

“Zionism and Judaism are not the same”: An interview with Muhlenberg College professor Maura Finkelstein, fired for opposing the Gaza genocide

Landon Gourov**17 October 2024**

Dr. Maura Finkelstein, a tenured professor of anthropology, was fired from her job by Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, earlier this year for public and social media comments opposing Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Finkelstein is herself Jewish. She recently spoke with Landon Gourov of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Landon Gourov: Could you explain to our readership what happened at Muhlenberg that led to the college firing you?

Maura Finkelstein: It’s sort of a long, convoluted story. But essentially, it started shortly after October 7, because I have a commitment to teaching about Palestine in all of my classes, almost all of my classes. It’s always relevant.

In the fall of 2023, I was teaching an urban anthropology class. And so we were focusing on multiple case studies, not only India, where I had done my research, but multiple case studies all over the world to think about what urban space is. And when we were studying about infrastructure, we were reading about checkpoints and roads and walls in Palestine. So we were learning from an Israeli architect named Eyal Weizman and we were reading the anthropologist Amahl Bishara, who writes about walls and roads. And in my methodology class, we were learning about oral history and memory and how that contributes to ethnography. And in doing so, we were learning about the Nakba and how memory and testimony is used in scholarship.

And that all happened in September. And so after October 7, because of the way the media landscape in the United States is entirely—and especially corporate media—is just at the center of Zionism, I would have been an irresponsible teacher to not explain the context, the history for my students, so that they could understand how these current events were connected to the things that we were learning in class.

On October 12, there was a student who made a complaint against me. And this sort of started a snowball effect in which, during the fall semester, the administration was very concerned about my teaching. They wanted to know why I was teaching about Palestine. They wanted to know why I was not teaching “both sides.” They wanted to know why I was not teaching an Israeli perspective on the genocide—though they would not use the word genocide.

And then when that seemed to not be the case, there was a lot of concern over things I published, and there was attention put on that. But I think because I was not doing anything wrong, aside from calling a genocide a genocide and trying to give my students the tools that they needed to understand what was happening in the world, that sort of died down.

And I thought over the December holidays that the story was closed. But in mid-January, a student I had never met, who I had never taught, who

was in leadership at Hillel International, filed an equal opportunity non-discrimination policy violation complaint against me because of a social media post that, while I did not write, I reposted in my Instagram stories. In the complaint, the student argued that because the Instagram post was critical of Zionism, and because the student identified as a Zionist, which the student said was the same as being Jewish or being Israeli, that that student’s right to an education was violated because they would not have felt safe in my classroom because I was critical of Zionism.

That became a whole investigation. And despite the fact that Judaism is a religious and ethical or ethnic identity, and Israeli is a nationality, and Zionism is a political ideology, the college determined that they were the same. And I was told that I was terminated. It has been in an appeals process which is now in its second phase.

But I think the important thing about this case is that Zionism and Judaism are not the same. We know that an ethnic and religious identity and a political ideology are not the same. They have different histories. They cannot be made equivalent. But really what this is being used to do is to silence all dissent against Zionism, and to silence all voices that are speaking out for Palestinian liberation.

So it is a very dangerous precedent. And I am hoping that the appeals committee will overturn the determination, and that I will be reinstated. Because otherwise, this is a huge violation of what it means to be an intellectual, be a teacher, be an academic in the world, be a person in the world.

LG: Based on what you are saying and also based on what I have read about your case, you were not really afforded due process. If I remember correctly, you were officially terminated back in May?

MF: I was told that I was fired on May 30th, and then there were a series of confidential appeals that happened.

LG: You said that you’re on your second appeal, could you describe the process with your first appeal?

MF: So certain things are wrapped in confidentiality, and that one kind of is. But essentially, what is happening now is that the case is with an elected committee of faculty who are determining whether or not I violated the policy, and then I might be afforded a hearing. And then the president will have the final say. This is all within the faculty handbook, and this is all sort of above board. But everything that happened before this is sort of wrapped up in the Title IX office and with equal opportunity non-discrimination policy violations, which are sort of removed from the policies laid out in the handbook.

Without saying too much—I’m supposed to be careful about the things that I talk about while it is still on appeal—this was an equal opportunity complaint, and it was not necessarily about my teaching or my

publications, there was a sort of special confidential secret policy that it went through that I did not understand. One could say that due process started last month, and that everything before that was its own procedure that was sort of outside of what I as a faculty member would have expected based on the kind of contract that I have with my institution.

