

## JFN Statement in Support of Student Protest

May 2, 2024

As of May 2, 2024 students established a People's Circle for Palestine at the University of Toronto demanding that the University cease complicity with the Israeli genocide on Gaza.

As University of Toronto faculty, we support the student protests and their demands that the university disclose its investments, divest from companies complicit in Israeli apartheid, occupation and genocide; and terminate partnerships with Israeli universities that operate in the illegal settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, or sustain or support the state of Israel's apartheid policies and its ongoing genocide in Gaza.

We recognize that these students, their demands, and their protests further the mission of our university, which we reproduce here:

The University of Toronto is dedicated to fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish, with vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.

The students' demands are supported by and grounded in national and international laws. The University of Toronto is bound by legal and moral responsibility to abide by the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice on January 26, 2024, as well as the Canadian government's parliamentary resolution to end arm sales to Israel.

University students must be allowed to protest one of the central humanitarian crises of our time without fear of disciplinary measures. In the words of Audrey Macklin, Professor & Rebecca Cook Chair in Human Rights Law at University of Toronto: "Universities encourage students to believe that education can equip them to understand the world and work to make it a more just place. Protesting to urge targeted divestment and a suspension of institutional partnerships with Israeli universities is a peaceful means of seeking that goal. These students are manifesting the university's mission and lawfully exercising the freedoms that protect us all under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

We are particularly concerned by the university administrations' statements that they are working with Toronto Police Services and threatening repercussions for students exercising their right to protest. We have watched in horror as university administrators at US-based institutions have brought in armed police officers — including riot police — using pepper spray, violence, and mass arrests, effectively condoning the mass brutalization and criminalization of their own students. These actions have been criticized by the UN Human Rights Chief. Police interventions will have severe repercussions for university students and their futures such as loss of employment or criminal charges. Policing also creates unacceptable risks for injury

towards student and staff, particularly for our Black and Indigenous community, who are disproportionately impacted by police use of force, arrest, and discretionary charges.

As faculty member Robyn Maynard suggests, “In spearheading the Scarborough Charter, a national charter on anti-Black racism in higher education, the University of Toronto has committed itself to ensuring a safe space for Black and minoritized students on campus. Policing places marginalized students especially at demonstrable risk of harm and constitutes a serious breach of the university’s responsibilities to protect its student body.”

Our students deserve to be able to protest without being smeared by accusations of antisemitism. Pro-Palestine perspectives and advocacy critical of Israeli state policies are met with false antisemitism accusations by pro-Israel lobby groups and their allies which has created a chilly climate on campus. Politically motivated and baseless accusations of anti-Semitism directed at pro-Palestine voices are extremely dangerous as they are aimed at shielding Israel from criticism. These false charges furthermore perpetuate anti-Palestinian racism. The weaponization of antisemitism against students opposing genocide allows the Israeli state to cement its occupation and expand its colonial and apartheid policies in Palestine.

As Deb Cowen, UofT Professor and member of the Jewish Faculty Network says, “We see the systematic attempts to slander the pro-Palestine and student movements under false charges of antisemitism. Those fighting actual antisemitism are hurt by these spurious claims. We reject the mischaracterization of the students as antisemitic in their demands for Palestinian liberation and rather see them working to enhance rights, safety and justice for all.”

UofT Professor Chandni Desai notes that “The ICJ’s recent order to Israel to prevent genocide in Gaza should motivate scholars and institutions to consider breaking their silence on scholasticide, a core aspect of this genocide, that students are protesting.” We have an ethical commitment as faculty to support our students who refuse to remain silent on scholasticide in Palestine: all of Gaza’s universities have been bombed and destroyed by Israeli and US-supplied weapons. 94 professors, including internationally renowned scholars, deans, university presidents, and medical faculty have been targeted, as well as 5,479 students, and thousands more have been injured or are under the rubble.

Finally, our students are taking up a long and powerful legacy of student activism in North America, spanning the mass movement to end the US war in Vietnam to the successful student-led movement to divest from South African apartheid in the 1980s and 90s. As U of T professor Esmat Elhalaby says, “Our students today build upon decades of organizing on and off campus. In making demands of their university, they face, too, a shameful history of intransigence: the University of Toronto was the last Canadian university to divest from South African apartheid.”

Jewish Faculty Network (UofT Chapter), Faculty for Palestine (UofT Chapter), Health workers Alliance for Palestine (H.A.P.) and concerned members of University of Toronto