

Antisemitism and anti-Israel Displays at American Medical School Commencement Ceremonies in 2024

Running Title: U.S. Medical Schools' 2024 commencements

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Abstract:

Introduction. Antisemitism has been increasing in U.S. medicine since the Hamas attack on Israel of October 7, 2023. This included anecdotal reports of antisemitic and anti-Israel displays at medical school commencements. We studied such behavior at the 25 top-ranked U.S. medical schools' commencements in 2024, which has significance given these graduates are expected to be future leaders.

Materials and Methods. Based on publicly-available videotaped 2024 commencements, we determined the number of students in the graduating classes wearing regalia, or carrying signs, wearing buttons, or engaging in verbal protests related to the Israel-terror groups conflict and which were either openly antisemitic, anti-Israel, or could be perceived as offensive or insensitive.

Results. At 2024 commencements, symbols representing antisemitic themes (keffiyehs and 3-part graduation stoles conveying antisemitic messages) were worn by students at just under half (12) of the schools. The mean number of students in each school wearing keffiyehs or these stoles was 4.0 (95% confidence interval, CI = 2.2-5.8), ranging from 0-13% of the classes, or 2.5% of the overall graduating cohort. The wearing of buttons, carrying banners, signs, verbal protests interrupting the ceremony, or with students deviating from script ranged from 0-22.5% of graduating students, with a mean of 2.7 per school (95% CI -0.8-6.2), or 1.7% of the graduating cohort.

Conclusions. We identified new behavior at commencements of top-ranked medical schools comprised of antisemitism, anti-Israel displays, and displaying offensive and insensitive symbols and messaging. There is an urgent need for medical schools in the U.S. to educate medical trainees about the dangers of antisemitism and all forms of hate and insensitivity.

Key words: activism; antisemitism; commencement; humanities; professionalism; regalia

Introduction

Advocacy to improve health outcomes is a physician's professional responsibility. Its incorporation as a competency into medical curricula has been encouraged,¹ and further elaborated within calls for "medical activism" to include "moral determinants of health."² Advocacy and activism are rooted in the ability to be socially engaged, exhibiting clear and responsible communication with patients and the public, fundamental skills which we, as responsible medical educators, regularly role model for, or teach, our medical students to emulate.³ In line with these competencies, academic medical organizations have issued and continue to produce statements on issues impacting health including pandemic management, firearms, climate change, international conflicts, and social justice.

Unprofessional behavior among medical trainees which includes communication issues and can relate to advocacy/activism is, however, common.^{4,5} It has been reported that a majority are unable to accept responsibility for their own unprofessional behavior.⁶ This is of concern given that disciplinary action by medical licensing boards against physicians is highly associated with prior unprofessional behavior in medical school.⁴ Unprofessional communication is reportedly the most common source of co-worker complaint reports against physicians.⁷

A recent increase in a particular form of unprofessional behavior among medical students is concerning and receiving attention within medical education and the media. Students have made hateful or offensive statements on social media, and directly to fellow students, including antisemitic content, related to the conflict between Israel and terror organizations that began with the deadly Hamas invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023.⁸⁻¹⁰ Also reported at US medical schools has been the tearing down of posters displaying Jewish hostages, including children, and citizens of the US, held by Hamas, a recognized terror organization by the United States

Government and most Western countries,¹¹ accusations that Jewish students are complicit with genocide, Holocaust distortion or inversion, and the inclusion of antisemitic course content.^{8, 12}

As educators at medical schools, we became aware of such behavior at the commencement ceremonies at our schools by direct observation of their publicly available video recordings, specifically, the wearing of symbols associated with the conflict between Israel and terror organizations and/or verbal protests. Some of these symbols/protests represent antisemitic themes, and others could be viewed as offensive, insensitive, or harassing, all violations of responsible and duty-bound professionalism. Some students wore non-official regalia despite receiving written notification that only school-provided regalia were permitted, further counter to tenets of professionalism. This led us to ask, is such medical student behavior more widespread among medical schools or just local phenomena?