I think we are seeing these precedent-setting cases. And so there is a lot of uncertainty about how they operate. As far as I know, there has not been a case in which the equal opportunity policy has been allegedly violated at my college. And so there is a lot of figuring it out as it goes on.

LG: There has been an orchestrated, anti-democratic attack on academics and students who have protested the Gaza genocide. And it really does seem to be anti-democratic that you have to stay quiet about your case while your job is at stake.

MF: It is definitely anti-democratic.

The faculty at my college, up until *The Intercept* story came out, had no idea that the case was actually happening. Aside from a very small group of people who had actually reached out to me, I was constantly being told that I could not tell anybody about what was going on because everything was confidential, which in addition to foreclosing on a solidarity movement on campus, it also sort of tries to wrap these up into some sort of individual and shame-based situations, even though I know that I did not do anything wrong.

I think opposing genocide and fighting for people's liberation, whether it be Palestinians or anyone else, should be the basic foundation of what we do as people. I mean, it's a really low bar. But in the United States, at least, and I think also in the UK and parts of Europe, there is this overwhelming racism against Palestinians, Arabs—an Islamophobia that has been built and cultivated over decades and has made it so that the perceived or imagined feelings of a small group of students are seen as more important and more pressing than actually hundreds of thousands of people who are being annihilated.

There is this way in which on college and university campuses people are so afraid to talk, they are so afraid to speak out on what would be just the basic human decency, which is to say that genocide is wrong. I think because of this language of shame, and because so many of these cases are wrapped up in confidentiality, that it is not only a breakdown of the democratic procedures that are expected to happen during these processes. These are institutions that are actually trying to make people like me feel as though we have done something wrong, which we have not.

LG: What has been the response from your students and faculty at Muhlenberg regarding your case?

MF: I am not sure. I have not been allowed on campus since mid-January, and I am not in contact with that many people. I have been in contact with certain students who are very vocal on social media about Palestinian liberation and against genocide.

I taught at Muhlenberg for nine years—this would have been my tenth—and it is a very Zionist institution. It has been very, very hard for Palestinian students, Arab students, Muslim students, anti-Zionist students, especially anti-Zionist Jewish students to stand in solidarity with Palestinians, to speak out against Israeli occupation. But I think that has changed. I think that this year there has really been a refusal to be silenced, both for a small group of faculty, and also for students.

We are all watching a live-streamed genocide. Just this week, I saw some of the worst things that I have ever seen happen, be done to people, be done to Palestinians by Israel—funded by the United States. And so we should all be very loud about this, and we should have been very loud about this since last year, two years ago, 10 years ago, etc, etc.

I think that over the past year we have seen the most horrific things that we can imagine. I am an optimist, despite myself, but I do think that we are not necessarily seeing the same kind of radical encampments that we were seeing last spring on college and university campuses, because our

campuses are being militarized. It is very scary.

I also think that young people—and I would include the students at the college where I teach, or used to teach—do not want to be part of a status quo that is bankrolling genocide. I think I want to remain connected to the shred of optimism I had in the spring with the student encampments. I think the fact that there are rallies happening at Muhlenberg College, because students are organizing; because they're refusing to be silent about genocide is really important, because this is a campus where that would not have happened a year ago.

LG: You have noted that students are becoming more vocal and more open, and I, too, see students at my high school undergoing the same processes. Many students, including many Jewish students, are very openly against genocide. A part of that is that, like you have said, we are witnessing a genocide in real time in Gaza.

Your case does appear to be the first firing of a professor for holding pro-Palestinian sympathies. You discussed earlier that there are some scary implications for something like this. What do you think the implications are for both academics and students alike?

MF: I think my case is the first known case of a tenured faculty member who's been fired for pro-Palestine speech since October 7, 2023.

So there have been cases before that related to the same things, like Steven Salaita's case was a very famous case. Last year, many contingent faculty, adjuncts visiting faculty lectures, did not have their contracts renewed or had their contracts broken because of pro-Palestine speech and activism on behalf of Palestinian liberation and in opposition to Zionism. But because of the way academia works, a lot of those cases could be made to seem murky. Was your contract not renewed because we didn't need you anymore? Or was your contract not renewed because you posted something about Palestine?

