

STATE

Abbott's condemnation of UT protesters contrasts with his 2019 stance on campus free speech

Gov. Greg Abbott and others see antisemitism at the root of the UT protests. But is that an inaccurate oversimplification?



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In a 2019 post on social media, Gov. Greg Abbott made a show of signing into law a measure that he said would protect the freedom of speech at institutions of higher learning across Texas, which the Republican warned was then under attack.

"Some colleges are banning free speech on college campuses," Abbott said in a 29-second video post on the platform then called Twitter. "Well, no more, because I'm about to sign a law that protects free speech on college campuses in Texas."

That tweet was resurrected Wednesday after Texas Department of Public Safety troopers, acting on Abbott's orders, aggressively arrested dozens of demonstrators at the University of Texas during a peaceful protest in support of Palestinian rights and against the Israeli military's bombardment of Gaza in reprisal for the Oct. 7 attacks on the Jewish state by Hamas, a Palestinian militant organization.

Even as posts such as "Free speech for me but not for thee" by U.S. Rep. Greg Casar, D-Austin, spread virally across the platform now called X that deplored the DPS show of force, a defiant Abbott signaled his support for putting an end to the demonstration, which organizers described as having a "peaceful" intent though it was carried out despite UT, a state supported institution, saying the protest was against its rules.

"Arrests being made right now & will continue until the crowd disperses," Abbott said on X about three hours into the mass demonstration at one of the state's flagship universities.

"These protesters belong in jail."

The governor's forceful words were hailed by national figures in his party, who contrasted them with Abbott's Democratic counterparts in other states who have taken a less aggressive stance with the recent wave of pro-Palestinian demonstrations at universities nationwide.

"This is what leadership looks like," posted U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-New York, who chairs the U.S. House Republican Conference. "Instead of letting the antisemitic pro-Hamas mob take over, (Abbott) is taking action and sending a clear message."

Abbott, too, sought to link the demonstrations, which included several Jewish students among its supporters, as antisemitic. But many demonstrators and their supporters said Abbott and others are falsely conflating the desire for a Palestinian homeland and the protests against the policies of Israeli leaders and its military forces with being hostile to the Jewish people.

Austin resident Bassel Tizani, whose son was among those arrested at the protest, said the demonstrators were not motivated by prejudice.

"Freedom of speech, human rights, that's what we stand for," he told the American-Statesman. "My kids asked me yesterday, they wanted to participate. I fully supported them because they're just expressing their opinions peacefully and just want to say there is an oppressed people and we want to stand with them. "We don't have anything against Jews. We have problems with occupying land. We have problems with people stealing people's land."

The irony of Abbott's 2019 tweet was not lost on Jawab Rasul, imam of the Islamic Center of Brushy Creek in Cedar Park.

"And now (Abbott's) the one who's calling these people criminals and saying that they belong in jails and they should be expelled," Rasul told the Statesman. "What's even sadder is that these people are being arrested and demonized, being called names, while they are calling for an end to genocide, while the people who are actually committing the genocide are receiving our money and our taxpayer dollars and 30,000-plus people have been killed."

Cal Jillson, a political science professor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, said the response by Abbott and the DPS troopers at UT dovetails with the governor's hawkish approach to border security, which has made the Texan a national political force. And it plays into what Republicans hope will be a defining thread in the 2024 election cycle as it swings into high gear ahead of this summer's national conventions, Jillson said.

"It's part of a broader pattern across the country on the Republican side from Trump on down, the belief that law and order will be one of the themes that will help them in the coming elections," Jillson said. "That standing for law and order with scruffy students on the other side of the barricade is good for your electoral prospects."

But Jillson, who was a college freshman in 1968 during campus unrest rooted in the opposition to the Vietnam War, said the pro-Palestinian demonstrations have not yet risen to the level of a national crisis.

"I think there is always a danger of overplaying your hand," Jillson said. "Whether it's at the border or ... claiming that UT is spiraling out of control. If people are watching, they know that those are overstatements."

Jeremi Suri, a UT professor of public affairs and history, said Abbott and others are overplaying their hand when it comes to branding the campus protest as being rooted in antisemitism. In the second half of the governor's quote about sending protesters to jail, Abbott said: "Antisemitism will not be tolerated in Texas. Period. Students joining in hate-filled, antisemitic protests at any public college or university in Texas should be expelled."

Suri said he observed Wednesday's demonstration at UT for about an hour. He described himself as "a proud Jew" and avowed opponent of antisemitism. He said the governor's comment and others like them do little to advance what should be a serious conversation about prejudice and bigotry.

"I did not hear a single antisemitic statement (during) the whole time," Suri said. "And I'm Jewish; I'm sensitive to antisemitic comments. I'm against antisemitism. There was no antisemitism among that group of students — nothing being expressed at that moment."

"It does a real disservice to Jews like me," he added, "because we have to be concerned about real antisemitism. And if we're crying wolf and we're saying there's antisemitism, and he's in places where it's not, then we're not paying attention to where it is."

Suri said contrary to Abbott's statements, the demonstrators' criticism of Israel's tactics is not necessarily a condemnation of the longtime U.S. ally and an attack on American Jews.

"I'll tell you where I stand," he said. "I believe Israel has the right to defend itself, but I believe Israel has gone way beyond the legitimate use of force, and I believe Israel has committed war crimes in Gaza. But I'm a proud believer in a Jewish homeland. But I'm very

critical of Israel because I think what Israel has done is wrong and also ineffective. That's not antisemitism at all."

Suri also noted that the cries of antisemitism used to describe the campus demonstrators contrast with the somewhat muted response to reports of influential Texas Republicans meeting with self-avowed Nazi sympathizer and antisemite Nick Fuentes in Fort Worth last year.

"We're attacking the wrong people for political reasons," Suri said. "And we're letting the real antisemites continue to do their work."

Statesman staff writer Bayliss Wagner contributed to this report.