements that are explicitly prejudicial against Jews and that endorse violence regardless of the political valence of the statements. But this phenomenon does not only occur when the subject is Jews, as Royden and I learned through a set of experiments. Some of our respondents were instead asked if they agreed with this statement: *Catholic Americans should be held accountable for the Vatican's actions.* Others were asked if they agreed with this one: *Indian American should be held accountable for India's actions.* Young conservatives were also far more likely to agree to those statements than young liberals. Interestingly, these patterns were not present among older adults (ages 31+).

Hardly anyone on the left agrees to the kinds of ominous statements about Jews and other minority groups that the right endorses. The left endorses social stigma against students who believe Israel should exist as a Jewish country and they deny the historical relationship between Jews and the land of Israel. But the left seems to shy away from affirming statements that target identities rather than viewpoints.

IT GETS MORE COMPLICATED

The picture is further complicated, however, by the fact that some identity groups associated with the left answer questions about Israel as negatively as the left answers them, but they also answer questions about Jews as negatively as the right does. For instance, Black students are far more likely than White students to say they wouldn't be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (43% agree vs 16% agree), but they are also far more likely to say they avoid socializing with Jews (14% vs 2%). Black students are also far more likely to say that Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas than White students are (13% versus 4%). That is, Black students answer the Israel-focused questions like liberals and Jewish-focused questions like conservatives.

Non-binary students follow this pattern as well. Compared to students identifying as men or women, non-binary students are substantially more likely to not want to be friends with someone who supports the existence of Israel as a Jewish state (46% versus 27%), but they are also more likely to say they avoid socializing with Jews (11% versus 6%). They, too, are more likely to say Israeli civilians are legitimate targets of Hamas (15% versus 6%) than those who identify as men or women.

Black students and non-binary students are not more likely to identify as very liberal compared to White students or men and women, respectively. But these are identity groups typically in coalition with the campus left. The patterns of how these groups answer questions about Jews and Israel complicate the story that each side of the ideological spectrum might want to tell. Conservatives are less likely to shun supporters of Israel but they have a problem in their political camp: a sizeable minority of conservative students avoids Jews and endorses Hamas killing civilians at similar or higher rates as some identity groups associated with the left. Liberals are less likely to hold negative views toward Jews as Jews, except that anti-Jewish views are somewhat common among identity groups that are in the left's political camp.

THE TAKEAWAY

The evidence from college students after October 7th is quite consistent with previous research. Young people on the left are more likely to exhibit extreme negative attitudes when it comes to Israel, whereas young people on the right, as well as some minority identity groups typically associated with the left, are more likely to endorse ominous and prejudicial statements about Jews.

The October 7th attack and its aftermath reinforces the existing evidence rather than challenges it. Of course, many important questions are left unanswered: Why do students respond to these survey questions the way they do? What is the relationship between attitudes and prejudicial actions? How are Jewish students affected by all this? And so on. My aim here was to show that even the simplest of questions – are negative attitudes toward Jews concentrated on the left or right? – is more complicated than it may appear. Advocates and leaders who want to address anti-Jewish or anti-Israel sentiment on campuses are better served by confronting this complexity rather than ignoring it. Advocates with strong ideological commitments too quickly seek comfort in focusing on problems on the side opposite their own camp. But the real work comes in understanding the different values and prejudices that motivate intolerance across the full spectrum of the student population.