



Deputation Regarding Antisemitism on McGill University Campus: A Staff Perspective

May 27, 2024

Background: Anti-Israel and antisemitic behaviours and activity has been long-standing at McGill University particularly and notably in student government over the years. Student government members had brought many anti-Israel, pro-Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) votes to the table. For example, in 2016 Student Society of McGill University (SSMU) tabled a pro-BDS motion that prompted then McGill Principal Suzanne Fortier to remind the students that BDS “flies in the face of the tolerance and respect we cherish as values fundamental to a university. It proposes actions that are contrary to the principles of academic freedom, equity, inclusiveness and the exchange of views and ideas in responsible, open discourse.” In another memorable episode in 2017, a member of the SSMU’s legislative council, tweeted “punch a Zionist today,” which resulted in President Fortier’s denunciation, although not the impeachment of the member.¹ Although anti-Israel sentiment has been evident on campus for years, it was generally by a small but vocal minority of students and was largely ignored by the bulk of the students and faculty on campus. Jewish and pro-Israel staff and students were always aware of it and worked toward combatting various aspects of it, including pro-BDS efforts. In 2022, McGill Deputy Provosts Lebeau and Campell lead a task force to combat “Islamophobia and Antisemitism” because of these challenges on campus². In hindsight, the above was a harbinger of the antisemitic, anti-Israel onslaught to come.

The Post-October 7, 2023 Campus: On October 7, 2023, the landscape for antisemitism was radically altered. Within 2-3 days of the brutal attack on Israelis, the Society for Palestinian Human Rights (SPHR) at McGill (and other pro-Palestinian organizations in the city) began celebrating the attack, calling it “heroic” in social media posts. Their reaction was swift and felt highly orchestrated (appearing to have had strategic advance knowledge of the attack; see Fig. 1), justifying it as liberating “resistance” in spite of the brutality of Hamas attacks on innocent civilians (babies, toddlers, elderly tortured and murdered), over two hundred of whom were taken hostage into Gaza. Pro-Hamas celebrations began in October on campus (long before Israel had mobilized to war), with loud pro-resistance chants including “From the River to the Sea Palestine will be free”, an established battle cry for the destruction of Israel. Students flew a Palestinian flag on the James Administration Building; McGill security declined to remove it for many hours out of fear to provoke the protesters. In response to the celebrations of Oct 7 by SPHR in a variety of social media posts, the University demanded SPHR remove its McGill affiliation, however they consistently use it in their social media posts to this day. Noting that one SPHR flyer, in November 2024, on the anniversary of the Nazi Kristallnacht (in which German Nazis in 1938 coordinated a massive violent attack on Jews), included an image of a pro-Palestinian kicking a glass wall. McGill administration condemned the flyer as “antisemitic” in a public statement. However, the names of the members of SPHR are secret – no one knows who these students are (they are always masked, always anonymous in correspondences), or even what fraction of them actually are students and affiliated with the University, making addressing the issue challenging. They appear to have strong outside orchestration that has a

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/punch-a-zionist-mcgill-student-politics-1.3975773>

² <https://www.mcgill.ca/provost/initiative-against-islamophobia-and-antisemitism>

clear motive: to delegitimize the state of Israel through hateful rhetoric, bigotry, twisted facts, and sometimes outright misinformation (e.g. Fig. 5,10).

In November of 2023, McGill's student society included on their Fall Referendum ballot a statement titled "Policy Against Genocide in Palestine" in spite of it being discriminatory and contrary to the Society's constitution and bylaws. On May 22, 2024, a Montreal superior court granted an interlocutory injunction preventing the adoption of the policy³.

In response to growing antisemitic, anti-Israel and anti-Zionist activity on campus Jewish faculty in Montreal have joined together to form the Montreal Academics Network Against Antisemitism and have worked together to identify strategies to help intimidated students, educate the community on the history of the region and realities of radical Islamic terrorist organizations, and advocate to the administration.

On February 22, 2024, a group of masked people in keffiyas (symbolic scarves associated with the pro-Palestinian movement) blockaded McGill's Bronfman Building, not allowing anyone into the building⁴. The Bronfman building is one named after a prominent Jewish philanthropist; it was no coincidence this Jewish-named building was chosen by the protesters. Protesters demanded boycotting and divesting from Israel and blocked students from classes, violating University policy. The protesters chanted loudly, using bullhorns, "From the River to the Sea Palestine will be Free," articulating the desire for the destruction of the state of Israel and called Zionists "murderers" and "baby killers". It was impossible to walk near the building, located on a portion of Sherbrooke St., a major artery, without being inundated with loud yelling, chanting of anti-Israel, anti-Zionist cries. Since then, there have been multiple loud pro-Hamas protests in various locations of campus (e.g. Fig. 11), including inside libraries, even during final exam period. Major efforts at distributing virulent anti-Israel propaganda have occurred (e.g. Fig. 3).

On April 27, roughly 20 tents were erected on the lower campus, in large soccer field immediately adjacent to Sherbrooke St.. The encampment is inhabited mainly by masked people whose affiliation with the University is unknown, but many are clearly not students as entire families with children are present. The encampment includes a large electrical generator. Loud chanting and yelling of slogans calling for the destruction of Israel, which implicitly requires the murder of millions of Jews, are often heard, and there are large signs (Fig. 2) calling for "Intifadah", (the strategic murder of Israeli non-combatants) as a form of "resistance" deemed by the mob acceptable to secure their political aspirations. There is no suggestion of peaceful outcome or two-state solution, only "complete victory." McGill President Deep Saini has complained of antisemitic and hateful statements from the encampment in public letters to the McGill community. Two Jewish McGill students sought an emergency injunction to have the encampment removed on the grounds that it constituted harassment and compromised safety but the injunction was denied. McGill has also sought an injunction on the grounds that the encampment is unsafe the land is private property. An emergency injunction was not granted but a second request is in the works.

