

Dear President Lachemi and Dean Gharabaghi,
(CCs: Provost Iannacito-Provenzano, VP Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion De Mello, VPFA Albanese)

We write to you in our capacity as the Steering Committee of the Jewish Faculty Network, co-authored with our JFN-TMU chapter. We are a membership-driven organization with hundreds of faculty members across the country, working together to uphold and protect principles of anti-racism and equity based on our Jewish traditions and values. We have JFN chapters across the country, united by a statement of principles centred on anti-racism.

It has come to our attention that our colleague Professor Maher El-Masri has become the target of a smear campaign initiated by several organizations claiming to represent a singular Jewish community. We have seen public posts made by DARA, Hillel, B'nai Brith, and the student group Students Supporting Israel.

The campaign against Professor El-Masri is part of a concerted effort to intimidate and punish academic criticism of Israel, as well as other forms of protest and equity seeking, that spans North America; organizations in Canada have openly stated that they wish to purge and reshape Canadian academia in a manner similar to the academic collapse south of the border. Certain organizations that falsely claim to represent all Jews and that are attempting to justify or deny these crimes have made it clear that there is no language in which Professor El-Masri could protest that they would not inaccurately label "anti-Semitic." "Zionist" does not mean Jewish, as these non-scholarly and politically motivated organizations claim; as scholars of Zionism and anti-Zionism can attest, it is the name of a political ideology that Professor El-Masri has every right to protest.

We feel it is vital to explain the context in which his publicly expressed sentiments were interpreted. We believe that it would be irresponsible to merit these organizations as good-faith actors who represent the Jewish community. B'nai Brith and Hillel in particular have played a destructive role in the university context, undermining academic freedom, attacking faculty and members of the public with spurious and libelous accusations, engaging in hateful and racist discourse, and drumming up support for their campaigns through fear-mongering and false claims of antisemitism.

For some background, here are other actions against academic freedom taken by the organizations that have slandered Professor El-Masri:

B'nai Brith: This organization has focused on silencing and intimidating those who oppose Israeli state policy, including shutting down dissent within Jewish communities. According to "[Unveiling the Chilly Climate](#)," B'nai Brith has been "at the forefront of attacks on Palestine solidarity activists." Though they claim to be a venerable human rights organization, their actions against Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim people contradict their commitment to human rights. For example, they lobbied *against* the non-binding parliamentary Bill M103 which

denounced Islamophobia, introduced after the killing of six Muslim men at a Quebec mosque by a far-right activist.

As the Unveiling the Chilly Climate report details, much of their work is aimed at targeting Palestinians and Palestine solidarity for speech and action that critiques Israeli state policy in the name of fighting antisemitism:

- The organization claims the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (the BDS) movement against Israel is antisemitic distorting the non-violent Palestinian civil society call to action against the egregious violence perpetrated by the Israeli state into a movement against Jews.
- B'nai Brith was [unsuccessful](#) in bringing a SLAPP motion in response to being sued for defamation by Palestine Solidarity activist Dmitri Lascaris, whom the organization accused in 2016 of advocating “on behalf of terrorists who have murdered Israeli civilians.”
- The Ontario Court of Appeals has recently [ordered](#) a trial in the defamation suit launched by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers in response to a 2018 press release by B’nai Brith alleging that CUPW had “aligned itself with the path of violence and extremism” by engaging in joint projects with the Palestinian Service Workers Union.
- In 2021, Christian organization Canadian Friends of Sabeel [settled](#) a defamation lawsuit against B’nai Brith Canada for a 2018 article claiming that CFOS had sponsored an antisemitic book tour. B’nai Brith was forced to take down all articles and social media referring to the book tour.

On university campuses, B’nai Brith has engaged in particularly egregious campaigning:

- In 2009, B’nai Brith Canada participated in efforts to shut down an academic conference on the one-state solution in Israel Palestine at York University, submitting a libelous statement to York administration asserting that, “No academic body should lend its imprimatur to a conference where several of the speakers are actively engaged in Holocaust denial, rationalize terrorism, and are infamous anti-Israel propagandists.” B’nai Brith was forced to retract this baseless statement and apologize.
- In 2018, B’nai Brith attempted to have a public meeting held at the University of Winnipeg canceled because it involved discussion of the U.S. government’s decision to move its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem. They extracted an apology from the University administration on the basis that the speakers were “antisemitic” according to the IHRA definition of antisemitism. The IHRA definition has been firmly [rejected](#) by an Independent Reviewer commissioned by Toronto Metropolitan University and the [TEA](#).
- In 2023, B’nai Brith pushed for the [expulsion](#) of our own TMU law students based on a letter they penned condemning the Israeli government for the bombardment of Gaza and the history of occupation that led to the events of October 7, 2023.

