

# Billionaires, imperialists, and antisemites: The forces behind the assault on opposition to Gaza genocide

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More than 80 days into Israel's genocidal war against the people of Gaza, the ruling class is bitterly attacking democratic rights in the major capitalist countries in order to suppress and isolate mass protest against the genocide.

The marches that have, globally, involved tens of millions of people are being relentlessly and cynically labeled "antisemitic" by the bourgeois press. In Germany, protests against the massacre are outright banned and criminalized. On college campuses in the United States, films by young Jewish directors critical of the state of Israel are being barred and those showing them threatened with expulsion. Student groups opposed to the massacre unfolding in Gaza are being outright banned, including Jewish Voice for Peace.

The United States Congress has begun a witch-hunt which targets university administrators whose words and actions do not sufficiently target students' right to protest. The congressional grilling of university presidents Liz Magill (Penn), Claudine Gay (Harvard), and Sally Kornbluth (MIT) earlier this month was a McCarthyite event aimed at intimidating other institutional heads to march in lock-step with this assault on democratic rights. Those who are not adequately revoking or curtailing the basic rights of students and employees to protest face expulsion from their post. The media is entirely complicit, with the *New York Times* pushing out reporters and staff who become too "political" by characterizing Israel's assault as genocide in their non-work-related writing, including social media posts.

Twenty-two Democratic members of the House of Representatives and virtually all the Republicans voted to censure US Representative Rashida Tlaib (Democrat-Michigan) for calling for a ceasefire. Meanwhile, figures like Republican Senator Lindsey Graham are cheered when they call for a "total war" against what he calls "the most extremist population on Earth," that is, the residents of Gaza.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality stated in its December 12 statement opposing this witch-hunt, "the central aims... are twofold: First, the destruction of free speech on the campuses and beyond, and, second, the complete subordination of schools and universities to the interests of the state, the military and the aims of US foreign policy."

The Biden administration has played a leading role in the campaign to censor opposition to Israel on college campuses. In October the White House began a campaign to combat the surge of pro-Palestinian sentiment on campus, sending teams from the Department of Education to go to major universities and colleges throughout the country.

White House spokesperson Andrew Bates, reporting on the student protests against Israel, stated, "these grotesque sentiments and actions shock the conscience and turn the stomach. They also recall our commitment that can't be forgotten: 'never again.'" Yet, cynically, it is the White House which has provided nearly every bomb that has been

dropped in Gaza, killing well over 20,000 civilians, primarily women and children, the worst ethnic cleansing of the 21st century.

## The billionaires

To better understand the narrow social basis of the campaign to silence opposition to Israel's genocide, it is useful to understand *who* is leading it. This campaign of censorship and intimidation is being led by an alliance of billionaires, Zionists, the far-right and top government and political leaders of American imperialism.

The first major group involved are a handful of multi-billionaires and economic power players whose stranglehold over the global economy positions them to control the political and cultural leadership of the major universities and other significant institutions.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in an article written by an anonymous Harvard employee:

Just as inequality in general is increasingly incompatible with what remains of democracy, so is the subordination of universities to wealthy donors incompatible with academic freedom. The right-wing, pro-Zionist "donor revolt" is a qualitative development in big-money university donors attempting to use their power and influence to shape campus discourse. That these donors wield such influence—and that many of them seek to do so publicly—is an indication of how deeply compromised academia already is.

Indeed, universities are largely reliant on this stream of cash. According to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, in 1980 private donations to US colleges and universities amounted to \$4.2 billion. Today they have surged to \$59.5 billion.

These are some of the major billionaires whose "donor revolt" is leading to the attack on basic rights of free speech and protest on US campuses.

*Les Wexner* – One of the most important capitalists in retail sales, Wexner has amassed \$10.6 billion, and is the 192nd richest person in the world, according to *Bloomberg*. Wexner founded L Brands, which controls, or previously controlled, Bath & Body Works, Victoria's Secret, Abercrombie & Fitch, Express, and several other major brands. While Wexner no longer controls L Brands, his foundation, the Wexner Foundation, donated tens of millions of dollars to Harvard over the last few decades and has now pulled millions of dollars of future support. (He is also the billionaire who became the launching pad for convicted sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein, who managed Wexner's personal holdings for nearly two decades).

