

Jewish Faculty Network (JFN) Joins Calls for Transparency: Why did university presidents travel on a CIJA sponsored trip to Israel?
Sept. 21, 2022

In August of this year (2022), approximately two dozen Canadian university Presidents and university administrators traveled to Israel to meet with Israeli university administrators. The delegation was organized and led by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) and funded or otherwise supported by several private foundations. The delegation included Presidents from Concordia University, Dalhousie University, University of Manitoba, McGill University, University of Ottawa, University of Waterloo, University of Western Ontario, and York University, among others. No Palestinian universities were included on the tour.

We, the Jewish Faculty Network (JFN), are concerned about the nature and timing of this trip in defense of academic freedom and in accordance with our commitment to all anti-racism struggles, we insist on accountability and transparency.

Multiple international human rights organizations have now concluded that the State of Israel has committed crimes of apartheid against the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Israel has intensified its repression of Palestinian civil society: it declared six prominent human rights organizations as terrorist organizations, based on spurious allegations rejected by Israel's closest allies, and imposed severe restrictions on the ability of Palestinian universities to extend invitations to visiting faculty, researchers, and students.

Palestinian academic freedom is curtailed both in Palestine and through the silencing of Palestinian academics and their allies in Canada. The decision of presidents of Canadian universities to participate in such a trip, yet remain silent about violations of human rights and academic freedom sends a strong political message. A trip organized, led, and funded by CIJA, a political advocacy group with no scientific expertise or mandate and a long track record of being an apologist for Israeli policies, is intended to advance a political agenda; to normalize Israel's continued violations of human rights. By virtue of their participation and their obliviousness to the continued violation of Palestinians' human rights, the University Presidents who participated in the delegation took a clear position in support of Israel's policies and actions.

On the heels of CIJA's recent interference in a hiring process at the University of Toronto, which culminated in the university being censured by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), the CIJA sponsored delegation of university presidents is even more alarming. To accept such a trip sponsored by CIJA, is to accept alignment with an organization that has violated the very precepts that universities are built upon. Until CIJA acknowledges the harm caused by its interference, or is held accountable, any alliance with the organization is emblematic of blatant disregard for academic freedom.

Academic freedom is a fundamental value to which all Canadian universities are committed. It reflects the vital role of universities as custodians of the human right to radical, critical teaching and research, and of their ability to provide fora in which controversial questions can be carefully studied and vigorously debated. A commitment to academic freedom often entails that universities are reluctant to take sides in political debates because universities risk abandoning these roles when they are perceived to advance a specific political position. A trip to Israel sponsored by CIJA is not neutral, regardless of intent, but rather makes a resounding political statement.

We join the calls for accountability and transparency [expressed](#) by Palestinian Canadian Academics and Artists Network (PCAAN), Faculty for Palestine (F4P), Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CPJME) and Independent Jewish Voices (IJV). We demand an explanation of why delegates visited Israeli universities but not Palestinian ones. We demand an explanation of the alignment with CIJA. We demand to know why there was a total lack of transparency regarding the trip. If such a venture is defensible in any way – why was it shrouded in secrecy? We demand that the university presidents involved explain how they will repair the damage to the independence of universities and to academic freedom caused by this trip. We demand that the university presidents acknowledge the harms caused by their participation, including how such an overtly political act might impact the equal rights of Palestinian students, scholars, and academics, and their sense of belonging, to Canadian universities.