Commencements, amongst the most hallowed celebrations, are traditionally considered solemn. Symbols and clothing reflect wearers' thinking, attitudes, and worldview. Unfortunately, depending upon their content, they can also deviate from positive intentions into hatred, insensitivity, and offensiveness, becoming the antithesis of the "creation of knowledgeable and *sensitive* health care providers" in the medical humanities framework,¹³ espoused within aims of diversity, equity, and inclusion.¹⁴

We focused upon student behavior at top rated U.S. medical schools' commencements which has high relevance and significance given that stakeholders expect their graduates to be future leaders in medicine. Hateful, offensive, or insensitive behavior particularly at official events which were recorded and publicly available, is ominous with respect to fostering an already eroded public trust in medicine and could lead to regret, negative publicity, donor attrition, and/or further erosion of trust.¹⁵ Accordingly, we propose educational paradigms aimed

toward eliminating antisemitism and hate of all kinds in medicine and training within a framework of respectful civil discourse, reflective practice, and sensitivity.

Methods

The study was deemed “exempt” by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Illinois at Chicago. We studied the commencement ceremonies at the 25 United States allopathic medical schools rated as the top schools for research in the 2023-24 US News and World Report rankings.¹⁶ The 2024-25 rankings were unavailable at the time of the commencements and the start of this study. Graduating class sizes were obtained from the Association of American Medical Colleges (Washington, DC) FACTS database.¹⁷ All commencements were professionally videotaped by the schools, and the ceremonies were available on the individual medical school websites, mostly as YouTube videos. Permissibility to view and report upon publicly available videos of students is in part governed by the United States Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which provides certain rights for parents regarding their children’s education records. Under FERPA, a video of a student is an education record, subject to specific exclusions, when the photo or video is either directly related to a student, and maintained by an educational agency or institution or by a party acting for the agency or institution. (20 U.S.C. 1232g(a)(4)(A); 34 CFR § 99.3). Commencement videos are not considered by FERPA to be directly related to a student ([FAQs on Photos and Videos under FERPA | Protecting Student Privacy \(ed.gov\)](#)), hence the images may be freely viewed and published.

The authors deemed it nonetheless appropriate, although not required by our IRB or FERPA, to not identify students or the medical schools. Hence, students’ faces within videos and schools’ identities are hidden in the figures provided, and a random number generator was used to assign a unique number to each medical school, thus de-identifying the schools. Links to the

publicly available videos, as well as the identification key for the 25 schools, is available from the authors upon request.

For seven schools, the videos were not available online, but three provided full ceremony videos upon request. Of the remaining four, three stated there was no full-length video, but highlight videos were available on two of the schools' commencement websites and/or on social media. One school responded that they are still trying to find the video and as of this date have still not located it.

We determined the absolute number, per cent, and mean number of students in the graduating classes wearing regalia that were in addition to officially-provided school gowns, caps, and stoles, and the carrying of signs or wearing of buttons, and any verbal protests, related to the Israel-terror groups conflict, and which were antisemitic in messaging, or could be perceived as offensive or insensitive. We also recorded the presence of stoles, or other non-official regalia, buttons, or signs, which contained images or flags of countries other than the United States, or any other signs or messages not related to the conflict. The authors first established these specific review criteria, then SR viewed the videos and compiled the results on an Excel spreadsheet. Due to the prominent presence of school banners and audio identification at every ceremony, authors were not blinded to the identity of the schools.

Screen shots were taken from the videos using Google YouTube Screen Capture to generate images for publication. All data and images were stored on University of Illinois BOX, which is both FERPA and HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act)-compliant. Data are presented as mean and 95% confidence intervals; all analysis was carried out after the de-identification of the schools. Images presented were de-identified by cropping them

or blocking out identifiable portions using Adobe Photoshop to ensure that students' faces and institutional names were not visible.

