

Statement in Support of the People’s Circle for Palestine Encampment Jewish Faculty Network – University of Toronto Chapter

We write as Jewish faculty and librarians at the University of Toronto, and members of the [Jewish Faculty Network](#) (JFN), to indicate our firm support for the [demands](#) of the [People’s Circle for Palestine](#) – the student encampment established since May 2, 2024 on the St. George campus of the University of Toronto – for disclosure, divestment, and ending partnerships complicit with Israel’s occupation and ongoing, brutal violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Gaza. On March 28, 2024, Judge Yusuf of the [International Court of Justice](#) declared that: “The alarm has now been sounded by the Court. All the indicators of genocidal activities are flashing red in Gaza.” We also write to express our firm support for, and commitment to, the rights of freedom of assembly and expression exercised by these students.

As Jewish teachers, researchers, and scholars, we share a strong commitment to social justice, to the energetic defense of academic freedom, and to unwavering opposition to antisemitism and all forms of racism. Many of us have deep, painful familiarity with genocide in our families. Many of us also have strong relations with friends, colleagues and family in Israel and Palestine.

We do not claim to speak for all Jewish faculty or for the entire Jewish community. We recognize the longstanding diversity of Jewish opinion, and its [intensity](#) regarding recent events in Israel and Palestine. However, neither do we accept efforts to minimize or marginalize our views and the depth of representation we hold. As a chapter of JFN – a network of scholars across Canadian universities and colleges – we are rooted in a growing, dynamic current of Jewish opinion that is both longstanding in Jewish history and teachings (see for example, [Boyarin](#)) and also part of a rising movement of Jewish youth in Canada and internationally (see for example, [Israelism](#)). In particular, we affirm the following:

- **We support the students’ demands for disclosure, divestment, and ending partnerships with academic institutions complicit in the Israeli occupation, apartheid and gross breaches of international law against Palestinians.**

We continue to respect and learn from our students’ ethical political stance to refuse to see their tuition dollars invested in ways that are widely seen as genocide against the people of Gaza and all of Palestine. We insist on engaging seriously and directly with the students’ legitimate [demands](#). The broader call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel until it adheres to international law is part of a global, [non-violent movement](#). Such a commitment to non-violent tactics should be celebrated and welcomed, especially in an age when unspeakable escalating violence against the people of Gaza continues.

- **The University of Toronto student encampment is a space of deep interfaith and cross-cultural respect, learning, and support.**

From the outset, we have shared days and evenings with the students who are part of and lead the People's Circle for Palestine. We celebrated Shabbat on the first Friday of the encampment ([May 3](#)) and again on May 10, the latter attended and supported by Canadian journalist, member of the Jewish Faculty Network, and University of British Columbia professor [Naomi Klein](#). We have shared stories of grief of the losses of friends and family in Israel on October 7, and of the horrific devastation, widely identified as genocide, against the people of Gaza every day since then and before.

The space students have created is an inspiring promise of what the best of our university life can and should be. It is a space of deep interfaith and cross-cultural respect, learning, and support. It is carefully organized and maintained. It is peaceful, and participants work diligently to avoid confrontations with both police and counter-demonstrators.

- **The University of Toronto student encampment is not rife with antisemitism, contrary to what political critics, much media coverage, and some internal university communications assert. Such a false claim attempts to criminalize political speech and exemplifies racism.**

The encampment has a strict and enforced policy to ensure non-discrimination, and we have witnessed care, solidarity, and support across differences. In fact, it is the counter-protesters defending the actions of the State of Israel and opposing Palestinian rights who have forwarded hateful messages, often [confronting student protesters aggressively](#). The students have consistently opposed those messages and actions with careful, non-violent responses, including effective de-escalation tactics.

Many of the students involved in campus protests are Palestinian, Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Black, and Indigenous. Threats and attempts to criminalize their political speech exemplify wider societal dynamics of racism, including [anti-Palestinian racism](#). The presumption that the political speech of students of colour threatens public safety is discriminatory. It directly contradicts the many formal [commitments made by the University of Toronto](#) to challenge racism, bias, and discrimination.

Yet, the university-wide [memo of May 8](#) from the administration alerted the community of “hateful messages and speech” as if this was common among the encampment students. It emphatically is not. In treating the People's Circle for Palestine encampment as a threat to the integrity of university life and in fomenting an atmosphere of fear and suspicion of the students' actions and demands, the administration is yielding ground to those who advocate the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. The IHRA definition, in its examples, identifies criticism of the State of Israel as indicative of antisemitism. It is not. The University of Toronto's Presidential, Provostial and Vice-Presidential [Working Group on Antisemitism](#) studied the IHRA definition and others on antisemitism, and

concluded in 2021 that the University “should not adopt any of the definitions of antisemitism that have recently been proposed” ([Report](#), p. 12).

We reiterate here the concerns that prompted the creation of the JFN in 2021, when the network emerged to oppose the adoption of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism in institutions of higher learning. Critics of the pro-Palestine movement continue to use the IHRA definition 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, they perpetuate [anti-Palestinian racism](#).

We are aware of rising threats of genuine antisemitism on our campus and beyond. Precisely because of this, we dare not concede to trivialization or distraction with false charges of antisemitism.

- **We defend the rights of students to protest peacefully and free of unwarranted surveillance, police repression, violence, or academic punishment.**

We note the University of Toronto administration’s [stated position](#) that they are “working hard to find a peaceful resolution.” When the warning signs of genocide are present – as the ICJ has found – there is an urgent duty to use all means available to halt the horror. A growing number of [universities in the United States and around the world](#) are divesting from Israel’s war of annihilation. Many universities are also [suspending ties](#) with complicit Israeli universities. The University of Toronto [divested from apartheid South Africa](#) in 1988-90, and more recently committed to [divesting from fossil fuels](#).

We are also keenly aware of the danger of repressive force being used against students at the encampment. We have witnessed university administrations rely on violent police repression at multiple U.S. campuses where students have organized similar protests, and recently, shamefully, at the [University of Calgary and the University of Alberta](#). We will defend the rights of the students to peaceful protest, and oppose any escalation of threats, with all possible means at our disposal. We are experienced in holding the University of Toronto administration to account regarding its own [stated policies](#) and commitments; we did so by supporting the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) successful [censure](#) of U of T for failing to uphold principles of academic freedom regarding human rights and scholarship on Palestine in 2021.

It is from this place of deep empathy that we stand with our students. To the People’s Circle for Palestine: We say no to genocide – Jewish faculty are on your side.

Statement endorsed by Jewish Faculty Network-University of Toronto Chapter

May 15, 2024

jewishfaculty.ca