

Jewish Faculty Network

Submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights from the Jewish Faculty Network Steering Committee. May 2024.

We write as the Steering Committee of the Jewish Faculty Network, a national network of Jewish scholars formed in opposition to the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism at our universities. 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. Our statement in opposition to the IHRA has been signed by over 200 Jewish university faculty members at universities across Canada.

Over the past week we have listened with growing concern to the misinformation offered by witnesses to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights regarding antisemitism on university campuses. The hearings demonstrate a clear bias in support of Israel's war on Gaza. Delegates have described the United Nations as an "anti-Israel mob," promoted a tour of Israeli Defence Force reservists speaking on campus at a time when Israel is being investigated for war crimes by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and described Jewish identity in Canada, inaccurately, as inherently Zionist. They have equated common slogans that criticize Zionism as a political project, with incitements to genocide. Almost exclusively, deponents have been individuals associated with Israel lobby organizations. Representatives of such organizations as Independent Jewish Voices who sought to depute at the hearings have not been included; their requests to appear have yet to be acknowledged. Concerns that the Justice Committee hearings would serve merely as a premise to weaponize allegations of antisemitism in fact prompted organizations such as the National Council of Canadian Muslims to boycott the proceedings.

As a network of Jewish faculty in universities and colleges across Canada we must note that to equate peaceful protests against Israel's actions targeting the Palestinian people with real acts of antisemitism is disingenuous at best. More crucially, these equations are extremely dangerous - putting Jews and non-Jews at risk, notably due to the weaponization of antisemitism allegations in a form openly intended to damage the professional and personal lives of those who express support for Palestinian human rights. We also note an additional, potentially severe consequence of trivializing and distracting public attention from real acts of antisemitism. Mislabeling of pro-Palestinian activism as antisemitism risks miseducating the wider public to the point that they may become inured to confronting and opposing real incidents of antisemitism as they occur.

Accusations of antisemitism stemming from the Palestine solidarity protests commonly rest on two false premises, both of which are discussed and overturned in a historical and legal primer published by the Hearing Palestine Initiative in December 2023 (included as reference material). First, the dominant (and misguided) approach in Canadian government and educational institutions to Israel/Palestine is that it is a religious (sometimes national-religious) conflict. Leading scholars reject this premise, demonstrating how the conflict is a result of a process of colonization encouraged under British Mandate Palestine (1917-1948). Second, multiple Israel advocacy organizations claim that Palestine solidarity slogans like "From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free" or "Intifada" are calls for destruction, ethnic cleansing or genocide of Israelis—however they cite absolutely no relevant literature on Palestinian movements, and actual experts show the claim to be false.

Our own experiences on university campuses in Canada point to very different conditions than those reported at the hearings. At university protests, we have heard consistent emphasis on the war crimes of the Israeli state, and clear demands for the end of Canadian government complicity with these war



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crimes. In contrast to witness' claims at the hearings that student encampments at universities calling for support for Palestinian human rights, and divestment from Israel make Jewish students unsafe, student encampment organizers - including Jewish students - at such sites as the University of Toronto have made it repeatedly clear that the encampments are welcoming of Jewish participation. In fact, Jewish students, staff and faculty have been present in large numbers and are among the organizers at various encampments across the country. At the University of Toronto encampment a Shabbat ceremony has been held every Friday night since it was first installed in early May 2024, where many members of the Jewish community, including Jewish faculty, have been centrally involved and warmly welcomed.

Unfortunately, we are compelled to report to you the real instances of antisemitism (and anti-Jewish hatred) experienced by Jewish students and faculty who express support for Palestine or simply stand up for the freedom of expression of those who criticize Israel's war crimes. This abuse and harassment is directed at them by pro-Israel supporters. Such harassment has included significant threats of violence, sexual violence and dehumanization, at times invoking antisemitic tropes. For instance, Jewish and non Jewish protesters in support of Palestine have been accused by pro-Israel counter protesters of receiving payment from wealthy Jewish individuals such as George Soros. Jewish supporters of encampments have even been likened to Nazis, and had the legitimacy of their Judaism questioned by other Jewish faculty in major media outlets. Clear verbal abuse has been endured by student members of the Jews Say No To Genocide Coalition (a Toronto based coalition including Independent Jewish Voices, If Not Now, World Beyond War, Standing Up for Racial Justice, the United Jewish Peoples' Order, and the Jewish Faculty Network). Below, we provide examples of abuse directed at members of the Jews Say No to Genocide Coalition at the University of Toronto by pro-Israel counter protesters on and before May 8th, 2024. Jews Say No To Genocide Members - who are easily identifiable as they wear t-shirts with the text "Jews Say No To Genocide" in large letters - were subject to the following taunts and threats:

- told that they would be pushed off a cliff in Gaza
- called a terrorist
- called a disgrace
- told that their ancestors would be ashamed of them
- that they were paid by George Soros
- called traitors - and that "you'll get what's coming to you"
- called kapos (referring to guards in Nazi concentration camps recruited from amongst the prisoners)
- that they were a non-Jew pretending to be a Jew
- called a Hamas lover
- accused of supporting the murder and sexual assault of Israeli women
- called expletives including a b-tch and a c-nt
- told how hard (they would) get f--d in Gaza
- told that they should go get raped in Gaza
- told that they had stuck their penis in a boy's three year old cousin and then murdered said baby
- called a self-hating Jew, mentally ill, and in need of saving
- called pedophiles
- called fake Jews and not real Jews

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Racist, Islamophobic, ableist and anti-trans and homophobic statements were clearly directed at them as well as other encampment supporters. Among these, pro-Israel reporters called Muslims filth; called Jews Say No to Genocide protesters “crazy” and that they were disgusting and shameful; referred to “so-called Gazans” and “so-called Palestinians”; told an Indigenous person to go learn their history (so that they would recognize Jews as Indigenous to Israel). Others were subject to fatphobia - an Indigenous person was told “you look like you get enough to eat” and their size and weight derided; and international students were called terrorists. Pro Israel supporters made false generalizations stating, for example, that people in the encampment were all non-Canadian, or all international students from the Middle East.

Over the past seven months Jewish and non-Jewish faculty who have expressed support for freedom of expression and/or support for Palestine have been subject to defamatory social media campaigns, notably when invited to speak at universities across the country (see attachment “In Defense of Diverse Jewish Voices”, an open letter to the administration of Wilfrid Laurier University). They have received death threats and harassment to their institutional email addresses. For example, a member of the Jewish Faculty Network received a message stating: “GO F--K YOURSELF, YOU GOD DAMN F--NG ANTI SEMITIC C--T! HOW DOES A F--G PIECE OF S--T EVEN GET A JOB AT A UNIVERSITY? GO F--K YOURSELF, C--T”! Many university faculty of colour have experienced such incidents of doxing. This problem is discussed in accompanying reference material submitted by the Jewish Faculty Network to the House Justice Committee (see the reference material we are submitting entitled ‘Jewish Faculty Network Public Letter in Support of Allies Under Threat’ and ‘In solidarity with our colleagues’).

We will close by noting that antisemitism is real and growing in this country, particularly over the past seven months. All instances of real antisemitism, notably bomb threats and violence targeting Jewish schools and synagogues and bullying of Jewish children, as well as the violent threats experienced by members of the Jews Say No to Genocide Coalition on university campuses, must be condemned in no uncertain terms. Similar and worse conditions have affected Muslim, Palestinian and Arab communities over the same period. To reiterate, equating criticism of Israel with antisemitism not only endangers those who show solidarity with Palestine, it does nothing to address, and may in fact only exacerbate, real antisemitism.

We thank you for your consideration.

Submitted reference material

- Jewish Faculty Network members [In solidarity with our colleagues facing antisemitism allegations](#). November 13, 2023.
- Hearing Palestine, University of Toronto (2023). [From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will be Free: A Primer on History, Context and Legalities in Canada](#). November 2023.
- Jewish Faculty Network [Public Letter in Support of Allies Under Threat](#). December 5, 2023.
- Jewish Faculty Network Steering Committee letter to WLU Admin In Defense of Diverse Jewish Voices. March 5, 2024.
- Jewish Faculty Network Steering Committee, [Open Letter to University Presidents in Canada](#) (on Student Encampments). May 8, 2024.
- Jewish Faculty Network - University of Toronto Chapter. [Statement in Support of the People’s Circle for Palestine Encampment](#), May 15, 2024.