

**Before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce**

Testimony of Jacob Khalili

Student at The Cooper Union

February 29, 2024

Good afternoon and thank you for allowing me to share my experience as a Jewish college student facing antisemitism on campus.

My name is Jacob Khalili. I am a senior at The Cooper Union, Albert Nerkin School of Engineering. I will be graduating in May 2024 with a bachelor's in engineering, and plan to submit a master's degree thesis in 2025. I am the former president of the Cooper Union Hillel and an active member of the Cooper Union Jewish community.

I want to focus on the widely publicized and alarming events at Cooper Union that followed the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel. In the wake of the horrific massacre, the Jewish community on campus was deeply shaken. But, despite the gravity of the situation, by Monday morning, October 9th, Cooper Union had yet to release any statement regarding the devastating events that unfolded in Israel. I and other members of the Jewish community at Cooper Union found this lack of response both unusual and disheartening, especially given the school's history of promptly and emphatically issuing statements in support of victimized communities, such as during Russia's attack on Ukraine and in the aftermath of George Floyd's death at the hands of police. Two days later, on the 9<sup>th</sup>, and only after the urging of Jewish students and alumni, the school finally released a message that was sorely lacking in tone and content and was a far cry from Cooper Union's prior statements of support for other groups. Cooper Union's statement was stunningly silent on Hamas's slaughter, torture, rape, and

kidnapping of Israelis and made no mention of terrorism. Instead, the message vaguely referred to “the upsetting news of war between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East as well as reports of devastation and aggressions in many other parts of the world.” Cooper Union President Laura Sparks did not sign the message or apologize to the students and alumni who had to reach out to the administration to urge a response.

Jewish students found the school’s statement insulting, and utterly insufficient. We wrote to the administration again, identifying specific past instances in which Cooper Union had spoken out much more swiftly and forcefully in response to events around the world. It was obvious to us that the school was applying a double standard when it came to attacks on Jews and Israel.

Under pressure from Jewish students and alumni alike, on October 11<sup>th</sup>, President Sparks issued a statement condemning the Hamas attack. But, in my view, damage had already been done. The school should have spoken out sooner and without the need for repeated prompting.

On the morning of October 23, 2023, Cooper Union students posted large signs filled with inflammatory anti-Israel, antisemitic messages in the Colonnade Windows of Cooper Union’s Foundation Building. The posters filled the windows and faced the street. A group of students stood by the signs to block their removal. The posters labeled Zionism racist, accused Israel of genocide, and called for the dismantling of the Jewish state. The students placed the posters without permission and in violation of school policy in a prominent and highly visible location reserved only for school messages. Despite this, the school failed to remove the posters for hours.

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, the campus walls were plastered with signs advertising a “Student Walkout” for “Palestinian Liberation,” scheduled for Wednesday, October 25<sup>th</sup>. The posters were red, white, black, and green—*i.e.*, the colors of the Palestinian flag—and prominently featured

images of raised fists. The posters also bore a red, white, black, and green version of the Cooper Union logo, suggesting that the walkout was sanctioned by Cooper Union.

On October 25<sup>th</sup>, the large anti-Israel posters that had been posted inappropriately on the Foundation Building windows reappeared glued to the plaza outside of the building. At about 1:00 p.m., the demonstration began. Many of the demonstrators wore masks. They shouted hateful chants, including “Globalize the intifada from New York to Gaza”; “Resistance is justified when people are occupied”; and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” My Cooper Union peers were justifying and normalizing Hamas’s barbaric terrorism, seeking an end to the State of Israel, and calling for violence against Jews worldwide – in their words, “from New York to Gaza.” The crowd of demonstrators far outnumbered the Jewish students, who were mostly standing in silence, some of them holding signs of kidnapped Israelis. At one point, someone, who has not yet been publicly identified by Cooper Union, pulled the fire alarm in the Foundation Building, apparently in the hopes of forcing everyone, including the administration, to exit the building to see the demonstration outside.

At approximately 4:00 p.m., the demonstrators headed inside the Foundation Building. They stormed past campus security and climbed the steps to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor offices of President Sparks and other administrators. At that time, having been standing for hours, I and a few of my Hillel friends decided to go into the Cooper Union library on the ground floor of the Foundation Building to process what we had just experienced. A short time later, a number of demonstrators descended on the perimeter of the library, loudly chanting “Free Palestine.” Someone—possibly Natalie Brooks, Cooper Union’s Chief Talent Officer, who was in the library—locked the doors to the library to keep the mob out, while we were inside. The mob attempted to enter the library, banging on and rattling the locked library doors. Upon hearing the loud banging, we approached the door

to see what was happening. Through small round “submarine windows” in the library doors we could see the demonstrators. The demonstrators then moved down the hall to the glass walls of the library. They began pounding on the glass while shouting hateful chants. Some of my friends were crying, and several of us were texting loved ones and alumni for help. Some called the police. Neither campus security nor police removed the demonstrators. To our relief, the demonstrators eventually left the building. We were later shocked to learn that President Sparks was offered but refused police intervention. We were also told by a member of administration that, to avoid the demonstrators, President Sparks herself had ducked out of the building through a back exit.

Although I tried to project outward calm, I found the experience frightening. I, along with other Jewish students, are still dealing with the repercussions of this traumatic incident. It is very troubling to feel unsafe on your own college campus, threatened by students with whom you share the campus on a daily basis.

To my knowledge, Cooper Union has taken no disciplinary action against any of the students involved. Consequently, those of us who endured the trauma of the library incident must continue to interact with those who threatened us, while the school sends a message of inaction. Cooper Union has failed to clearly communicate that this type of conduct targeted at Jewish students will not be tolerated. Not surprisingly, speech, graffiti and posters targeting Jewish students who identify with Israel, have continued to appear on campus since October 25<sup>th</sup>.

Jewish students, as all students at Cooper Union and elsewhere, have the fundamental right to pursue their education free from threats of violence and harassment. They should never be in fear that they will be targeted simply because they are Jewish or because they identify with their ancestral homeland—Israel.

I want to thank the committee for allowing me to share my experiences and for your efforts to address the growing problem of antisemitism on college campuses.