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NYC's public law school releases video of 'antisemitic' commencement speech

CUNY Law School speaker says Israel indiscriminately murders worshipers, claims 'investors' stifle criticism, in address colleges' Jewish partner said employed anti-Jewish tropes

By [LUKE TRESS](#) 27 May 2023



Fatima Mohammed speaks at CUNY School of Law (Youtube screenshot; used in accordance with clause 27a of the copyright law)

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The speech marked the second consecutive year that the law school’s commencement speaker dedicated much of their address to anti-Israel rhetoric, and comes amid a years-long running battle over alleged widespread antisemitism in the city college system.

Much of the dispute centers around when anti-Zionism crosses into antisemitism, and is part of a larger debate on US college campuses and in progressive circles.

The CUNY system has 25 colleges around New York’s five boroughs, with around 260,000 students and close to 20,000 faculty. It has long been part of the city’s social fabric.

The CUNY Law School is one of the system’s better-known institutions, and is a bastion of progressive and activist politics. The student body and faculty have both come out in support of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.

The law school's commencement ceremony on May 12 featured anti-Israel activist Fatima Mohammed as its keynote speaker. The school's commencement speaker is elected by the student body.

[In her speech](#), Mohammad repeatedly lashed Israel, linking the Jewish state to white supremacy, oppression, colonialism and violence.

“This is the law school that passed and endorsed BDS on a student and faculty level, recognizing that absent a critical imperialism settler colonialism lens, our work and the school's mission statement is void of value as Israel continues to indiscriminately rain bullets and bombs on worshipers, murdering the old, the young, attacking the funerals and graveyards as it encourages lynch mobs,” she said.

“We are the student body and faculty that fought back when the investor-focused administration attempted to cross the BDS picket line, saying loud and clear that Palestine can no longer be the exception to our pursuit of justice, that our morality will not be purchased by investors,” she said.



Illustrative: Anti-Israel, pro-Palestinian activists in New York City, May 15, 2021. (Luke Tress/Times of Israel)

Mohammad also said that CUNY “continues to train IDF soldiers” to carry out “violence globally,” blaming the school system for being “committed to its donors, not to its students.”

She repeatedly linked racism against Black Americans to Israel, and said Jewish New York Senator Chuck Schumer had “dignified” the killing of Jordan Neely, a Black man, on a New York City subway.

“May we rejoice in the corners of our New York City bedroom apartments and dining tables, may it be fuel for the fight against capitalism, racism, imperialism, and Zionism around the world,” she said in closing.

Mohammed is a member of CUNY Law’s chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, which has spearheaded BDS and other anti-Israel initiatives on campus.

During the commencement ceremony, the law school graduates also heckled New York City Mayor Eric Adams at the mention of his career on the police force, and turned their backs to Adams while he spoke to them.

The ceremony was closed to the press, and afterward, CUNY Law made the video non-public. CUNY’s central administration and CUNY Law did not respond to requests to make the video public earlier this month.

The law school made the video available online on Thursday, along with other past commencement events. Both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel groups had pressured the school to release the video.

After the commencement event, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York and the Anti-Defamation League condemned the speech. JCRC-NY had announced a new partnership with CUNY to boost Jewish life on campus the day before.

“Once again the CUNY Law School commencement speech by the student body elected commencement speaker was incendiary anti-Israel propaganda,” JCRC-NY said in a statement.

“This particular commencement speech cast aside the principle of seeking truth in a shameless attempt to vilify CUNY’s constructive engagement with Israel and the New York Jewish community and to denigrate Israel’s supporters on campus while trading in antisemitic tropes,” it said. “We strongly encourage CUNY to revise its guidelines surrounding commencement speeches.”

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— ADL New York / New Jersey (@ADL_NYNJ) [May 12, 2023](#)

The Anti-Defamation League said, “Graduations should be a place for all — not a time to denigrate students’ identities.”

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Last year, activist Nerdeen Kiswani dedicated much of her CUNY Law [commencement speech](#) to anti-Israel rhetoric. Kiswani is a leader of Within Our Lifetime, a pro-Palestinian group, and was the president of CUNY Law’s Students for Justice in Palestine.

Within Our Lifetime and Students for Justice in Palestine collaborate on campus initiatives, and hold regular street protests that call for an end to the Jewish state, a “global intifada” and the ostracization of Zionists. Kiswani and

Mohammed are regular speakers at the events. The groups refuse to speak to “Zionist media.”

A member of Within Our Lifetime, Saadah Masoud, [was imprisoned](#) this year on federal hate crimes charges [for beating a Jewish man](#) at one of the group’s events. Masoud and co-conspirators [plotted attacks](#) on Jews ahead of the event and told each other to refer to their targets as “Zionists,” not Jews, apparently to avoid allegations of antisemitism.



Illustrative: Anti-Israel protesters call for an intifada at a protest in New York City, September 17, 2021. (Luke Tress/Flash90)

Antisemitism has been a growing concern on CUNY campuses in recent years, as anti-Israel activities became more prominent and anti-Jewish crime [surged in New York City](#). Jewish groups and [city officials](#) have accused the administration of tolerating anti-Jewish activity on campuses, and students have reported intense harassment.

The US Department of Education [opened an investigation](#) into allegations of widespread harassment of Jewish students at CUNY’s Brooklyn College. The federal agency has launched a number of other similar probes on US

campuses, with many focusing on whether anti-Zionism amounts to antisemitism.

The CUNY faculty union has also [passed anti-Israel resolutions](#), sparking backlash from Jewish professors.

The school system has taken some steps to improve campus life for Jews.

Earlier this month, CUNY partnered with JCRC-NY and the Foundation to Combat Antisemitism in a campaign against anti-Jewish racism.

“We will not waver in our dedication to fighting antisemitism, and we want our Jewish students, faculty and staff to know they are valued and protected at our university,” Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez said.

The college system also announced a new advisory council on Jewish life.

A campus group representing Zionist professors and students [lashed the announcements](#) as a fig leaf and called for more concrete steps, including that CUNY officially adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which covers some forms of Israel criticism.

Late last year, CUNY [committed to a series of measures](#) to combat antisemitism on its campuses, including a partnership with Hillel, an online portal to report discrimination and \$750,000 for programming to combat hate.