

Select experiences of antisemitism at UBC

Over the past seven months, Jewish faculty, staff, and students at the University of British Columbia (“UBC”) have experienced cases of outright antisemitism. Additionally, there is significant one-sided and inflammatory criticism of Israel that tends to go beyond reasonable critique of the government and often questions Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist. Rhetoric tends to play on erasure of Jewish history and culture by, for instance, claiming that Palestinians are the only indigenous people in that land. Some of the signs at the UBC protest encampment call for the elimination of Israel. Taken as a whole, the antisemitism, the demonization of Israel to an exceptional extent, the erasure of Jewish history, and the myriad of small discriminatory actions have contributed to a climate at UBC that is unwelcoming – and at times hostile – for Jews.

Faculty statement post-October 7, 2023

- In a widely-publicized [letter](#) 195 faculty and 1,365 members of the UBC academic community (as of May 24, 2024) expressed their concern about the statement that Interim President Deborah Buszard issued on October 11th titled “[Supporting the UBC Community](#),” alleging that UBC “remain[ed] silent regarding the ongoing state terror committed by Israel against Palestinians” and demanding that the UBC’s President’s office “[r]ectify the statement and condemn Israeli state violence and violations of international humanitarian law.”
- In response, 200 faculty members issued a [letter](#) in which they stated that universities “have a responsibility to ensure an environment safe from discrimination and hate for everyone in our community” and reported that “[m]any Jewish and Israeli faculty, students, and staff report feeling isolated, ostracized, and unsafe on campus.” The letter asked that “this University affirm the distinction between politically permissible discourse, and identity-based discrimination,” and called on incoming President Bacon to “publicly affirm these basic principles and to take active steps to ensure that all people, including Palestinians and Jews, feel safe and welcome on campus.”
- No such statement was issued by President Bacon.
- The UBC student newspaper, *The Ubyssy*:
 - [Reported](#) on and [linked](#) to the letter from the anti-Israel group.
 - Ignored the request to publish or report on the response calling for moderation and mutual respect.

Attempts to remove Hillel BC from campus

- On February 16, 2024, the Alma Mater Society (AMS), the governing student body, issued a notice on a referendum petition to be included in the 2024 AMS General Elections ballot titled “Demands for Palestine, the Food Bank, and Divestment at the AMS.” The petition had received over 1000 student signatures, and included a demand that the University end Hillel BC’s lease (Hillel BC Society promotes Jewish life on campus). Ultimately the AMS Council rejected the ballot question on a technicality.
- There have been continued calls from various anti-Israel groups around campus for UBC to end Hillel BC’s lease.

Targeting of Jewish instructors, courses related to Judaism, and Israeli programs

- On April 2 a pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel group occupied the office for international student exchanges, and posted flyers with various phrases: “Genocide”, “No archeology

on stolen land” (a reference to UBC’s archaeological excavation and field school in Israel, a collaboration with Hebrew University), “UBC is complicit”, “No exchange on stolen land”. Israel was replaced by Palestine on a map in the office. The office staff defended the protesters’ rights to their actions.

- A course, UBC’s archaeological field school in Israel (AMNE 395/595) has been targeted by anti-Israel groups calling for boycott of UBC archeological excavations “on stolen Palestinian land”. They claim that the course is “complicit in the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Palestine and the Israeli Apartheid regime”. In response, we note that the project has consistently been endorsed by several scholarly associations.
- A Jewish physics professor received a student evaluation stating that they disseminated “extremely violent zionist content on his personal account.” The student wrote: “I demand the department to open an investigation and impose certain restrictions against the instructor”. The professor has no history of including political content in their social media accounts and reports concern that this evaluation will affect their upcoming tenure application.
- A Jewish instructor routinely finds anti-Israel flyers posted outside their office, sometimes over their name sign. No other offices on the same floor are similarly targeted.
- A Term 2 course on Holocaust Studies was canceled on October 15th, 2023 due to low enrollment, even though other courses with low enrollment were not canceled. The same instructor had previously been required in their application package to submit a statement on their “teaching philosophy in the field of Holocaust education.” No other applications in that department required similar statements.

