

Hearing before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce

Testimony of Claudine Gay
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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished Members of the Committee, I appreciate your leadership on this important issue and welcome the opportunity to discuss it today.

My name is Claudine Gay, and I am honored to serve as the 30th President of Harvard University. My parents immigrated to America from Haiti with very little, but they believed in this country and in the transformative power of education. With their support, I pursued my own education passionately, eventually earning my doctorate at Harvard. I have since dedicated my career to educating today's students and building upon Harvard's tradition of excellence.

I am privileged to appear before this Committee representing the full Harvard community. Founded more than a century before the Declaration of Independence was signed, Harvard is America's first institution of higher learning. Today, the Harvard community includes more than 25,000 undergraduate and graduate students, 19,000 faculty and staff, and more than 400,000 alumni worldwide, including multiple Members of this Committee.

On October 7, Hamas brutally attacked and murdered over a thousand civilians in Israel, including American citizens. I condemn that attack unequivocally. That terrorist attack, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza that followed, and reactions to these events in the United States and across the world have shone a spotlight on ancient forms of hate that continue to fester in our societies and, unfortunately, persist on college campuses.

We at Harvard reject antisemitism and denounce any trace of it on our campus or within our community. Harvard must provide firm leadership in the fight against antisemitism and hate speech even while preserving room for free expression and dissent. This is difficult work, and I admit that we have not always gotten it right. As Harvard's President, I am personally responsible for confronting antisemitism with the urgency it demands.

I am grateful for the chance to share the meaningful steps that we are taking to address this challenge.

I. OCTOBER 7 ATTACKS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

Words cannot express the horror and monstrosity of the atrocities committed by the Hamas terrorist group on October 7 or the disgust I, and all of us, feel in response to them. Hamas's premeditated murder, torture, and hostage-taking of civilians reflects unimaginable cruelty and contempt for human dignity.

The pain in the wake of October 7 has been compounded by reports of rising incidences of antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crimes and attacks in the United States and elsewhere. The

combination of violence in the Middle East and prejudiced speech and hateful actions at home have left many fearful and distraught.

That is true at Harvard as well. Many, including myself, feel a profound sense of loss and sadness. Some are angry. Others are frightened. These feelings are being exacerbated by the rise in antisemitism, including on our campus.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, my colleagues and I focused on determining whether any Harvard community members, or their families, were in Israel or the larger region and in need of assistance. The following night, I visited Harvard Hillel to share in our Jewish students' grief and shock. On Monday, October 9, I led a joint statement with all the Deans of Harvard's schools expressing sorrow and compassion for the victims of this attack, including their friends, families, and loved ones. The next morning, I added a personal statement underscoring my condemnation of the inhumane and abhorrent atrocities perpetrated by Hamas.

In the days and weeks that followed, I met with members of our Jewish community to offer my administration's full and unwavering support. I shared Shabbat dinner at Harvard Chabad and Hillel on October 13 and 27, respectively, and I met separately with Harvard's rabbis at both Hillel and Chabad. At these events, we mourned together, and many shared their fears and concerns with me. At Hillel, I announced steps my administration would take to combat antisemitism.

Over the last several weeks, I have continued speaking with students, faculty, and alumni in our community about how the events of October 7 and its aftermath were affecting them, with a focus on those who were feeling vulnerable or isolated. I have attended Friday Prayers with our Muslim community, met with Harvard's Muslim chaplains, and met with multiple groups of Muslim undergraduate and graduate students.

Over the last two months, there have been numerous demonstrations on campus protesting the violence in the Middle East and showing support for those affected. Impassioned reactions to these events are understandable. But there is no excuse for hate or harassment within our community.

I am deeply troubled by instances of inflammatory rhetoric and division on campus. Individuals are reporting feeling threatened by others in our community. The chilling effect created by these tactics threatens to turn our community of learning and trust into an environment of alienation and fear. Reckless and thoughtless rhetoric—in person and online, on campus and off—is undermining feelings of belonging among members of the Harvard community.

Efforts to threaten or intimidate members of our community betray Harvard's core values. Harvard's mission stretches back centuries, has endured wars and depressions, and has outlasted difficulties and strife across eras because we upheld foundational principles. Chief among them are freedom of speech and open academic inquiry. They are fundamental to our ability to foster curiosity, creativity, and academic discovery.

We believe the best path to uncover truth is through open inquiry and robust debate. Harvard understands that hatred is a symptom of ignorance. The cure for ignorance is knowledge. But the pursuit of truth is possible only when freedom of expression is protected and exercised. At

Harvard, we will not allow discomfort or disagreement with opinions fairly expressed to impede this pursuit.

At the same time, true open discourse requires respect for our community, and we must do more to ensure such respect is shown. We encourage the vigorous exchange of ideas, but we will not, under any circumstances, permit speech that incites violence, threatens safety, or violates Harvard's policies against bullying and harassment. My administration has repeatedly made crystal clear that antisemitism and other forms of hate have no place at Harvard. Threats and intimidation have no place at Harvard.

Nor will Harvard allow actions that interfere with its core teaching and research mission. The vital work of the University—educating leaders for the future and pursuing knowledge for the benefit of humanity—continues. And it will continue even as we face these challenges. There is a time and place for protests, but it is not in the classroom. Let there be no confusion: Harvard's top priority is to protect every student's physical safety and their right to learn without disruption. Respect, compassion, and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing values that must all be present for Harvard to carry out its educational mandate.

Harvard's strength comes from its diversity of ideas and identities. The open exchange of views is essential to our work and to building a community of leaders, something we have been working to perfect over four hundred years. But these successes can occur only when our community feels safe and heard. Betrayal of our core values of free expression and mutual respect serves only to sow division, stoke fears, and undermine a sense of belonging in our community.

