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LINDA BLACKFORD

UK professor's call for war on Israel shows free speech, civil rights tensions | Opinion

By **Linda Blackford**

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Ramsi Woodcock, a professor at the University of Kentucky Rosenberg School of Law



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On July 1, Ramsi Woodcock was promoted to full professor at the University of Kentucky Rosenberg College of Law, where he has taught since 2018, mostly focusing on business and antitrust.

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On July 18, he was informed that he was suspended from teaching and banned from campus for remarks he made at a conference calling for the destruction of Israel. He had also created a website called “Antizionist Legal Studies Movement” that contains [a petition](#) calling for “every country in the world to make war on Israel immediately and until such time as Israel has submitted permanently and unconditionally to the government of Palestine everywhere from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.”

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Officials said they would start an investigation into whether Woodcock had created a hostile environment for Jewish people on campus. He is still being paid; the university says he’s been reassigned.

That same day, UK President Eli Capilouto sent out a campuswide message about the suspension, and very quickly afterward, conservative members of the GOP applauded the move.

In his message, Capilouto referenced the online petition, calling the views “repugnant.”

Although UK protects academic freedom central to the creation of knowledge, he wrote, “We also foster a community where everyone can find a home, can feel a sense of safety and well-being and can, as a result, have the opportunity to thrive.”

The case quickly got national attention, including from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which hired local attorney **Joe Childers** to represent Woodcock during the investigation.

“Any time you see a university punishing a professor for speech outside the classroom, that’s always going to raise our concerns from a First Amendment perspective,” said Graham Piro, FIRE’s Faculty Legal Defense Fund fellow.

In his email, Capilouto acknowledged the tension between the First Amendment and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color and national origin anywhere that receives federal funding.

“But, critically, when those values are in tension with each other, we are resolved and resolute about working quickly and thoughtfully to seek answers that protect our people while honoring our mission to advance this state in all that we do,” he wrote.



University of Kentucky President Eli Capilouto Ryan C. Hermens rhermens@herald-leader.com

But Capilouto left out another tension, one that makes this case so vexing.

And that is of politics: from a conservative supermajority in Frankfort determined to root out what it sees as antisemitism on college campuses to a presidential administration sworn to eradicate leftist ideals and pro-Palestinian [campus protests](#) from academia [using the lever of federal research funding](#) to do so.

FIRE, which started its work two decades ago mostly defending the free speech rights of conservative academics, [has now turned](#) to representing the liberalism it once fought, including fighting the deportations of pro-Palestinian students who protested against the war in Gaza.

“Two things can be true at once,” Piro said. “The First Amendment is always a nuisance to people in power, no matter the political party. And we can acknowledge that a lot of what’s happening right now is really concerning.”



Pro-Palestinian protesters set up a tent encampment during a demonstration in front of Sproul Hall on the UC Berkeley campus in Berkeley, California, on Sunday. Justin Sullivan Getty Images/TNS

Academic freedom and the First Amendment

For the past few years, Woodcock has taught one seminar in international law, and every year, one student wants to do a project on Palestine.

“I don’t share my views on that,” he said in a recent interview with the Herald-Leader. “I think it’s very important for teachers not to indoctrinate their students. And as far as I know, there have been no student complaints.”

The course sent Woodcock down an intellectual inquiry about the role of colonization in the Middle East conflict, which led him to the conclusion that Palestine should overthrow its colonizer, Israel, by the same forceful means used in other colonial conflicts throughout history.

That’s when he started posting about his views on a listserv run by the Association of American Law Schools, and created the website.

It’s increasingly mainstream to question U.S. involvement in helping Israel destroy Gaza in retaliation for the Hamas attack of Oct. 7, 2023. An [Economist/YouGov survey](#) released on Aug. 5 found a plurality of voters thinks that Israel’s continued attacks on Gaza are unjustified, while only 27% are supportive of Prime Minister Netanyahu, and 84% favor an immediate ceasefire.

But calling for the destruction of Israel is, by any U.S. standard, radical.

