

# [***Opinion: As a Muslim American who went to Columbia, I feel the aftershock - and the opportunity - of this spring's protests***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C34-XGX1-DY7V-G128-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; When I was growing up, most of my South Asian friends and peers were pushed into medical careers. I was able to go in a different direction, initially attending law school, only to realize early in my first semester that a legal career wasn't what I wanted.

Coming from a literary and scholarly Pakistani-American family, I yearned to learn more about my faith. I wanted to challenge misperceptions about Islam. I wanted to teach and empower.

A year after graduating from college, I enrolled at Columbia University's Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies, eager to study with the many scholars who approached Islam on its own terms, with respect, rigor, nuance and a love of inquiry.

In the nearly decade and a half since I graduated with a master's degree, I've continued to draw on the remarkable education I received. That has included designing historical experiences immersing travelers in the Muslim legacy in Europe: A new kind of Sunday school for middle and high schoolers. And global leadership programs for young Muslim professionals from across the West, strongly influenced by the kind of creative and open-ended inquiry I often experienced at Columbia. That is why I found what transpired at Columbia University these last few months so profoundly disappointing.

The weeks of student protests (which continue at some campuses) should provoke us to reflect on the larger impact of this movement - especially at my alma mater, where the [*main commencement ceremony*](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/columbia-cancels-university-wide-commencement-ceremony-after-protests-2024-05-06/#:~:text=Columbia%20University%20cancels%20main%20graduation%20ceremony%20in%20wake%20of%20protests,-By%20Julia%20Harte&text=NEW%20YORK%2C%20May%206%20(Reuters,smaller%2C%20school%2Dbased%20events.), which had been scheduled for this week, was canceled. (Protesters and their supporters organized [*their own ceremony*](https://time.com/6979149/pro-palestinian-student-protesters-the-peoples-graduation/).)

The media line fed to the public about weeks of protests at Columbia - and the [*administrative crackdown*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/22/us/columbia-university-protests.html) that followed - has been selective at best. I know this as an alumnus, a parent with two kids on the verge of college and as someone who teaches young Americans, including high schoolers. I know adolescents and young adults are far more passionate, curious, creative and courageous than older adults sometimes casually assume.

America's universities are the envy of the world and are meant to be laboratories for democracy and engines of innovation, keeping our society democratic and vigorous, economically dynamic and forward-facing. But instead, it appears too many this spring have seemed intent on suffocating debate they don't endorse, rather than promoting and protecting the exchange of ideas.

I'm incensed by the same realities the student protesters are outraged by: Israel's occupation and brutalization of Palestinians with our country's active assistance. Columbia students have made clear that that's what drives their protests. What's less widely reported is [*how they are also driven*](https://cuapartheiddivest.org/demands) by double standards in how our leaders address Israeli and Palestinian issues.

When was the last time you heard a news report about anti-Arab or anti-Muslim animus on campuses? Where is the outcry for the pro-Palestinian students [*threatened with professional consequences*](https://cnn.com/.element/interactive/2024/05/letter-to-Shafik-from-Judges.pdf) only for protesting? Why, even as numerous students at Columbia and elsewhere have been [*doxxed, harassed and bullied*](https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/01/31/conservative-media-group-behind-doxxing-truck-returns-to-columbia-launches-new-website/), were no congressional hearings called?

Long before our protracted national conversation about antisemitism got underway, some Columbia faculty members have quite arguably [*crossed a line*](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/shai-davidai-columbia-protests.html) into anti-Palestinian agitation, with no apparent consequences. And at UCLA, [*pro-Israel demonstrators*](https://www.cnn.com./2024/05/16/us/ucla-student-protests-counterprotesters-invs/index.html) even attacked pro-Palestinian student encampments for hours. Police were [*nowhere to be seen*](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/05/03/us/ucla-protests-encampment-violence.html).

For months now, we've seen pro-Palestinian students, including Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims, as well as students of other backgrounds and faiths (including many Jewish students), held to different standards and demonized when they are in fact standing up for fundamental human, basic American and common civic values. There may be no better symbol of this than [*Columbia's President Minouche Shafik,*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/25/business/minouche-shafik-columbia-president/index.html) who last week was on the losing end of a [*no-confidence vote*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/16/us/university-of-washington-protests-antisemitic-graffiti/index.html) by faculty over her handling of the protests.