Results

The mean graduating class size was 141 (95% confidence interval, CI =123-159), with a total of 3,522 graduating students across the 25 schools. Symbols suggestive of support for terrorism, or hateful antisemitic regalia, were worn by students at just under half (12) of the schools (**Table 1**). This included keffiyehs, which were worn over, or under graduation gowns and still visible covering the neck, and graduation stoles that conveyed antisemitic messaging. In certain contexts, keffiyehs represent a symbol of political violence or support of terrorism.¹⁸ The mean number of students in each school wearing keffiyehs or such stoles was 4.0 (95% confidence interval, CI = 2.2-5.8), ranging from 0-13% of the classes, and constituted 2.5% of the overall graduating student cohort. In 6 schools, students wore various 3-part stoles consisting of a Palestinian flag, keffiyeh, and an empty map of Israel, some with the word “Palestine” adjacent to the map, written in Arabic. Other keffiyeh stoles contained a picture of the Dome of the Rock located over the site of the holiest place in Judaism, the Holy Temple, and “Jerusalem is Ours” adjacent, written also in Arabic (**Figure 1**). Such stoles symbolize support for the US Department of State-recognized terrorist organizations Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah,¹¹ i.e., annihilation of all Jews and Israel’s destruction, hence the empty map, and the phrase “Jerusalem is Ours” implying a wish for no Jewish presence in the city.¹⁹

Keffiyehs and/or these 3-part stoles were also worn by students at our institutions. These 3-part stoles meet the definitions of antisemitism (calling for, aiding, or justifying killing or harming Jews in the name of a radical ideology or extremist view of religion; and denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination) contained within the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) antisemitism guidelines,²⁰ the definition adopted by the U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism,²¹ the U.S. State Department,²² 35 member countries

of the IHRA, including the U.S. and much of the European Union,^{21, 23} and the Global Imams Council, consisting of over 1500 imams from 80 different countries.²⁴

Additional antisemitic symbols by the IHRA definition, or at least, inflammatory within hateful, offensive, and/or insensitive messaging, were worn or carried by students. At five of the top-rated schools, banners, buttons, and signs worn or carried called for “divest now.” This represents a call for “BDS,” i.e., boycott, divest, and sanction of Israel academics and businesses (including U.S. firms doing business with Israel),²⁵ with many of the founding goals of this movement deemed to be antisemitic included within the “3D’s” of demonization, delegitimization, and double standard.²⁶⁻²⁹ Other signs the students carried or wore on their gowns or caps included “occupation is a health crisis,” “stop bombing hospitals,” “(the school name) funds genocide,” “end genocide, apartheid, Zionism, end your complicity, free Palestine” among others (**Figure 2**). Schools #7 and #13, respectively, had particularly high percentages of students displaying anti-Israel protest banners including support of BDS (7%), or wearing buttons calling for BDS (22.5%).

Students also delivered verbal protests, in most instances deviating from the program for the ceremony. At school #13, a student gave an impromptu speech with accusations of “genocide” by the State of Israel, after being requested to only read a line of the Physician’s Oath in Arabic. At school #6, a student chosen to speak for the class spoke exclusively about the war in Gaza, stating that Israel was involved in “genocide,” and that the medical school had “actively stopped our attempts to stop genocide.” Two graduating students at school #4 delivered on-stage protests against “genocide” in Gaza, with both loudly and disrespectfully addressing the faculty, with one grabbing the diploma and shouting “Free Palestine,” while another displayed a large sign completely obscuring their body after coming for the diploma to the stage, which read “stop