The encampment has been growing steadily, with roughly 100 tents now taking up a sizable portion of lower campus⁵. Many Jewish students and faculty avoid the area; the campus feels like a battleground,

³ <https://www.bnaibrith.ca/victory-bnai-brith-welcomes-injunction-halting-anti-israel-referendum-at-mcgill/>

⁴ <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/pro-palestinian-demonstrators-block-bronfman-building-at-mcgill-university>

⁵ <https://www.alamy.com/the-protesters-set-up-about-100-tents-saturday-afternoon-with-the-intent-of-staying-on-mcgill-universitys-lower-field-indefinitely-image604980959.html?imageid=F2432C9C-13B8-4557-8891-60552F1E1C69&p=1369988&pn=5&searchId=b3455c97c22cb561791a41871b25341d&searchtype=0>

far from a place of thoughtful dialog, the main purpose of the institution. McGill buildings are now routinely vandalized (e.g. Fig. 6-9). Campus feels highly volatile, and there is constant police presence.

On May 16, 2024 the McGill Association of University Teachers (MAUT), sent an email stating, “MAUT Council opposes the use of force or violence against nonviolent forms of expression and calls on the administration to consult MAUT and Senate prior to taking actions with respect to the encampment and other nonviolent forms of expression”. The statement went out without consultation with its members assuming there would be agreement, whereas we oppose the encampments and aver they are promoting hate speech and as such are violent and intimidating. The statement violates the MAUT mandate of, “Advancing and protecting the interests of all academic staff and maintaining the calibre of academic life at McGill”. The President of MAUT was made aware of our concerns which were shared with the council who went forward with the resolution. The lack of consideration for the safety and security of those negatively impacted by the encampments has resulted in many of us contemplating resigning from MAUT.

On May 19, 2024 anti-Israel protesters blocked the home of a McGill senior administrator⁶ chanting “you can’t hide.” Police were called. This behavior is intimidating and sends a strong message that dissenting views will be met with aggression and harassment. We are aware that our views are under scrutiny and leads us feeling vulnerable, compromising safety and freedoms fundamental to our human rights.

On May 21, 2024, two Jewish-Israeli rights activists came on the McGill campus peacefully to try to engage members of the encampment in dialogue. They held signs that said, “There is no future without Israelis and Palestinians. Let’s talk.” and “We witnessed Oct 7. Ask us anything.” The mob from the encampment grew agitated, refused dialog, shouted at them. Police arrived and escorted the Jewish dialog seekers off campus to restore calm. Calls from members of the encampment for Jews to “go back to Europe” were reported⁷. It is clear many in the encampments do not fully understand the historical record and have naive comprehension of the stated intentions of radical Islam and Hamas – to murder all Jews. The orchestrators have cleverly co-opted valid campus intentions toward diversity and inclusion into their own narrative, using false, misleading, and malicious propaganda, that Zionists and anyone pro-Israel, including Jews, are “racist” and “monstrous” (see Fig. 4) for having a single home country in which they are indigenous, or for defending that country and its citizens, regardless of race or religion. The concept of peaceful co-existence is not in the lexicon of the pro-Palestinian protestors at McGill.

Overall, the atmosphere on campus, which includes an explosion of people wearing keffiyas, many of whom are likely not students, feels threatening and upsetting to many Jewish students and faculty, many of whom are avoiding campus entirely. Jewish McGill students are being doxxed and intimidated; they post images of students and refer to them as “dirty Zionists.” *A deputation directly from Jewish students on McGill campus would certainly describe intimidation, hate and bigotry that would surely not be accepted toward any other identifiable group.* Encampment members insist they will stay put until all their demands are met. This includes divestment of all ties to Israel, financial and academic, in opposition to McGill’s own open research philosophy. McGill administrators have tried negotiating in good faith as detailed in President Saini’s recent op-ed⁸, however encampment members are uncompromising, insisting on complete acquiescence or they will remain, and presumably continue growing their campus

⁶https://www.thesuburban.com/news/city_news/pro-palestinians-blockade-mcgill-official-s-ndg-home/article_c496abdd-eac1-5aa7-b1cc-6d9950d004dc.html

⁷ <https://tnc.news/2024/05/21/campus-watch-police-evict-jewish-mcgill/> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/mcgill-interlocutory-injunction-request-1.7208149>

⁸ <https://reporter.mcgill.ca/principles-guiding-mcgills-response-to-encampment/>

land grab. Anyone holding dissenting views is called complicit in “genocide” and is bullied and intimidated⁹. Signs falsely claiming that the attacks of October 7 were perpetrated by Israelis themselves are seen regularly (Fig.5), as are signs denying the Holocaust. *The concept of thoughtful dialog and rational exchange of ideas seems distant, despite that being the very purpose of the University.*

Sent on Behalf of the Montreal Academic Network Against Antisemitism

Link to Figures:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1pd1jRnx6AZa05sJT7h168oWm2dDv3IRi?usp=sharing>

⁹https://www.thesuburban.com/news/city_news/pro-palestinians-blockade-mcgill-official-s-ndg-home/article_c496abdd-eac1-5aa7-b1cc-6d9950d004dc.html