

U.S. university ties to weapons contractors under scrutiny amid genocidal war against Gaza



Protesters set up a tent encampment in front of Sproul Hall on the University of California, Berkeley, campus [Getty Images via AFP]

Los Angeles, May 14 (RHC)-- As the war in Gaza enters its eighth month, Israel's military campaign, one of the most destructive in modern history, has killed nearly 35,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children.

The death toll, as well as the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, has many progressive and anti-war activists in the United States critical of their country's role in the war.

The US has long been Israel's closest ally, supplying the country with about \$3.8 billion each year in military aid. Critics have blasted that support, as well as the billions of dollars in additional assistance used to bolster the war since its start in October.

On U.S. college campuses, though, the pushback is especially fierce, as students question their universities' relationships with weapons manufacturers and other companies with ties to Israel's military.

"These are supposedly social justice-oriented institutions, but their actions say entirely differently," said Sinqi Chapman, a freshman at Pomona College, a liberal arts institution in Claremont, California.

Chapman was among the student protesters arrested last month for setting up a pro-Palestinian encampment on school grounds. The demonstration was part of an effort to force the college to sever its ties with Israel and any companies that support its military campaign in Gaza. "Eventually we will look back on this and see that we were on the right side of history," Chapman said.

"And the administration will have blood on their hands for waiting 209 days and counting into a genocide to respond to student, faculty and staff demands for divestment."

For decades, institutions of higher education in the United States have collaborated with the country's defence and aerospace sectors, the largest such industries in the world. Concerns about the implications have lingered for decades, too. In 1961, for instance, former President Dwight Eisenhower warned of the dangers of the "military-industrial complex" entering the academic sphere.

"Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity" in university research, he said in a speech.

Daniel Bessner, a professor of international studies at the University of Washington, told Al Jazeera that the Cold War set the stage for relationships between universities and military contractors to flourish.

When the Soviet Union launched the world's first artificial satellite, Sputnik, in 1957, the event forced the U.S. to confront the possibility it could fall behind its rivals' technological achievements. So the U.S. Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958, to put universities on a "war footing". Lawmakers found that funding for higher education could win greater political support if it was promoted as enhancing the country's military and technological prowess.

Bessner also notes that President Eisenhower signed the act into law, despite the misgivings he would later voice. Money from the Pentagon began pouring into universities and research institutions.

That entanglement between academics and the military became particularly prominent in California, a state known for its mild weather and its defence and aerospace sectors. The state's Office of Business and Economic Development estimated the defence industry alone brings in more than \$158 billion a year, as of fiscal year 2021.

"Blue skies are good for two things: filming movies and flying planes," Bessner said.

But California was also a hotbed for student activism, a tradition that continues to this day.

Chapman, the Pomona College freshman, said she drew inspiration from a long history of protests when she took a leadership role in her campus's encampment. In the past, for instance, students have organized against the war in Vietnam, U.S. support for apartheid South Africa and the Iraq War.

"The only reason that students are protesting is because our institutions are aiding and abetting genocide in Gaza, in the same way that in the past they were funding apartheid in South Africa," Chapman told Al Jazeera. "We are following the courageous students before us who dared to challenge their school's investments in war."

Many student demonstrators have zeroed in on their schools' multimillion-dollar endowment funds as a target for their activism. Those financial endowments often use investments in a range of industries, including defense, to ensure the campus can fund its operations over the long term.

But while endowment funds are often at the centre of calls for divestment, activists say that collaborations between universities and defence companies can come in myriad forms. Those ties are especially prevalent in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) departments, where activists say weapons and aerospace companies wield influence through research projects, recruitment, job fairs and school donations.

At Harvey Mudd College, a STEM-focused school in southern California, a participant in the student group Mudders Against Murder told Al Jazeera such influence is rarely linked directly to weapons production.

"A lot of it is masked as something more neutral-sounding, like aerospace. They aren't advertising the fact that they make weapons," said the participant, who declined to give their name due to concerns of retaliation.

"The school prides itself as producing 'socially conscious scientists', but you're never encouraged to think about the role you'll be playing if you go work at one of these companies."

The engineering and sciences centre at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB), for example, features ties with the defence contractor Raytheon as a "success story" on its website.

Weapons companies such as Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, Boeing and Lockheed Martin are also listed on a website of the university's corporate affiliates program. All but Lockheed Martin were included on a list of companies that cumulatively donated \$1 million to the university in the 2022-2023 fiscal year.

Raytheon did not respond to an inquiry from Al Jazeera about cooperation with US universities, but weapons contractors have defended such connections as mutually beneficial partnerships that offer students valuable experience while advancing scientific research.

Not everyone trusts those motivations, though, and schools across the country have faced calls to distance themselves from weapons manufacturers and government defence operations.

"A lot of graduate students were asking themselves what their response should be to the genocide in Palestine," Isabel Kain, an astronomy graduate student at the University of California at Santa Cruz, told Al Jazeera.

She organizes with the group Researchers Against War, which encourages graduate students to mobilise against ties between academic institutions and the military. "The Palestinian Federation of Trade Unions issued a call for workers to disrupt weapons deliveries, including military funding and research, and we thought, as workers at these universities, this is something we can use our labour to disrupt." Kain added that the increased unionisation of graduate students has provided them with more power to exert their demands.

Starting on Monday, UAW 4811, a union representing about 48,000 graduate student workers in California, will vote to authorise a strike in response to university crackdowns on pro-Palestine protesters.

In recent weeks, police have been called in to break up protest encampments at schools like the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), leading to a harsh crackdown on demonstrators and dozens of arrests. The encampment was previously attacked by a pro-Israel crowd wielding metal pipes and mace as law enforcement largely stood by.

The union's vote aims to send the message to school administrators that the law enforcement action violated students' free speech rights and that universities should instead engage with the demands of the protesters.

"We're in a very different moment, because graduate students are unionised to a much greater extent," said Kain. "That gives us leverage that wasn't previously available."

The tensions between students and campus military ties stand to go beyond the present-day war in Gaza, though. Analysts say investments on college campuses can be seen as part of a larger effort by the military and related industries to embed themselves in academic, cultural, scientific and political institutions.

Access to universities, they explain, can buy companies access to young professionals who are set to enter any number of fields. "Wherever you turn, you can see the influence of these companies, from think tanks and universities to video games and popular films," said Benjamin Freeman, the director of the Democratizing Foreign Policy programme at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a U.S.-based think tank.

"These are enormous industries, and when it comes to college campuses, especially in STEM, it has a huge influence directing talent."

Freeman questions how young students might be shaped by early professional encounters with defence and aerospace companies – and how those companies' ideals might mould their contributions to society as a whole. "Instead of a young, promising student going to work on green energy, for example, they're being directed towards companies for whom weapons development is their largest source of revenue," Freeman explained.

"To tell a young, idealistic college student that they can come work for you and do exciting research that will make a difference in the world when, in fact, they are more likely to be working on weapons – that's a pretty nasty bait and switch."

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