genocide.” These are examples of misuse of the term “genocide,” a legally-determined definition with special status in international law.^{30,31} At school #4, medical students marched around the perimeter of the audience shouting “Free, Free Palestine.” “Free Palestine” is often associated with derogatory unfounded anti-Israel accusations including antisemitic calling for replacement of the State of Israel and denial of the historical and religious connection of Jewish people to the land of Israel.³² Large signs protesting “genocide,” “faculty complicity,” as well as to “end apartheid,” and “end Zionism” were carried onto the stage and displayed by students at schools #7 and 13 (**Figure 2** and **Table 1**). Antisemitic actions include such signs or statements demonizing Jews, and Holocaust inversion, i.e., accusing Jews of genocide.²⁰ Overall, protests in the form of buttons, banners, signs, or verbal protests ranged from 0-22.5% of graduating students, with a mean of 2.7 per school (95% CI -0.8-6.2), or 1.7% of the entire graduating cohort. Outside the graduation ceremony at one school, medical students from years 1-3 shouted “From the River to the Sea,” a euphemism included in the Hamas terrorist charter conveying annihilation of the Jewish people and the State of Israel.³³

At most schools we studied, we were unable to find rules on the commencement websites regarding permissible items at the ceremonies. However, at two schools, students contravened the stated prohibitions against the wearing of non-official regalia or carrying any signs into the commencement ceremony, a professionalism violation of failure to obey rules.

Discussion

The moral imperative to counter antisemitism in medicine in the US exists within a context of increased antisemitism since October 7, 2023 in U.S. medical schools, which has impacted the learning environment.⁸ Although our focus has been on U.S. schools, significantly increased antisemitism that has also directly followed Oct 7, 2023 has also been reported in medical schools in Canada and the U.K.³⁴⁻³⁶ At none of the commencements we studied did we find any anti-Palestinian, or anti-Muslim signs or symbols, there were no other buttons or signs worn apart from those we described, and only in two schools did any student wear flags of any other nations, a total of 5 students in the entire graduating cohort. Common language in commencement oaths includes: “I will not permit considerations of ... creed, ethnic origin, ... or any other factor to intervene between my duty and my patient.” The unprofessionalism demonstrated by students in this study via displays of offensive, insensitive symbols, or antisemitism violated the oath they took at the very same ceremony, raising the question of whether physicians displaying such unprofessional behavior can communicate with let alone care for all patients in a humanistic and nonbiased manner.

Commencement ceremonies are hardly the place for disruptive behaviors, displays and disputes of meanings of geopolitical conflicts and emotionally-laden controversial claims, with, e.g., “stop bombing hospitals” omitting weaponization of Gaza hospitals and UNWRA facilities by Hamas, and inaccurate use of the terms apartheid and genocide.^{37, 38} Besides the expressed sentiments of hate for Jews, and offensiveness, the wearing of regalia with empty maps of Israel labeled as Palestine, explicit statements on their regalia that “Jerusalem is Ours,” signs calling for “end Zionism,” and shouting “Free, Free Palestine,” or “From the River to the Sea...” compromise sensitivity to and safety of fellow students, family, faculty, and attendees. These displays of hate, insensitivity, lack of respect, disruptions of ceremonies, support for terror,

disobeying school rules, and false claims, are unprofessional behaviors occurring in the context of a hallowed and public ceremony.³⁹ Medical school curricula have increasingly emphasized sensitivity to all patients and peers. Cultivating sensitivity within medical education and practice is essential considering its critical role within the physician-patient relationship which includes fostering public trust.⁴⁰ It is important to emphasize that certain symbolism and imagery, or content of speeches, can be deeply offensive or hurtful to individuals of specific ethnicity, religion, or other specific characteristics.

These unprofessional actions including inappropriate expressions of hate provide an important opportunity for education to provide guidance on professional behavior. Given that various factors may contribute to the lack of sensitivity and respect demonstrated within the above exemplars, including potential misunderstandings regarding upholding professionalism within what may be perceived as “advocacy” or “activism,” the “4 E’s” paradigm for countering antisemitism may be helpful.⁸ These “4 E’s” include “Education” on Jewish identity, antisemitism, and eliminating bias as well as history of the role of medicine during the Holocaust, “Engagement” including respectful civil discourse in medical education, “Empathy” within practice and the learning environment and for students and families especially on a meaningful day with a ripple effect onto physician-patient communication and care, and “Enforcement”, e.g., policies for regalia and a non-hostile learning environment upheld.⁸ In general, the wearing of official regalia is associated with a more dignified ceremony, embodying the professionalism we expect of our medical graduates. For future commencements, proactive action to permit only official school-provided regalia, and no signs, is recommended. We are aware of several schools which issued such directives.

