

**BRIEF SUBMITTED TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS
RE ISLAMOPHOBIA HEARINGS 2024**

Submitted by Adrian Deveau, Karina Roman Justo, and the Art History Decolonial Action Group (AHDAG)

Our names are Adrian Deveau, a current PhD Candidate in the Art History Department at Concordia University, and Karina Roman Justo, a recently graduated MA student in the same department. We are submitting this brief on behalf of our colleagues, peers, and members of the Art History Decolonial Action Group (AHDAG). The group came into existence in October following the frustration, isolation and fear that many of us encountered for our pro-Palestine stance.

In this brief, we want to highlight our experiences following the events of 7 October 2023, as well as the reasons why we have been concerned about the impact of our activism on our careers and academic life. There are genuine consequences and not just feelings of discomfort, and evidence of such actions against Pro-Palestine activism is well-documented.¹ There also have been considerable examples within the art world and institutions, in particular museums, against individuals who have spoken about Palestine.²

It is also worth pointing out that many of our colleagues who have taken a pro-Palestine stance are Indigenous, racialized, and international students, which puts them at a greater risk for any repercussions that might follow their activism.

The discrimination, intimidation, and harassment we have experienced, coupled with our university's failure to provide support or even recognition of the issue at hand that continues to affect a vast majority of students, are manifestations of institutional racism - namely anti-Muslim racism (also sometimes called Islamophobia) and anti-Palestinian racism (APR). APR is defined as racism that "entails the dehumanization and erasure of the Palestinian people. Anti-Palestinian racism can be implicit, overt, systemic and structural. It is perpetrated across Canadian society, including by political, intellectual, social and economic elites."³

¹ Wilfred Chan, "'The Palestine Exception': Why pro-Palestinian Voices Are Suppressed in the US," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2023, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/01/palestine-us-activism-firings-speech>; Brishti Basu, "'Chilling Effect': People Expressing pro-Palestinian Views Censured, Suspended from Work and School," *CBC News*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/chilling-effect-pro-palestinian-1.7064510>.<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/chilling-effect-pro-palestinian-1.7064510>Chan, "'The Palestine Exception'"; Basu, "'Chilling Effect.'"

² Brishti Basu, "ROM Backtracks after Trying to Alter Palestinian Artists' Work over 'Heightened Sensitivities,'" *CBC News*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/rom-apologizes-palestinian-artists-1.7017217>; Jo Lawson-Tancred, "Fallout Over the Surprise Departure of Art Gallery of Ontario's Indigenous Curator Escalates," *Artnet News*, January 24, 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/fallout-over-the-surprise-departure-of-art-gallery-of-ontarios-indigenous-curator-escalates-2422632>.

³ Palestinian-Canadian Academics and Artists Network, "What Is Anti-Palestinian Racism?," PCAAN, accessed June 21, 2024, <https://pcaan.org/>.

Following the events of 7 October 2023, there has been a general sense of unease and worry in the student body and how they have been treated. After students submitted a signed letter to the Art History administration to relay their intention to strike on 20 October 2023, following a call for a global strike and to show solidarity with the Palestinian cause, many students were approached by a faculty member, who questioned them about their signing the letter. Students felt the faculty member was reprimanding them for their actions and support for Palestine.

Similarly, when an open letter from members of this group – anonymous at that point – was circulated, faculty members made efforts to find out the names of the students who had written this anonymous letter. We remain unsure as to why the letter's content was not enough to understand students' demands and address the concerns that had been raised, and instead, what took priority was the desire to find out who wrote the letter – presumably with the intent to reprimand the students.

Misinformation became another way in which students faced anti-Palestine sentiments and attempts to shut down their activism. One faculty member told students that talking about Palestine could lead to disciplinary and legal action – which is why the topic should not be discussed. This kind of misinformation only added to the fears of students and how to counter them, and even concerns about who can and cannot be trusted. The responsibility of countering this misinformation also fell on the students' shoulders. Could this not have been addressed by the university by having an open conversation with students?

