

Summer is Around the Corner: What Now for Campus Protests?

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The reverberations of Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack in Israel and the Israeli military's ensuing operations in Gaza have been felt far beyond the Middle East. Across the U.S., pro-Palestinian and anti-war protests have persisted for the past seven months, as have growing antisemitism and harassment, including on college and university campuses.

In April and early May, many of these protests escalated, with students pitching tents on campus lawns and in some cases, taking over buildings. This sweep of pro-Palestinian activism is one of the largest and highest-profile student movements witnessed in the U.S. in recent history. While commencement and summer break have started or are around the corner for most institutions, the drivers and demands of the demonstrations remain, raising the question of what happens next.

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While summer may quell some protests, the drivers of demonstrations persist

While the end of the school year may suppress some protests, with students returning to their hometowns, traveling to summer destinations and settling into their summer internships, jobs and other plans, the drivers of many of the student protests remain:

- **Continued war in Gaza:** As of this assessment, the war in Gaza continues, with ceasefire negotiations at a stalemate and Israel commencing military operations in Rafah. While this incursion is thus far seen as a limited operation, concerns remain that a full ground invasion of Rafah is imminent if a ceasefire agreement is not reached soon. On-the-ground realities in Gaza, where the death toll is currently over 30,000, as well as the detailed coverage of the war across social media platforms, are likely to continue to motivate many students to continue their anti-war and pro-Palestinian activism, regardless of whether or not they are still on campus.
- **Divestment demands:** A key demand of student protesters has been divestiture from companies with business operations in Israel or companies that manufacture weapons systems or military equipment sold to the Israeli government. At some universities, student protesters have come to agreements with administrators around divestment policies, while at others, any such demands have faced strong objections from administrators, alumni and donors. Similarly, other student demands have included ending any academic partnerships with Israeli institutions or publicly condemning the Israeli military's continued operations in Gaza. A lack of resolution or dialogue related to these demands will likely continue to motivate student activism focused on the war.
- **Non-student protest participants:** Finally, protests at campuses have included the involvement of non-student groups, many with their own motivations and objectives for participating in the demonstrations. These motivations range from opportunistic media exposure to serve personal interests to a desire to create chaos and violent disorder.

Regardless of motive or intent, non-student protest participants will want the protests to continue and therefore will seek to identify more opportunities to stoke the flames.

Protests are likely to continue well into the summer, though some may disperse

Given these drivers, until a ceasefire agreement is reached and enforced, protests are likely to continue, though they may move from college campuses to city centers instead. While many students may be deterred from demonstrating given recent arrests and suspensions, or by their summer plans or campus closers, others may continue to protest in their hometowns or the cities where their summer jobs and internships are located. Large, metropolitan cities that are home to a high number of academic institutions, government buildings or popular destinations for summer internships are thus likely to continue to witness demonstrations, many of which may now be further invigorated by incoming or additional student participation.

Upcoming party conventions may serve as venues for both peaceful and violent demonstrations

The upcoming Republican and Democratic Party Conventions, scheduled to take place on July 15-18 in Milwaukee, WI and August 19-22 in Chicago, IL respectively, may also serve as venues for large-scale protests. Pressure from House Republicans for colleges to stem violence and disorder at campus protests, including the recently enacted House bill that empowers the Department of Education to crack down on antisemitism on college campuses and related investigative panels, may serve as a rallying point for students and drive protests to Milwaukee for the Republican National Convention. Similarly, a myriad of protest groups, including student demonstrators from across the country, may view the Democratic National Convention in Chicago the following month as an opportunistic target for protests against the Biden administration's support of Israel's military operations in Gaza.

Failure to secure a lasting ceasefire, the proliferation of propaganda and disinformation, and continued calls for action will indicate sustained activism and escalation

A series of issues will likely play a role in sustaining and escalating tensions in the months ahead. These include the interplay of developments on the ground in Gaza and Israel, the proliferation of propaganda and disinformation related to the conflict, and the relentless tensions between and calls for actions from different stakeholders and threat actors.

- **Failure to secure a lasting ceasefire:** As noted above, as of this assessment, the war in Gaza continues, with concerns of further escalation and wider conflagration far from dissipated. Rising civilian casualties and displacement, as well as the dire humanitarian conditions in Gaza, are likely to continue to drive anti-war and pro-Palestinian protests around the world. If ceasefire proposals fail and the war carries on throughout the summer months, students are likely to return to campus in late August and September ready to revive protests and engage in related activism. This will be especially probable if the students' divestiture demands have not been addressed, if attempts for substantive dialogue were not met before the spring semester was over, or if administrators called in law enforcement agencies to clear out encampments.
- **U.S. policy and support for Israeli military operations:** Relatedly, continued support from the Biden administration and members of Congress for the Israeli government will likely also drive protests. As of this assessment, the Biden administration reportedly paused an arms shipment to Israel to prevent U.S. weapons from being used in Rafah. There is also growing momentum among Democratic members of Congress who support suspending certain transfers of offensive weapons to Israel in order to deter a full-scale invasion of Rafah, as well as conditioning further assistance to Israel by requiring increased humanitarian aid flows into Gaza. However, how effective any of these efforts will be in changing or deterring the Biden administration's current policies and support remains to be seen. This, in turn, will also likely continue to mobilize pro-Palestinian activism efforts.