Universities (and medical schools) are being challenged in their interest to maintain free exchange of ideas toward improving health and advancing medical science vs unprofessional behavior by students or faculty that is offensive, insensitive, or even overtly displaying hatred, and which could be perceived by the public as representative of medical student behavior or training. Legal guidance regarding germane regulations and their enforcement at medical school events is prudent, given questions of academic freedom or First Amendment rights. With respect to displays of hate and offensiveness, which carry potentially serious ethical and legal consequences, an institution could, and would be justified, to limit what is allowed to be worn or carried at commencement ceremonies, particularly in a private institution.⁴¹ The ability to restrict such behavior may be more limited in a public university, given potential for First Amendment challenges.⁴² U.S. institutions of higher learning (including medical schools), however, are obligated to provide protections for all students within the Title VI Civil Rights Code, which prohibits the existence of a hostile learning environment on the basis of “shared ancestry” (including religion).⁴³

Limitations of our study include a possible view that the number and percent of students involved in these antisemitic, inflammatory, and insensitive messaging at commencements was insignificant. The results for the overall number of students wearing non-official regalia and carrying protest signs may have in fact been underestimated due to missing the complete videos from four schools. It is, however, important to recognize that having 13-22% of students at some of the schools engaging in such protest displays, some of which were disrespectful, insensitive, and hateful, and all of which are available for viewing by the public, is in fact, not negligible and even a single student behaving disrespectfully or insensitively is inappropriate. It is notable in this respect that microaggressions, particularly those directed at diverse students, are taken very

seriously and often followed by consequences to violators at most US medical schools.⁴⁴ Another limitation is that we only examined the top rated 25 schools for research (not primary care) and these may not be representative of behavior in other medical schools. International medical student behavior in the context of our study focus regarding antisemitism and unprofessional behavior is of interest for future research.

As role models for the medical students, faculty and leadership are not always above reproach in regard to students exhibiting highly unprofessional behavior – faculty may even be engaging in such egregious behaviors themselves, for example on social media,⁸ or showing reluctance to appropriately remediate or discipline.⁴⁵ As educators, our own activism must include reaffirming our responsibility to the public for whom we strive to provide nonbiased care with clinical excellence. Education about eliminating antisemitism and hate of all kinds in medicine and training in respectful civil discourse, reflective practice, and sensitivity is recommended to support professionalism in all communications, and prevent hateful and insensitive displays or statements that could harm students, institutions, and their patients. US Civil Rights Title VI cases for allegations of hostile learning environment continue to be filed with the US Department of Education, including a recently initiated Congressional investigation of antisemitism at the University of California at San Francisco and its associated medical centers under UCSF Health.⁴⁶ Recipients of U.S. federal funding such as health centers are obligated to comply with federal law on appropriate responses to such discrimination, thus avoiding penalties that could include the loss of federal funding.⁴⁶ It is therefore prudent for medical schools and health centers to take proactive steps to address and attenuate antisemitism and discrimination of all kinds to insure a safe environment for all.

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Figures

Figure 1: Examples of regalia worn by medical students at three schools during commencement ceremonies. **1A** presents the three part stole consisting of a keffiyeh, Palestinian flag, and the Dome of the Rock with Arabic translated as “Jerusalem is Ours” as worn by a student. **1B, C,** and **D** show variations including the empty map of Israel, and adjacent Arabic writing meaning “Palestine.” **1A-D** were taken directly from the publicly available schools’ commencement videos on youtube.com using the Google Screenshot app. Clearer pictures of the stoles may be seen in **1E** and in **1F**.