Capilouto said Woodcock’s petition could be “interpreted as as antisemitic in accordance with state and federal guidance, by which he means UK regulations that

adopt the [definition of antisemitism](#) adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

That's also the definition used by Kentucky Senate Resolution 67 in 2021 and Senate Resolution 55 earlier this year, which was directly aimed at preventing antisemitism on campuses.

However, the reason both those acts are resolutions and not laws is because of the First Amendment issues inherent in the IHRA definition, which says, "Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

More and more regulatory bodies are relying on this definition, said FIRE's Piro.

"It's been our position for a while that using this definition as a legal standard is way too broad," he said.

"It opens the door to a lot of investigations of speech that is critical of Israel (rather than antisemitic). This was perhaps done with good intentions, but in reality they are just restricting speech on campus."

Because of the tenets of academic freedom, faculty members have an extra layer of freedom of speech, so long as it is clear they are not speaking for the institution, but as part of their work. And as long as they are not creating hostile environments around them.

"That is the question that has been raised," said UK spokesman Jay Blanton. "And that is what an investigation, from an expert, outside counsel, will help the university determine."

But Woodcock and his team are also concerned about the impartiality of that expert, outside counsel. UK chose to go well outside Kentucky to find an investigator, landing upon [Farnaz Farkish Thompson](#), a higher education expert with McGuireWoods in Washington, D.C

[Thompson represented the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors](#) when, in concert with Trump's Department of Justice, it forced the resignation of President Jim Ryan over alleged delays in getting rid of diversity efforts at UVA. Thompson is also credited with being [a contributor to the Heritage Foundation's 2025 Project](#), which has proven to be a blueprint for policy in the second Trump administration.

A fine line between criticism and incitement

Is Woodcock criticizing Israel or inciting violence?

For Jonathan Miller, a Jewish Democrat who chairs Gov. Beshear's antisemitism task force, it's most certainly the latter.

"I strongly support what the university has done," he told me. "I am a passionate defender of First Amendment and support the peaceful protest of Israel. The nature of college should be about hearing both sides of issues.

"But what I think is actionable is a call for war, a call for violence against Israel — I think that does threaten safety and security of folks on campus, and I think it's wise to investigate this."

As an example of how complicated the issue is, Miller is also concerned about Trump's attempts to shackle higher education.

"Using antisemitism as a front to go after what should be protected free speech and use it as a lever to reshape academia is entirely inappropriate," he said. "As someone who believes there has been a rise in antisemitism, I don't appreciate when it's used as a tool to go after other folks who don't fall into these guidelines."

But for Republican activist Michael Frazier, who founded the Kentucky Student Rights Coalition, the Woodcock case shows how much UK has caved to political pressure.

"Criticism of Israel — or any foreign government — is protected under the First Amendment. Those who disagree are free to respond with their own speech, but government entities cannot suppress it," he wrote in [a recent Herald-Leader guest column](#).

In a subsequent statement, Frazier said the case showed UK playing politics rather than protecting academic freedom. "While I personally find Professor Woodcock's views immoral and repugnant, the university's actions appear less about principle and more about politics," he said.

The American Association of University Professors have been the most stalwart defenders of academic freedom since its founding in 1915; the UK chapter has not yet made a formal statement, but chapter director Jennifer Cramer said, "It appears that his academic freedom has been violated."

One of Woodcock's possible supporters would have been the UK Faculty Senate, but it was abolished last year by the Capilouto administration, ending shared governance at Kentucky's flagship university.

"Personally, I think this is all connected," Cramer said. "This is one more case where the administration is chipping away at faculty autonomy."

Woodcock's fate will be first determined by UK's investigation, and will no doubt end up in court. In some ways, UK is in an impossible situation, trapped between the traditional liberal values of academic freedom and intellectual inquiry and a state and federal government now [determined to punish them](#).

But this issue is important, not because of Woodcock's extreme views, but because of what his case represents.

As Donald Trump assembles a personal army in Washington D.C., as he extorts universities to gain control over enrollment and curriculum, as he creates an authoritarian government with the help from all too willing GOP lawmakers, pushback has to come from people standing up for constitutional principles in small, but important ways.

No matter how the UK investigation ends, Woodcock's case is one of those ways.

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