- **Domestic and global pro-Palestinian activism efforts:** Student movements will likely continue to draw inspiration and guidance from other domestic and global pro-Palestinian and anti-war efforts, including organizing and mobilizing tactics. An example of this includes Columbia University's encampments who inspired similar tents to appear at other campuses across the country. Escalating or innovative tactics by pro-Palestinian groups may, therefore, indicate how student groups may act once they return to their campuses in the fall. The continued coverage, including across social media platforms, of conditions in Gaza will further contribute to these efforts.
- **University policies and action around other pro-Palestinian activity:** How university administrators respond regarding other pro-Palestinian or campus free-speech efforts, including guest speakers and events, the formation and disbandment of student groups, and communication from or actions taken by key alumni or donors may also serve as further motivations for student protest activity. New testimony or commentary from college administrators may further drive renewed protest activity once campuses reopen.
- **Continued tensions between Jewish and pro-Palestinian groups:** While the summer break will physically disperse students, any lingering tensions between Jewish and pro-Palestinian groups will likely continue to simmer virtually. Escalating commentary and dialogue online may, in turn, serve as drivers for inflamed tensions when students return to their colleges and universities. This may particularly be the case if administrators have not addressed antisemitism, harassment and threats, leaving members of the Jewish student body feeling just as vulnerable as they did before the summer break. Similarly, harassment and threats directed at students espousing pro-Palestinian support must also be effectively addressed. At the same time, the failure of administrators to clearly outline and enforce consequences for threats or harassment to members of the student body will also contribute to an environment where tensions between student groups may persist.

- **Propaganda, disinformation and calls for action by violent extremists:** Since the October 7 attacks, multiple law enforcement and intelligence agencies have noted the consistent dissemination of extremist propaganda focused on attacking Jewish targets. While developments related to Israeli-Palestinian relations have long been a rallying cry for a variety of foreign terrorist organizations and violent extremist actors, the current war in Gaza has provided renewed fervor to some of these calls. This may subsequently motivate a range of threat actors, including those participating in student-led protests to seize on any protest activity to ferment further chaos and violence. Similarly, propaganda and disinformation shared by these actors and other extremist groups and foreign adversaries may also drive inflamed commentary online and physical confrontations.
- **National political temperature across polarizing issues:** This spring's protests took place amid a polarized election year with former president/ current presumed Republican presidential candidate Donald J. Trump currently standing trial in New York City and controversial topics being debated at the Supreme Court and elsewhere and as part of our national discourse. All these factors ensure that college students will return to campus this fall amid a very politically charged environment.

Return to campus is likely to be fraught with tensions, though this spring's protests offer a blueprint for the next academic year

While summer may provide a reprieve from campus demonstrations and encampments, it may also provide returning students with the time and space needed to reevaluate their tactics, re-organize and strategize further action for the return to campus. The summer months may also allow students to connect with and learn new tactics from more organized protest movements. If the drivers and motivations for pro-Palestinian activism persist, students may return to campus with renewed motivation to engage in campus protests and activism.

Recent experiences with campus protests this spring offer university administrators a multitude of lessons learned and can serve as a blueprint of best practices for the next academic year. As many universities experienced this spring, the challenge of campus demonstrations included managing a coordinated response that proactively considered the reactions of significant stakeholder groups. Therefore, college and university administrators would be remiss not to take advantage of the summer months to comprehensively and proactively plan for the return to campus, particularly by incorporating the following best practices:

- **Engaging in substantive dialogues with students:** Universities that have come to successful agreements with students and where students have largely protested peacefully or disbanded encampments on their own have focused on engaging students in substantive dialogues to understand their concerns. As noted above, many of the drivers for protests are likely to remain come the fall. It is, therefore, critical that institutions think through and enact ways to foster and facilitate credible and open dialogue with students. Regular and robust communications between administrators, the student body and other key stakeholders, such as alumni and donors is a critical component of such continued dialogue.
- **Addressing threats immediately, while integrating de-escalation strategies as part of crisis preparedness and response:** This spring's student protests also took place amid heightened antisemitism and other bias and harassment incidents on campuses. While many campus demonstrations have been peaceful, some protests have been violent and members of the student body, particularly Jewish students, have reported unprecedented antisemitism, harassment and threats. When students return to campus, it will behoove administrators to ensure that all threats and harassment complaints are effectively addressed and that de-escalation strategies are consistently integrated into crisis response mechanisms.

- **Proactively considering and evaluating new signposts of escalation:** In the face of continued disruption, university administrators will require truly anticipatory and tailored insights into their unique campus environments. Although there is abundant commentary and analysis about the war and the experiences at academic institutions abound, generic assessments will no longer suffice. Instead, college and university administrators need tailored analysis, coupled with robust scenario planning that considers clear indicators of potentially known escalating or newly emerging issues and their associated impacts. This will ensure they are appropriately evaluating and responding to student protests and any related disruptions on their campuses come the next academic year.

Anticipatory analysis of potential indicators of escalation and robust scenario planning are key to effective crisis preparedness in light of these unprecedented times. Teneo's Risk Advisory team welcomes the opportunity to speak with academic institutions and discuss how our deep subject matter expertise, threat-focused approach rooted in structured analytical techniques, and robust risk and crisis management experience can help them prepare for the next academic year.

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