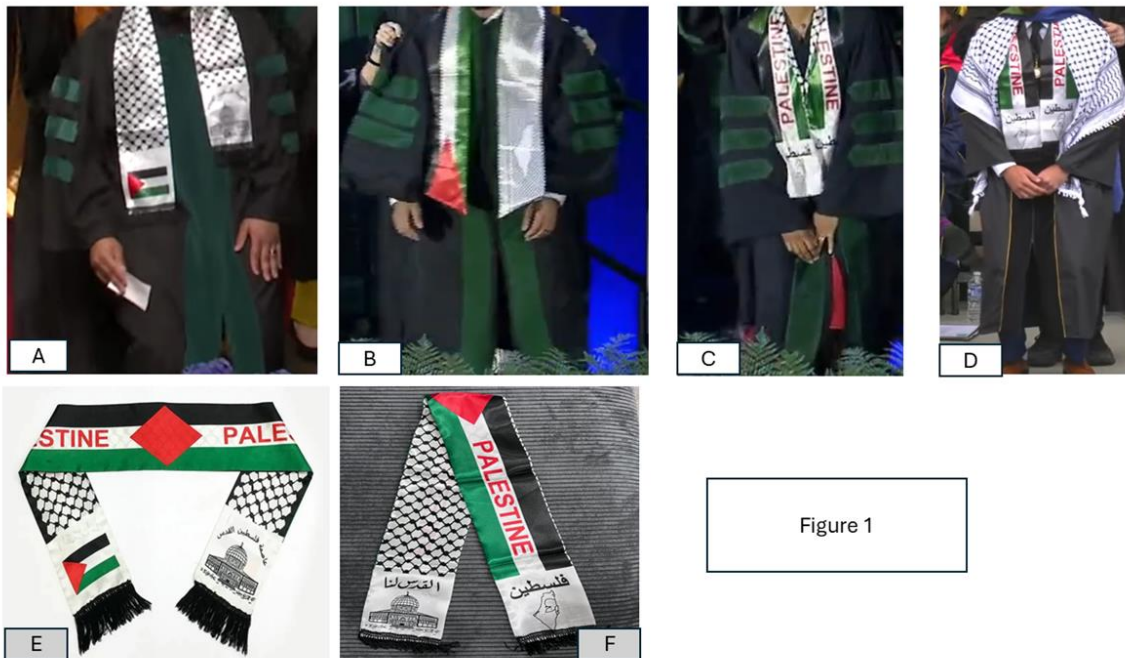
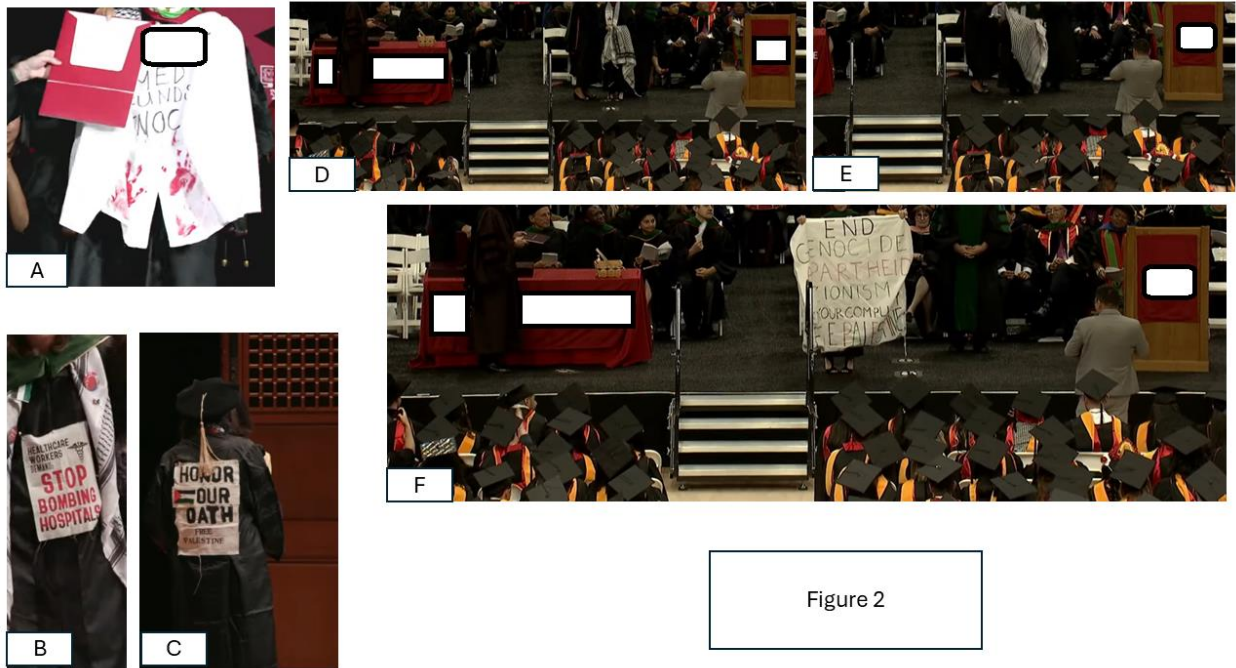