*Idan Ofer* – Idan and his brother Eyal are the 77th and 87th richest

people in the world, owning \$42 billion, according to Bloomberg. Together they control Ofer Global, the Zodiac Group, Quantum Pacific Group and Global Holdings, each of which are massive industrial, energy and real estate investment firms. They own about half of Israeli Corp., Israel's largest holding company. Collectively their companies take in hundreds of billions of dollars a year in revenue through shipping, fertilizers, industrial chemicals, energy and real estate. Miller Global Properties, one of the various "small" companies that they have a leading ownership in, is notable for controlling various landmark properties, such as the Pebble Beach golf course, the Aspen ski resort and the Bevely Hills Hotel. Idan Ofer and his wife Batia both quit the Harvard Kennedy School Dean's Executive Board in an attempt to pressure the university to crack down on the outcry of pro-Palestinian sentiment on the campus. Idan Ofer's companies have been at the heart of multiple chemical leak and environmental scandals in Israel. Eyal was formerly an intelligence officer in the Israeli Air Force; he now resides in Monaco.

**Bill Ackman** – Ackman is an American billionaire who runs Pershing Square Capital, a hedge fund with about \$20 billion under management. Ackman owns \$4 billion personally. Pershing Square Capital holds significant shares of major US companies, including a 10 percent ownership of Target, one percent of Procter & Gamble, 10 percent control of Chipotle, a 7 percent share of Universal Music Group, and over a billion dollars in Netflix. Ackman is currently leading a vicious campaign to oust Harvard President Claudine Gay. Previously Ackman fought to get Harvard to release all the names of students who signed a pro-Palestinian statement, demanding that employers refuse to hire these students.

**Ken Griffin** – Griffin is the 35th richest person in the world, with over \$37 billion in assets. He is the CEO of Citadel, a massive \$52 billion hedge fund based in Miami. Citadel owns a significant share in some of the largest technology and bioscience companies, including Microsoft, Activision, Boston Scientific, Nvidia, Humana, Apple, Comcast, Merck, and Adobe. Griffin has donated over half a billion dollars to Harvard and is pressuring the university to adopt a stronger pro-Israel stance.

**Cliff Asness** – Asness is an American billionaire who founded AQR Capital Management, which has over \$100 billion under management. Asness severed all his donations to the University of Pennsylvania and has publicly begun a campaign to pressure the university to stop "support[ing] evil." In a diatribe published in the *Wall Street Journal*, he described the pro-Palestinian protests as a reflection of the "deep and systematic rot on elite college campuses."

**Marc Rowan** – Rowan is co-owner of Apollo Asset Management, one of the largest private equity firms. He has over \$6 billion in personal wealth. He halted his donations to University of Pennsylvania, using "Wall Street tactics to 'strong-arm'" the university, in the words of *Business Insider*. Apollo has sprawling investments in real estate, cruise companies (Norwegian, Regent), hotels (Harrah's Entertainment), education (McGraw Hill), entertainment (Chuck E. Cheese), private security (ADT) and retail (Smart and Final). Apollo co-founder Leon Black was formerly CEO of the company before revelations emerged that he had paid Jeffrey Epstein over \$100 million for tax planning and consulting services.

#### **Zionists, antisemites and ethno-nationalists**

Complementing this group of billionaires are a series of ethno-nationalists, both Zionists and MAGA Trumpers, who are more closely coordinating the effort to censor outrage against Israel's genocide.

A recent, 2023 film, *Israelism*, made by two Jewish filmmakers, provides a window into the mechanisms used to promote Zionism in American culture and equate it with Judaism. One central figure in the film is Abe Foxman, an American lawyer and multi-millionaire who was the national director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) from 1987 to 2015. Foxman and the ADL are major fixtures in the American Zionist lobby, heavily promoting organizations such as Birthright.