On 9 November 2023, Zionists who were not university members attacked students at Concordia. The attack resulted in physical harm to several students and the cops being called on campus.⁴ Two weeks later, three Palestinian students were shot for speaking Arabic and wearing their keffiyehs, signifying their heritage in Burlington, Vermont - two hours south of Montreal.⁵

The two incidents created an environment of unease for students, particularly those with Teaching Assistant contracts, who reported to their supervisors that they feared that Zionist students might attack them due to their names being public and their Arab background. The faculty instead decided to let those students know to either take a stress leave or simply call security if anything happens, choosing to ignore and minimize what Palestinian students have been facing for 76 years and ignoring the valid safety concerns of pro-Palestinian students.

This silence and indifference showed us that students' concerns simply do not matter. Every single time students approach the university or departmental administration, they are either directed to bureaucratic routes or advised to call security. We have been consistently met with systematic failure to understand the Palestinian struggle, which has deepened the fear of many racialized students for bringing their genuine concerns forward.

⁴ Abby Cole and Diane Yeung, "Confrontation between Israeli and Palestinian Students Turns Violent | News," November 9, 2023, <https://thelinknewspaper.ca/article/confrontation-between-israeli-and-palestinian-students-turns-violent>.

⁵ The Associated Press, "Vermont Man Charged with Attempted Murder in Shooting of 3 College Students of Palestinian Descent," *CBC News*, November 27, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/palestinians-students-shot-vermont-1.7040774>.

The idea that students should call security on their university peers goes against the values of open debate and the spirit of intellectual freedom that is integral to an academic environment. How could more violence and surveillance result in anything productive? How does this protect vulnerable students whose status in the country can be impacted by having a record?

The students have also consistently been admonished to remain “neutral” in their teaching and activism. These claims of neutrality have been particularly triggering for many of us, especially as nothing about our curriculum has so far been neutral. The curriculum is not neutral when talking about slavery, residential schools, colonial-settler violence, and indentured slavery— but it is only in the case of Palestine and the violence they are experiencing that we have asked to be neutral. The call for Palestine-specific “neutrality” exempts our faculty from re-learning and challenging their own biases against Palestine, in line with other “decolonial” initiatives, while also preventing students from voicing their stance against an ongoing genocide.

Nowhere is this reflected more clearly than in the Art History syllabus and curriculum, which fail to mention the Palestinian experience in both material and visual culture. Palestine does not exist in the supposed “decolonized” world of our academic department, and there has been no concrete effort to address this situation. We understand this as yet another example of Anti-Palestinian Racism. At the end of the day, it is a question of ethics and morality. What ethical principles guide the pedagogical aspects of our university?

Caught in the middle, it is the students who have consistently made the efforts - despite knowing what this could mean for their careers - to create spaces to re-learn from each other.

As students, we are further concerned by a possible compulsory and codified adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which conflates anti-Zionism and antisemitism.⁶ This measure can’t undo the systematic racism that exists and which perpetuates anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, and even antisemitism. To serve its purpose in a democratic society, the university has to be free from donor interference and partisan political agendas, thereby cultivating a space for dialogue and discussion. At the core of it, the issue remains that universities are underfunded by governments and are thus adhering to donor agendas; professors avoid ‘taboo’ topics or show any kind of support for Palestinians for fear of disciplinary action or losing their research funding. In the university, then, the cost of “doing research” is to ignore a genocide until it becomes a historical fact, which can then be discussed in our classrooms and used to gain more funding.

⁶ Kenneth Stern, “I Drafted the Definition of Antisemitism. Rightwing Jews Are Weaponizing It,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect>; Jasmin Zine, Greg Bird, and Sara Matthews, “Commentary / Criticizing Israel Is Not Antisemitic — It’s Academic Freedom,” December 2020, <https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/2020/12/commentary-criticizing-israel-not-antisemitic-its-academic-freedom>.