II. HARVARD'S RESPONSE TO THE EVENTS OF OCTOBER 7 AND THEIR AFTERMATH

The past two months have shown that Harvard must always strive to do more to facilitate productive, civil discourse in moments of crisis. We must actively teach our community how to engage constructively on complex and divisive issues, and to do so in a way where all our students feel safe and welcome in our community. We must accelerate efforts to make our community a model for how to talk and listen, to educate and learn across lines of difference.

With these principles in mind, my administration has been mobilizing and engaging stakeholders in our community to combat antisemitism, as well as ensuring the safety and security of all members of our community. Here are just a few examples of actions we have taken over the past two months:

- **Increased Security:** We have increased campus security in important and potentially vulnerable University spaces like student residences. When necessary, we have been closing the gates to Harvard Yard to limit the ability of outside actors and groups to use our campus as a platform. We and our University Police have also engaged in close coordination with local, state, and federal law enforcement to assess and respond to any threats to our community. Our University Police have likewise been monitoring a hotline 24/7 to address online harassment.

- **Policies For On-Campus Events:** We have provided clear requirements for on-campus events, including engaging in broad efforts to remind our students and community about the University’s policies and requirements for demonstrations and protests, and the disciplinary implications for violating those policies.
- **Increased Reporting Mechanisms:** We have increased outreach to our community regarding ways to report discrimination, harassment, and abusive behavior, and we have widely disseminated these tools to the Harvard community. This includes increased monitoring of online harassment by our information security department. We also have a hotline for community members to report incidents anonymously.
- **Enhanced Counseling Resources:** We have robust mental health and counseling resources, including a 24/7 care line, and a dedicated team specifically prepared to help our undergraduates navigate these resources. We have also added additional trauma-informed counseling resources through our Counseling and Mental Health Services.
- **Religious Community Support:** We have organized community support sessions through our counseling team and Harvard’s chaplains, which comprise more than thirty faith leaders representing many of the world’s religions, including Judaism and Islam.

Harvard’s efforts to combat antisemitism on campus, which is the focus of today’s hearing, do not prevent Harvard from fighting other forms of hate within our community. It is possible to feel deeply concerned for all students affected by recent events and to balance free expression on campus with the right of all our students to feel safe and included. Compassion is not a finite resource.

III. HARVARD’S COMMITMENT TO COMBATING ANTISEMITISM AND HATE ON CAMPUS

While we are proud of the initial steps Harvard has taken in the immediate aftermath of October 7, much work remains. Antisemitism has deep roots that grew long before Hamas’s attack. It will take time and focused efforts by my administration and our community to heal the divides on campus, and build the solidarity and collective action necessary to counter this hatred. But we are in it for the duration, and we will not cease our work until all members of our community feel safe and respected so they can learn and thrive.

In addition to the steps outlined above, we will take the following steps to combat religious hate in all its forms:

- **Antisemitism and Islamophobia Education:** Harvard will implement a robust program of education and training for students, faculty, and staff on antisemitism and Islamophobia broadly and at Harvard specifically. These educational programs will provide history and context about the roots of certain rhetoric that has been heard on our campus in recent weeks, and its impact on Jewish and Muslim members of our community. The goal is to identify antisemitism and Islamophobia in daily life and interrupt its harmful influence.
- **Efforts from Individual Schools:** Several of our Schools have announced their own efforts and commitments. Last month Harvard Business School launched four working

groups—on (1) Antisemitism, (2) Islamophobia and Anti-Arabism, (3) Classroom Culture, and (4) Free Expression—tasked with proposing both short and long-term actions to address these issues. Harvard’s Business School and Kennedy School likewise recently hosted a panel discussion on the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict and possible paths forward. Later this month, the Harvard Radcliffe Institute will host a panel discussion regarding universities’ responses to conflict and protest, including efforts to address concerns about antisemitism and Islamophobia.

- **External Partnerships:** Harvard is actively working to identify and build partnerships with outside organizations, especially those with well-established track records of fighting antisemitism. For instance, we are discussing a collaboration with the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism, and Deans of Harvard’s Schools recently met with the Foundation President to further discuss partnership opportunities. A team from Harvard visited the Foundation last week to plan for specific collaborations.

I will continue to mobilize my full authority as President to confront antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hate. It is my top priority to foster a community that exercises free speech with tolerance, respect, and compassion.

Harvard’s strength is its engaged community. I want to thank our alumni—including those on this Committee—and other valued members of the Harvard community who have spoken out and offered suggestions or encouragement during this difficult time. Harvard values that input and will continue to work with, and listen to, members of the community to ensure that its approach to these issues is as robust as possible.

IV. CONCLUSION

I’d like to again thank the Committee for the chance to discuss this important work at this critical moment. I have no illusions that these challenges will resolve quickly or easily, just as no one is under any illusions that antisemitism will be extinguished within mere months or with a few focused actions. But that is precisely why we must commit to this work, both in our universities and throughout the country.

I began my tenure as Harvard’s President with an address in which I encouraged our community to ask “Why not?” when imagining Harvard’s future. “Why not?” is a call to act courageously and to take on difficult, entrenched problems with energy, creativity, and resolve. It is a call to put one’s resources and unique talents to their highest possible use. So, I now ask again: “Why not?” Why not show how a campus can take on antisemitism and also preserve freedom of speech? Why not be a model for the world on how to engage across difference, how to embrace both open inquiry and inclusion as community values?

I know Harvard has the tools it needs to achieve these goals, and I am proud to lead this effort. We have the resolve to be a force for good in the world. We have faced moments of divisiveness in the past and have emerged stronger. Through determined effort and guided by our shared values, I have faith we can face adversity as a community to learn, grow, and heal together.