Antisemitism around campus

- On March 21, The Ubysey published a [cartoon featuring antisemitic imagery](#).
- The English Language department’s official bulletin boards, which faculty must walk past regularly, frequently display anti-Israel posters (presumably without authorization from the department). Other official department bulletin boards in Arts have also been targeted.
- [Statements on the website of the Arts Faculty](#) supports calls to boycott Israeli state institutions, which includes universities, as they are public institutions. [Statement on the website of the Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice \(GRSJ\)](#) misrepresents Zionism and Jewish thought
- Posters advertising “May is Jewish Heritage month” were repeatedly vandalized.

Anti-Israel encampment

- An encampment was set up on April 29, with 75 tents and perhaps 100 masked students and [non-students](#). Students, faculty members, and others guard the entrance to the encampment and decide who can enter. There are many reports of Jewish students and faculty being denied entry because they said they supported not just a free Palestine *but also* a country of Israel.
- The encampment displays signs such as “There is only one solution, Intifada. Revolution”, “Intifada until victory”, “Generation after generation until total liberation” (with a burning tire), and imagery of masked people throwing Molotov cocktails. On one morning 240 signs were counted around the perimeter, with only three using the word “peace”, and all three of these used it in a negative connotation.
- President Bacon has not condemned the violent messaging, but instead has stated that “the campus protests are seeking to end violence in Israel and Palestine”. The calls for

violence, acts of exclusion, and demands for UBC to cut ties with Israel combine to create an atmosphere of intimidation, stigmatization, and exclusion for Jewish and Israeli students, faculty, and staff.

- The Center for Climate Justice on May 1 put out a [statement of solidarity with the encampment](#). [A statement of solidarity](#) with the encampment is posted by GRSJ; both statements support calls to boycott Israeli universities.
- On May 7, 207 faculty members wrote a letter against an encampment to the UBC President. The letter objected to “protestors taking over public spaces at UBC and physically barring other people from using that space unless they renounce the right of Israel to exist.” The President did not address the concerns in this letter. In a public statement, he welcomed “a discussion with student representatives from UBC”.
- On May 6 [an open letter](#) from UBC Alumni and staff claims to stand with the student encampment for Gaza. Among other demands, the letter says “UBC must respect Palestinian right to return”.
- On May 12 the encampment members took over the UBC bookstore, intimidating staff on site. Then on May 16 the protestors took over part of the library and the provost’s office, chanting “no peace on stolen land”. The President’s office in the library building protected itself with locked doors and two security guards. In both cases the RCMP were called in.

UBC Senates (both campuses)

- UBC-Okanagan: On April 25 the Okanagan Senate issued a resolution stating that UBCO “condemns the perpetration of genocide... by the state of Israel”. The resolution misrepresented the ICJ ruling of January 26 as well as the World Bank’s reports about the famine in Gaza. It made no mention of Israeli hostages. (See [op-ed in the Vancouver Sun](#) on May 1 by a UBC law professor).
- A petition signed by 18 senators called for a special Vancouver Senate meeting held between May 16 and June 6 to discuss a motion regarding “cutting or suspending academic ties with Israeli government entities (including public universities)”. No other country was targeted for boycott by the Senate.

May 2024 Graduation

- On May 22 students carried signs saying “From the River to the Sea Palestine will be free”, “UBC divest from genocide”. To wide applause, a student-speaker claimed that Israel had been violently wiping out indigenous languages of Palestinians.
- The Provost and President can be seen publicly nodding in approval of political statements (see video of the [ceremony](#)).
- Graduating Jewish students reported that they found attending the ceremony intimidating and non-celebratory.

Maya Kopylova, Professor, the Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sci. Dept., Faculty of Science, mkopylov@eos.ubc.ca

Ania Switzer, Lecturer, Dept of Central, Eastern and Northern European Studies, Faculty of Arts, ania.switzer@ubc.ca

members of the Network of Engaged Canadian Academics,
representing the Jewish Academic Alliance of BC

May 27, 2024