The ADL characterizes all Jewish organizations opposed to the policies

of the state of Israel as "hate groups." Jonathan Greenblatt, the current ADL chief, described organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace as the "photo inverse of white supremacists," on Twitter. "We long have said that these are hate groups," he stated.

The comparison of left-wing Jewish activists opposed to an apartheid ethno-nationalist state with white supremacists is as slanderous as it is ignorantly absurd. It is precisely these types of comparisons that are being used as ammunition in the effort to ban anti-Zionist groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine from campuses.

Foxman previously provided political cover for the rise of Donald Trump, declaring in an interview, "I don't think he's a racist, I don't think he's an antisemite."

The marriage between the Zionist lobby—many of whom are Democrats, like Foxman and Ackman—and the fascistic right-wing must be underscored.

Henry Schwartz, an executive committee member of one of the main US Zionist lobbies, the Zionist Organization of America, stated that Jews were "blessed by heaven with Donald Trump being elected president of the United States."

To these wealthy layers, indifferent to the social crisis, who solidarize themselves not with the plight of millions of working-class Jews but rather the capitalist elite, Trump's openly fascistic ethno-nationalism is warmly greeted. When, in 2017, fascists, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists took up torches and marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting "Jews will not replace us," Trump commented that they were "very fine people." But this was no problem for these donors, who by antisemitism simply mean opposition to the government of Israel.

The lead "prosecutor" in the December 6 McCarthyite hearing for the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and Penn was Republican Representative Elise Stefanik (New York). Stefanik is a close ally of Donald Trump, who has expressed support for the so-called "Great Replacement Theory," an openly fascistic and anti-Semitic theory, which holds that a conspiracy of elite Jewish liberals is trying to "poison the blood"—in the words of Trump—of white Western Christian nations through mass immigration. She supported Trump's attempt to overturn the presidential election through the coup of January 6, 2021.

These forces are closely connected to the right-wing evangelical movement, with its billionaire and multi-millionaire pastors, who enthusiastically support Israel's bloodbath. Figures such as John Hagee, the influential Texan evangelist, preach that war in Israel and Palestine is a heralding of the "end times," during which armies will come against Israel from China, Russia, Iran, and various Arab countries. "God will wipe them out," he stated in October. Hagee joins a larger group of Christian Zionists, many of whom orbit the Trinity Broadcasting Network, one of the largest Christian evangelical media companies, with significant influence and connection to the Republican party.

Beyond the evangelicals, the close connections between the Zionist lobby and the far right are well documented.

One of Trump's largest donors was the late Sheldon Adelson, who in 2015 had amassed \$28 billion through the addictive and exploitative casino industry. According to *Forbes* he was the 18th richest person in the world a few years before his death in 2021. Adelson was a major figure in the Israeli American Council, acting both on its executive board and as a lead donor.

Adelson was introduced to Trump through Michael Steinhardt, an American hedge fund manager and billionaire, who co-founded the Birthright Israel program. Steinhardt was also a major donor to Trump, and also to New York University, where he was a member of the board before resigning over accusations of illegally trafficking in antiquities.

It is notable that one of the founders of Birthright is a major Trump supporter.

Birthright is a critical institution both in garnering political support for

Israel within the US and in facilitating migration to Israel, especially its illegal settlements on the West Bank. About one in every six Israeli settlers in the West Bank are American citizens. Some 800,000 young people have gone on free trips to Israel sponsored by the Birthright Israel Foundation, described by the *New York Times* as a “rite of passage” for many young American Jews. Rabbi Bennet Miller, the national chair of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, is interviewed in the film *Israelism*, insisting, “Every one of our kids should be going over, not for ten days, but for a semester or a year.” In recent years, thousands of young people have been protesting on the trips, walking off in the middle to visit Palestinian settlements in opposition to the program’s guided tour.

