

# [***Columbia's president rebuts claims she has allowed the university to become a hotbed of antisemitism***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTM-2JM1-JC5B-G0DX-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

April 17, 2024 Wednesday 9:36 PM GMT

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**Section:** DOMESTIC NEWS; STATE AND REGIONAL

**Length:** 1163 words

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**Dateline:** WASHINGTON, D.C.

**Body**

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Columbia University’s president took a firm stance against antisemitism in a congressional hearing on Wednesday, but she faced bruising criticism from Republicans who say her actions haven’t supported her words, especially when it comes to disciplining faculty and students accused of bias.

Nemat Shafik's visit to Capitol Hill was a reprise of a December hearing that led to [*the resignations of presidents*](https://apnews.com/article/harvard-president-claudine-gay-resigns-841575b89bcdc062cdf979e647a2539e) at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. It's part of a Republican campaign to investigate antisemitism at America's most prestigious universities since Hamas' Oct. 7 [*attack on Israel*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war).

After the other [*Ivy League presidents’ equivocation*](https://apnews.com/article/harvard-penn-mit-president-congress-intifada-193a1c81e9ebcc15c5dd68b71b4c6b71) led to weeks of backlash, Shafik focused her message on fighting antisemitism rather than protecting free speech.

“Antisemitism has no place on our campus, and I am personally committed to doing everything I can to confront it directly,” Shafik said in her opening comments.

On key questions, she took a more decisive stance than her Ivy League colleagues, who gave lawyerly answers when asked if calls for the genocide of Jews would violate campus policies. Asked the same question, Shafik and three other Columbia leaders responded definitively: yes.

But Shafik hedged on whether certain phrases invoked by some supporters of the Palestinians rise to harassment.

Rep. Lisa McClain, a Republican from Michigan, asked her if phrases such as “ [*from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free*](https://apnews.com/article/river-sea-israel-gaza-hamas-protests-d7abbd756f481fe50b6fa5c0b907cd49) ” or “long live intifada” are antisemitic.

“I hear them as such, some people don't,” Shafik said.

McClain posed the same question to David Schizer, who leads an antisemitism task force at Columbia. He said those phrases are antisemitic.

It was a shaky moment for an Ivy League president who otherwise dodged the gotcha questions that turned the previous hearing into a frenzy for Republicans, who cast elite schools as hotbeds of hatred toward Jews.

Unlike in December, much of the questioning on Wednesday focused on Columbia's handling of faculty who are accused of antisemitism. Given the protections offered by university tenure, disciplining faculty is a thorny question for universities whose professors are weighing in on the Israel-Hamas war.

Shafik was hammered on the issue by Rep. Elise Stefanik, a New York Republican and a driving force behind the hearings.

Stefanik asked about Mohamed Abdou, a visiting Arab studies professor who expressed support for Hamas on social media after Oct. 7. Shafik said she shared Stefanik's “repugnance” over Abdou’s comments, adding that he had been terminated.

“He is grading his students’ papers and will never teach at Columbia again,” she said.

“Mr. Abdou is not grading papers right now,” Stefanik later countered. She said she heard Abdou attended a pro-Palestinian demonstration at Columbia Wednesday morning, in apparent violation of the school’s new rules limiting protests to certain hours and locations.

Shafik was also grilled over Columbia's handling of Joseph Massad, a professor of modern Arab ***politics***, accused of calling the Oct. 7 attacks “awesome,” “astonishing,” “astounding” and “incredible.”

Shafik said Massad had been reprimanded and removed as chair of an academic review committee. When Stefanik revealed that a Columbia website still listed Massad as the committee chair, she demanded Shafik's commitment to remove him from the post.

“I think that would be — I think I would — yes,” Shafik said.

Massad is a tenured professor, which generally brings added protection against firing, including for expressing controversial opinions. When asked if Massad could lose his job, Shafik wouldn't give a clear answer.

“There are some very complex issues around tenure,” she said.

In a comment to the Associated Press, Massad denied being reprimanded. He said members of Congress distorted his comments, and he disputed praising the killing of 1,200 Jews. Massad said he was not removed as chair of the academic review committee and that his term ends in the coming weeks.

Columbia professor Marcel Agüeros, a leader at the college's chapter of the American Association of University presidents, expressed dismay at how much Shafik conceded to Republicans on faculty discipline.

“The university has processes, and those processes are intended to protect academic freedom,” he said. “Faculty whose speech is not necessarily what I would say myself, they have a right to that speech.”

Complaints of antisemitism and Islamophobia have been on the rise at the New York campus of 35,000 students, prompting the school to adopt new limits on demonstrations. Protests can be held only on weekdays at certain times and locations, with advance notice to school officials.

Some civil rights groups, students and faculty say the policy curbs free expression. But Shafik cited it as evidence that the school is serious about protecting students, saying 15 students have been suspended and six are on probation for breaches.

"I promise you, from the messages I’m hearing from students, they are getting the message that violations will have consequences,” she said.

Her vision clashes with one presented by Republicans in Congress and some Jewish students who say antisemitism goes unchecked at Columbia, citing a Jewish student who was beaten on campus while putting up posters of Israeli hostages, and protesters who chanted phrases that some consider a call for the genocide of Jews.

“The problem is, action on campus doesn’t match your rhetoric today,” said Rep. Aaron Bean, a Florida Republican. “Your students, their message is quite different. Their message is one of fear.”

Some Columbia students who support Palestinians were frustrated they were not allowed into the hearing.

“This is not an honest conversation that we are having today in this committee,” said Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Democrat from Minnesota who is Muslim, after speaking with the students.

The December hearing featured the Harvard and Penn presidents, as well as the leader of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. During [*heated questioning,*](https://apnews.com/article/harvard-penn-mit-president-congress-intifada-193a1c81e9ebcc15c5dd68b71b4c6b71) Stefanik asked them whether “calling for the genocide of Jews” would violate each university’s code of conduct.

[*Liz Magill,*](https://apnews.com/article/new-york-governor-antisemitism-colleges-israel-gaza-ae1294d644b3305cc51e8d9bb7252766) then-president of Penn, and Claudine Gay, then-president of Harvard, both said it would depend on the situation. MIT president Sally Kornbluth said she had not heard of anyone calling for the genocide of Jews on campus, and that speech “targeted at individuals, not making public statements,” would be considered harassment.

Almost immediately, the careful responses from the university presidents drew criticism from donors, alumni and politicians. Magill resigned soon after the hearing and Gay stepped down in January following accusations of plagiarism.

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Binkley reported from Los Angeles

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**Load-Date:** April 17, 2024

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