I think what we are seeing right now, as in my case, is an increasing number of faculty, whether they're contingent faculty, tenure track or tenured faculty, who have been suspended or put on administrative leave or given warnings or whatnot.

This is a part of the larger American project of empire in which the United States government's interest as a settler colonial nation is involved in all kinds of imperial violence, in partnership with Israel. It's Indigenous People's Day today. In some ways, this is not new. What we're seeing is happening faster and with more devastating weapons, but this is just the colonial violence that has happened for hundreds of years. But we're seeing it. And because of the investment in Zionism as a settler colonial project, the US government, our college and university administrators, high school administrators, are basically equating speech, action, writing, teaching in solidarity with Palestine and Palestinian liberation with hate speech.

I am terrified of the precedent that that sets because as educators, as students, as people in the world, we have to be able to call out these forms of violence when we see them, we have to be able to draw attention to how power operates. To be able to fire a teacher because they are actually teaching about the world and what is happening in the world is incredibly dangerous and it makes it dangerous for everyone else who's speaking out on behalf of Palestinian liberation. It makes it incredibly dangerous for Palestinians in the United States, for Muslims, for Arabs. So the implications are pretty terrifying.

LG: Last December, the presidents of MIT, Harvard, and University of Pennsylvania were brought before Congress and were berated for not "curtailing antisemitism" on their campuses. The Biden administration, around that time, opened a number of these investigations into colleges across the nation, one of them being Muhlenberg. Can you discuss the role of the Biden administration in your case and or just the larger crackdown on opposition to genocide on college campuses in general?

MF: As far as the Biden administration, I will say that Biden is a long-term Zionist and a long-term believer in the Zionist project. I believe that

Zionism is a form of white supremacy. I think Biden—I do not know the number off the top of my head—but I think he's received more money from AIPAC [the American Israel Public Affairs Committee] than any other politician.

He is both a believer and someone who has received an incredible amount of money in order to be staunchly in partnership with Israel, the Zionist project, Netanyahu, etc. And so when Biden comes out and says that he believes—I think this was in his State of the Union speech—that he believes that anti-Zionism is antisemitism, that is an incredibly dangerous thing for him to be doing.

And it is inherently antisemitic. There has always been tension within the larger global Jewish community about whether Zionism is good or not. There have always been Jews who have opposed the State of Israel, have opposed the Zionist project, which has always explicitly, despite what people are saying now, has always explicitly claimed itself to be a project to colonize Palestine. It was very clear at the beginning of Zionism.

So I think when people like Biden say antisemitism and anti-Zionism are the same, that Zionism and Judaism are the same, it's both incredibly dangerous and it's also inherently antisemitic to say there is only one way to be Jewish, and that it is the way that we have determined that you can be Jewish. It also renders pretty much every Palestinian antisemitic, which is a very, very dangerous precedent to set.

There is a lot of things that are going on in our college campuses. On the one hand, you have right-wing politicians. You have people like Christopher Rufo, who have been trying to dismantle equity initiatives on college and university campuses for decades now. They successfully eroded affirmative action. They've gone after DEI, they've gone after critical race theory, they've gone after gender studies and ethnic studies. And this is just another part of that white supremacist anti-equity work that Jewish Zionists are participating in. But they are participating in the service of an inherently antisemitic white supremacist project. They will eventually be discarded.

I also think there is the problem of how education in this country has been defunded as we continue to amp up the amount of money that we invest in the military, in foreign aid, in arms trade, etc, etc. Then you have a college like Muhlenberg that's so dependent on donor money. I mean, this is like capitalism 101, right? Whoever is in control of the money gets to be in control of the institution. And so if there are Zionist donors who do not want a professor to be on campus teaching about Palestine, threatening to withhold money, it's going to be really devastating for a college like Muhlenberg that is relying on tuition and relying on donor money. And this is more and more of a problem across the country. If you don't have federally funded free or affordable education, then you're having a market that is creating a product and somebody gets to control that product.

LG: Have you followed the case at Cornell University of graduate student and instructor Momodou Taal who was temporarily suspended and threatened with deportation for protesting the Gaza genocide? What do you think of his case and how do you see it in comparison to yours?

MF: I have been grateful for his voice. I have learned a lot from him. I am glad that, at least for now, Cornell is backing down. I do not want to say too much because I do not think I know enough, but I think that in the way that our institutions are trying to shame students, faculty, staff who are speaking out, who are speaking up for Palestinian liberation, who are speaking out against Zionism and other forms of white supremacy, they are trying to shame us and isolate us.

