



Jewish Faculty Network

May 8, 2024

Dear Presidents of Universities in Canada:

As the Steering Committee of the [Jewish Faculty Network](#) (JFN), a national network of Jewish scholars, we write to you at a time of both profound anguish and inspired hope. Scholars affiliated with the JFN share a strong commitment to social justice, anti-racism and the energetic defence of academic freedom. Our network emerged in 2021 to oppose the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism in institutions of higher learning. The IHRA definition of antisemitism has been used to suppress legitimate free speech, criticism of actions of the State of Israel, and advocacy for Palestinian rights. By inaccurately and dangerously conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism, the definition perpetuates [Anti-Palestinian racism](#).

We mourn the violent attacks on October 7, 2023, against Israeli and other residents of Israel, and the genocidal attack by Israel on the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank. As a consequence of the events of the past months, our determination to distinguish between antisemitism and critiques of Israeli state policies have redoubled. In efforts to shield the Israeli state from criticism and accountability, the IHRA definition of antisemitism has been repeatedly invoked. False allegations of antisemitism, including alarming claims of threats to Jewish life, have been levelled at those calling for ceasefire and defence of Palestinian human rights at peaceful protests on our campuses. These false allegations have contributed to escalating and exceptional repression of speech in support of the rights and lives of Palestinians, from university administrations as well as governments in Canada and internationally.

As we bear witness to the growing movement of student protests and encampments in defence of Palestinian lives on university campuses across the continent, we are compelled to listen to, and learn from, our students. We recall that much of our current public policy and scholarship is a legacy of student movements of earlier times. Historically and in the present, student movements have served as a moral compass through vital, complex and controversial questions.

In this crucial historical moment, we are devastated to see so many university administrators condemn student protests, frequently in the name of “Jewish safety.” Calls on law enforcement to clear encampments and protests have created situations of extreme violence and repression. Police violence on campus not only threatens our students’ well being, but undermines the central role of the university as an institution of learning and open debate.

Many of the students involved in campus protests are Palestinian, Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Black, and Indigenous. Attempts to criminalise their political speech are bound up with racialization, consistent with wider patterns in our society. The presumption that the political speech of students of colour and historically racialized groups threaten public safety exemplifies the discrimination that many institutions of higher learning have reproduced historically, but are now, at least formally, widely committed to dismantling. The assumption that calls for the liberation of Palestinian people are inherently antisemitic demonstrates implicit reliance on the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and effectively promotes anti-Palestinian racism. University administrators have relied on allegations of antisemitism as a justification for surveillance by policing institutions, sanctioning of students, and the repression of academic freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.



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Students are demanding that their universities divest from companies and partnerships that support the State of Israel. The JFN recognizes the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement against Israel as an inherently non-violent and legitimate form of protest. It is not antisemitic to call on universities to sever partnerships with a nation-state. Indeed, since student movements of the 1980s demanded divestment from apartheid South Africa many institutions have precedent, and in some cases policy, to respond precisely to these calls.

In January, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) determined that Israel is plausibly committing genocide. Numerous international human rights organizations, civil society organisations, and civil liberties groups have echoed the ICJ decision. We continue to watch in horror as the numbers of Palestinians murdered by Israeli state actions grows, while close to 2 million Palestinians in Gaza are on the brink of starvation.

In the context of these stark realities, we firmly object to the labelling of calls for university divestment from Israel as antisemitic. Such labels are not only incorrect. They are also doubly dangerous: they weaponize antisemitism allegations to protect Israel from non-violent pressure, while dangerously trivialising actual antisemitism. There are real, painful, and horrific instances of antisemitism on campuses and elsewhere. Like all forms of racism, real antisemitism must be acknowledged and addressed.

We also wish to call attention to the role of mainstream media, pro-Israel lobby groups, politicians and many others in attempting to invisibilize and ignore Jewish opposition to Israeli genocide, often treating the Jewish community as a monolith. The Jewish community holds a diversity of opinion; Jewish student and faculty participation in campus protests against the Israeli attack on Gaza is widespread.

Indeed at campus protests, we have witnessed inspiring collaborations between students of all identities and religious orientations, with diverse communities coming together not only to protest genocide and violence, but also to model what a shared future might look like. Mass peace seders, Shabbat prayers, dancing, joint ceremonies and rituals, collective protection offered to students as they pray; these gestures animate the protests. Not only should the right of speech and assembly be protected and amplified by university administrators, but these acts should be celebrated as extraordinary models of shared space and a shared future.

There is no justification for the reliance on law enforcement in the face of students exercising their Charter protected rights to freedom of speech and assembly. Carceral sanctions threaten these fundamental rights and undermine the very democratic essence of universities.

As Jewish scholars, who know well the stakes in the suppression of speech from our lived histories of antisemitism, we implore you to uphold the university as a place of learning, debate, and critical inquiry - a place where democracy can flourish - where student voices, presence, and protest are welcomed and encouraged as part of the very fabric of scholarly life.

Sincerely,

The Jewish Faculty Network Steering Committee

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