When Shafik was called to testify [*before a biased*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/22/us/politics/columbia-nemat-shafik-censure.html) congressional hearing, she faced a hard choice. Two of her fellow Ivy League president predecessors did not hold onto their jobs very long after appearing before the same House panel, some of whose members seemed gleeful at the prospect of taking down another.

In my view, Shafik capitulated. She told Republican lawmakers everything that they appeared to want to hear. But she did not have to capitulate. She could have [*questioned the dubious*](https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2024/04/17/live-updates-shafik-testifies-before-congress-on-columbias-handling-of-antisemitism-on-campus/), even dangerous assumptions inherent in the questions themselves. She could have taken a stand on principle, in support of students expressing their views in the best tradition of campus protest. She might have considered the blatant double standards at her and peer institutions.

She might have told lawmakers that all speech is free, or none is. She might have invited our national leaders to engage in a more difficult conversation - one which would have been less sensationalistic than the congressional hearing they held, but probably far more substantial.

Such a dialogue could have addressed how we balance free inquiry in a country of robust pluralism. It might also have raised the question about what it means to balance strong beliefs, academic rigor and mutual respect.

That's the kind of engagement we sorely need more of in this country. It's the kind of discussion a university president such as Shafik would have been uniquely positioned to lead. She capitulated to bad-faith interrogators [*after the collapse of days of talks, then invited heavily armed police onto campus. Somehow, she and*](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/columbia-university-urges-pro-palestinian-protesters-disperse-after-failed-talks-2024-04-29/) other authorities seemed more concerned with the purported unruliness of the protest than the horrors that prompted it.

Palestinians in this country, as well as pro-Palestinian demonstrators, have been shot at, menaced, struck with vehicles, merely for who they are or what they stand for. But there has been no congressional hearing about these crimes and hardly even acknowledgement in many quarters that these crimes have happened. That Shafik even had to appear before Congress is just another example of how deeply entrenched our double standards are.

Students aren't out of touch with America. A [*majority of Americans*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/642695/majority-disapprove-israeli-action-gaza.aspx) disapprove of Israeli actions in Gaza. Student protesters are confirming what more and more Americans cannot deny, even while many of our elites [*remain seemingly indifferent*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/12/12/biden-empathy-lacking-palestinians/). We might on reflection appreciate that it is better to see young Americans exceedingly committed to freedom, debate and challenging our hypocrisies than not.

That hardly means we are all going to agree on how to protest or on what approach is better - but we should all agree on the right to protest - and the responsibility of the protesters to push our country to do better.

Just a few weeks ago, I joined some 50 or so American Muslims and allies in Washington, DC, leaders and activists from diverse backgrounds, coming together to explore what it might mean to continue to advocate for our faith communities. That included continuing to hold our government to account for our role in Israel's war and protecting freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

There was a special level of interest in protecting our universities from governmental and elite interference, preserving the unique space campuses provide for hard conversations, political exploration and civic formation. Most of us were deeply disappointed by how our respective alma maters put select donors over institutional integrity. But the energy and engagement underscored the commitment to this cause.

We left inspired to continue standing up for the right to protest and leverage our resources to put pressure on these colleges and universities to maintain academic freedom, to uphold standards that [*do not privilege certain* ***politics*** *or positions*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/05/16/business-leaders-chat-group-eric-adams-columbia-protesters/) and to maintain and extend the opportunities our colleges had opened for us - a commitment I believe continues down to this present moment.

When Shafik arrived at those hearings, she faced some lawmakers who acted as if they believed universities, and those on campus who are allies of the Palestinians, were enemies of America.

But if Columbia students didn't care about their university and the values it claims to uphold, they wouldn't have risked so much with their protests. By the same token, if students didn't care about our country, they wouldn't protest so vocally against its policies.

Maybe these students are mirrors of America, revealing how much work we have left to do. But they also reveal that there is enough passion, commitment and courage that our causes are not lost. Our struggles are not pointless. A better future can be ours.

Opinion by Haroon Moghul

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