What we need to do is we need to shame our institutions. We need to be loud. And I think Momodou has been incredibly loud in some of the most powerful ways. And this creates coalitions. People are putting pressure on these institutions. We have to shame them. We cannot allow them to silence dissent. I have so much respect for him. And I'm so glad that, for now, he's still on campus.

LG: I am a member of the IYSSE, which is the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. We are mounting a defense for anti-war protesters, not only just in the United States, but also all over the world, including in Ukraine, where there is a member of our movement, named Bogdan Syrotiuk, who is currently in prison for holding anti-war stances against the Ukrainian and Russian governments.

Our position is that student protesters have to turn to the working class as the social force that can end the wars in Ukraine, as well as in Palestine and throughout the world. There is an escalation of war everywhere, not just in Palestine and Gaza, we are seeing escalations against Russia, against China, Iran, I mean, the list really goes on. So what do you think has to be done to beat back against the attacks against protesters and students and faculty and their democratic rights?

MF: I believe that we are always stronger together. I think that the way forward is always solidarity movements and thinking about creating alliances across identity categories.

I think the nation state is a huge, huge danger to liberation. I am aware that I exist within the structures of power that I live within, but I also want to imagine a world otherwise. I want to imagine a just world. I do not necessarily think that I am going to live to see it, but I want to keep fighting for it. And I think that that is about global solidarity movements. It is about solidarity across class, across race, across interest.

I think as we get siloed into our individual sort of projects or issues, then we get really fractured. But I think everyone who is fighting for liberation, everyone who is striving for liberation, I want to stand in solidarity with those people.

And I do not want to just stand in solidarity. I want to think about what that solidarity looks like in action. And so when I think about how to fight against fascism, which is here, and when I think about how to speak out against genocide and other political projects of destruction, I think about how can I imagine myself connected with everyone who is fighting against these movements, everyone who is fighting for liberation.

And that is how I imagine a way forward, because I am interested in imagining a world otherwise. I do not like this world. It is a violent, violent world. And I do not think that our long term goal is about achieving some kind of fake peace. I think it is about achieving liberation for everyone.

LG: A Change.org petition was launched against you by Zionists, and it cited as a grievances against you that you dared to say that there needs to be an understanding of history with regards to these events, that these things don't operate in a vacuum, like October 7, that these have much deeper historical roots to them. Do you believe that an understanding of history can aid in moving to a better future?

MF: Yeah, I mean, I am a social scientist, I am a scholar by training. And I think that understanding the larger context in which we are operating is absolutely critical. An understanding of our history and an understanding of what has come before is important. We cannot understand the present or the future if we do not understand the past.

That has really formed my politics and my sensibility. It has been removing myself from a community that made the argument that this "conflict" between Arabs and Israelis is this long historical conflict, and that they have always hated each other. They have always hated us, etc, etc. We have always been this, we have always been that. I have seen this over decades as someone who started learning about Palestine in high school in the 1990s and has been trying to learn as much as I can ever since.

Judaism is 5,785 years old, and Zionism is 120 years old. Not only are they not the same, they have very different histories. Zionism is not very old. It has a very, very small historical footprint. As an ideology that created the state of Israel, it has had a very, very short history. I think it is really important that when we are talking about what is happening in Palestine, we have a solid understanding of what actually transpired over

the past 120 years, and especially since 1948 because there is a real effort to evacuate that history in order to frame Zionism as a just project. If you actually study what Zionism is, there is no way that you can see it as anything other than a white supremacist settler colonial project that is invested in the destruction of Palestine and Palestinian lives, a genocidal project.

If we do not acknowledge that, then it is very easy to open up the *New York Times* or watch MSNBC and think that we are watching some kind of historical conflict between two people who hate each other, which is completely false in the sense that this has real political, historical and ideological context that we are not being taught in this country.

I think that young people are learning, they are studying, they are reading Palestinians, they are engaged in understanding what is happening in Palestine in a way that was very difficult 10 years ago. But if you look at the US government, if you look at the US corporate media, that is very dangerous information, and it is not readily accessible. I think that is sort of the clue as to what happens when we understand this history, it no longer is a conflict, it's an occupation, it's a genocide.

LG: Thank you for your time.



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