This intertwining of the fascistic right, US imperialism, and Zionist forces can also be seen in the lawsuits underway in the US right now claiming rampant antisemitism on US campuses. An investigation by *Grayzone* notes that all of the lawsuits are being filed by one firm, Kasowitz Benson Torres. David Friedman was also one of the principal lawyers at the firm until 2017, when he became the US Ambassador to Israel under Trump. Friedman is currently campaigning for NYU to begin a crackdown against pro-Palestinian protest.

The firm has been described by Eric Garland, a geopolitical analyst and influencer, as “Netanyahu’s guys in the Trump White House.” The law firm was founded by a Big Tobacco lawyer, Marc Kasowitz, a long-time donor to both the Republican and Democratic parties, including to Trump, Biden and Obama. The firm was previously registered as a foreign agent, representing Israel, with the US Justice Department. Another of its clients was the Ukrainian-Israeli billionaire Ikor Kolomoisky, a major early donor for the fascist Azov battalion, who is now in prison for fraud.

The presence of this firm, and the larger Zionist lobby, in driving the attack on democratic rights testifies to the direct involvement of the state of Israel. The Netanyahu’s “guys in the White House” are leading the lawsuits which the congressional hearings were partially based on. It is no secret that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) operates as a direct arm of Tel Aviv in American politics, a kind of nexus for American imperialism’s bipartisan support of Israel. The organization founded by Isaiah Kenen, a former member of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on candidates for office in the US. Most recently, AIPAC has spent a whopping \$100 million as part of a campaign to put pressure on “progressive” Democrats to support Israel or face a well-funded primary or general election opponent.

The *Grayzone* report also notes that the “witnesses” who have launched lawsuits through this firm have all been semi-employed, despite being students, by Israeli lobby organizations, particularly the Alliance for Israel, Israel Alliance, and Students Supporting Israel. While these paid employees of these groups have claimed instances of hate, such as being told, “You’re a dirty little Jew and you deserve to die,” their lawsuits do not provide any specific examples or references to such moments of antisemitism, just confrontations with pro-Palestinian activists, shouting matches, and the use of the supposedly antisemitic slogan, “from the river to the sea.”

### **The defense of Palestine is a class question**

This marriage of Zionists, billionaires and outright fascistic antisemites testifies to the fact that the campaign underway to assault basic democratic rights, including free speech, has nothing to do with the popular demands of students, nor, for that matter, anything to do with a campaign against genuine antisemitism.

In a critical lecture delivered December 14 at Humboldt University in Berlin, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North outlined the fascistic ideology that underpins the Netanyahu regime in Israel:

In the midst of the crimes being committed by the Israeli regime, there is no greater and more insidious lie than the claim that opposition to Zionism is, and must be, antisemitic. This is a lie that is refuted by the long history of pre-1948 opposition to Zionism among countless thousands of Jewish workers and intellectuals, spanning several generations, who rejected the myth-based call for a return to Palestine.

The working class, socialist movement played a key role in opposing Zionism, North explained:

[Socialists] identified and denounced the politically reactionary character of the perspective of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. It was understood that this project was a colonialist enterprise, which could only be achieved in alliance with imperialism and at the expense of the Palestinian Arab population that had lived in the territory for 2,000 years.

The genocide of Gaza has nothing to do with the defense of the Jewish people. In fact, insisting that the horrific death of more than 20,000 people serves Jews or Judaism, is itself a deeply perverse, fundamentally antisemitic notion—claiming that Jews or Judaism require this massacre.

Those censoring the mass upsurge and awakening of anger in young people and workers worldwide do not reflect a genuine popular movement, let alone a genuine popular movement of Jewish people. Rather, this campaign is the product of an alliance of multi-billionaires, Trump-loving antisemites, and American imperialist strategists and cheerleaders dedicated to Israel as a geopolitical necessity. Safeguarded and promoted by the media, this alliance of reaction represents the interests of a tiny minority.

Workers and youth must make every effort to expose and resist this assault underway on democratic rights. Fighting not only against Israel’s genocide against Palestine, but also against the broader preparations for US-led war against Iran and China, requires a militant opposition against every effort to strip the population of the basic right even to question the actions undertaken by the government on the pretext of “national security.”



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