Figure 1

Figure 2: Examples of signage carried by medical students at commencement ceremonies of another set of three schools different from those in **Figure 1**. **2A** shows a student receiving her diploma whilst holding up to the audience a short white coat with red-stained palm prints with the coat containing the words “(name of school)_ Med funds genocide,” and **2B** presents two different signs worn by students over their gowns. **2D-F**, clockwise, a student carried a large

keffiyeh in violation of school policy (no carrying of anything permitted) onto the stage **D**, then unfurled the keffiyeh **E** to reveal the sign on the back of it **F**, which was then waved from side-to-side both at the point where the student is standing, and then the same actions, moments later standing next to the Dean of the medical school on the left of the picture. The sign reads “End genocide, apartheid, Zionism, end your complicity, free Palestine.”



School Random #	Class size	Stoles or keffiyehs (%)	Signs, buttons, and protests (%)
1	126	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
2	67	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
3	76	11 (14.5%)	3.0 (3.9%)
4	109	Not available	3.0 (2.8%)
5	142	8 (5.6%)	1.0 (0.7%)
6	170	10 (5.9%)	0 (0%)
7	182	10 (5.5%)	13.0 (7.1%)
8	181	9 (5%)	0 (0%)
9	141	Not available	Not available
10	110	Not available	Not available
11	112	1 (0.9%)	0 (0%)
12	135	0(0%)	0 (0%)
13	173	10 (5.8%)	39.0 (22.5%)
14	134	5 (3.7%)	0 (0%)
15	254	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
16	228	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
17	133	4 (3.0%)	0 (0%)
18	133	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
19	95	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

	20	144	4 (2.8)	0 (0%)
	21	104	1 (1.0%)	0 (0%)
	22	210	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	23	103	8 (7.8%)	0 (0%)
	24	92	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	25	168	7 (4.2%)	Not available
mean		140.9	4.0	2.7
SD		45.3	4.2	8.4
CI		123.2-158.5	2.2-5.8	0.8-6.2
totals for all				
students		3522	88	59
% of all students			2.5	1.7

Table 1: Students wearing antisemitic or offensive stoles, or keffiyehs, and those wearing buttons, carrying signs, or protesting verbally or with banners. Data in the two columns is shown as number and % of those in each graduating class, and mean, standard deviation (SD), and 95% confidence intervals (CI). Each of the top 25 schools was assigned a random number 1-25. The total number of students in the graduating classes was 3,522. Where complete videos were not obtained, data is shown as “not available,” although partial results were obtained from highlights for schools # 4 and 25.

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