Hillel: Hillel has student chapters in hundreds of universities across North America. Its parent organization, Hillel Organization, has maintained a policy since 2010 that its chapters are

prohibited from partnering with organizations that support the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement or “deny” or “delegitimize” the “right of Israel to exist” - broadly defined to include criticism of the state of Israel.¹ Rather than uphold the critical inquiry and academic freedom that are the cornerstone of our university community, Hillel has engaged in the following types of activities:

- On UBC campus, a Hillel subcontractor pasted [fraudulent](#) stickers that said “I (heart) Hamas” that were attributed to the Social Justice Centre. The incident is now subject to a defamation lawsuit.
- Hillel has intervened in classroom curricula critical of Israel across the United States, including at University of California, Berkeley - where an international smear campaign was launched against a Palestinian-American teacher - but also at Loyola University in Chicago that targeted Palestinian students, Barnard College where a banner of historic Palestine was deemed “unsafe” for Jewish students, and at Northeastern University, where students who led a “mock eviction” process in the dorms to raise awareness about Israeli housing demolition of Palestinian residences led to a police investigation, instigated by Hillel, and the suspension of Palestine solidarity campus group.
- In 2010, Hillel targeted students at Rutgers for raising money for humanitarian aid to Gaza, successfully restricting the money from being sent.
- In 2024, Hillel pushed for the successful [firing](#) of Jewish tenured professor Dr. Maura Finklestein at Muhlenberg College due to a social media post she made that was critical of Zionism and Israel’s assault on Gaza.

It deeply concerns us that a university community member is being attacked by these organizations, yet the university has failed to stand up to this hate. Professor El-Masri, a cherished colleague to both JFN-TMU and JFN-Steering Committee members, lost a brother in the State of Israel’s assault on Gaza; his surviving family in Gaza are in grave danger because of Israel’s ongoing and escalating crimes against humanity, including forced mass starvation, recognized by Amnesty International and the ICJ as genocide.

Regarding Professor El-Masri’s anguished social media posts in support of the Palestinian people: it is fitting that on June 4, Professor El-Masri tweeted, “The Zionist logic: We’ll commit all the atrocities against the Palestinian people & we’ll spew hate on our TV screens & social media posts, including killing of 1000s of babies and children. If you, however, dare to criticize us, we will label you antisemite [sp] and a Hamas supporter” That is exactly what has happened here. The claim that Palestinian people are motivated by antisemitism when they articulate their opposition to Israeli violence against them is a blatant form of anti-Palestinian racism.²

¹ Ungar-Sargon, Batya. “How the Israel Lobby Captured Hillel.” Foreign Policy. November 23, 2015. Accessed November 8, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/23/how-the-israel-lobby-captured-hillel-international-college-campus/>

² Dania Majid, *Anti-Palestinian Racism: Naming, Framing, and Manifestations* (Arab Canadian Lawyers Association: 2022):

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61db30d12e169a5c45950345/t/627dcf83fa17ad41ff217964/1652412292220/Anti-Palestinian+Racism-+Naming%2C+Framing+and+Manifestations.pdf>

It is in fact against our Talmudic teaching to hold people responsible for speaking freely when in distress (or anguish) (אין אדם נתפס בשעת צער). The organized policing of anything that a Palestinian says when they're undergoing a genocide and when their family members are being killed, and when those still alive are being starved and bombed, is not only a form of anti-Palestinian racism, but is also against the teaching of Judaism.

It is also of great importance to avoid spurious accusations of "support for terrorism" because states use the accusation of terrorism to withdraw legal protection from people and populations to be detained, tortured, maimed, and killed—exactly what is happening to Palestinians in Gaza under the guise of fighting Hamas and terrorism, and what is beginning to happen to student protesters in the United States. The claims made against Professor El-Masri are in themselves racist and repeat Israeli and U.S. state narrativization that attempts to create impunity for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and gross violations of international law.

It appalls us that Palestinian people face these kind of racist smear campaigns against them - that threaten to decimate their reputations, their professional lives, their livelihoods - all as they are bearing witness to the racially motivated genocide of their families and communities in Gaza. Not only are Palestinian people having to endure the Israeli violence that pervades their lives, but the public response often takes the form of denial of that very violence, accusations that opposition to Israeli violence is antisemitic, and that criticism of Israel is criticism of Jews. For JFN-TMU members, we have been moved by Professor El-Masri's genuine desire to forge more deeply the bonds of solidarity between Jewish faculty and Palestinians on campus, and he has made us feel more welcome than anyone else in the movement for Palestinian human rights on campus.

Though our organization does not claim to adjudicate what antisemitism is and is not, we urge you to comprehend how dangerous it is when criticism of a nation-state is deemed racist. As Professor El-Masri's tweets indicate very clearly, his opposition is to Israeli genocide, fueled by the ideology of Zionism, and has nothing to do with Jewish people. The groups making accusations against Professor El-Masri parse the language of the oppressed used against the oppressor in a moment of genocide, described as one of the [worst](#) in modern history.

On behalf of JFN-TMU specifically, we want to add that Professor El-Masri has served for five years as the Director of the Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing at TMU. As any of us, Dr. El-Masri carries his own experience and identity that cannot, must not, be used as a reason to sanction him or suggest he not take on further leadership roles in the university. Professor El-Masri has demonstrated capacity to support all students and will continue to support all students and colleagues in his role as Interim Associate Dean in the Faculty of Community Services at TMU. Public attempts to smear and denigrate him are frankly appalling. In these painful and devastating times, conversations between colleagues about how we navigate our identities, experiences and diverse knowledges are welcomed; letters that shame, falsely accuse and unjustly impute ill-motives do not result in greater understanding or collaboration, they polarize and cause harm.

We urge colleagues at TMU to reach out to JFN for more meaningful and effective processes. We also urge the administration to acknowledge these complaints as racist attacks and to ensure that all steps are taken to protect Professor El-Masri.

Sincerely,

Jewish Faculty Network Steering Committee

Jewish Faculty Network - TMU Chapter