



Canada's Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia  
Représentante spéciale du Canada chargée de la lutte contre l'islamophobie

August 30, 2024

Dear College and University Presidents,

It has been almost 11 months since October 7, 2023, and the onset of the war in Gaza.

Over 40,000 Palestinians and 1,200 Israelis have been killed. Hostages are still being held. Families have been repeatedly displaced, bombed, and left helpless. Hospitals, universities, places of worship, homes and infrastructure have been decimated. Famine and disease continue to spread.

Many Canadians are witnessing the daily unprecedented violence on their screens, watching unspeakable horrors unfold, including images of children left orphaned and permanently injured, many who are missing limbs.

The pain and agony of the steady reports of death and injury are affecting many Canadians, especially those with ties to the region, including university students, staff, and faculty.

As the new school year approaches, the ongoing violence will continue to weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of many.

I know that university presidents and administrators have struggled to respond to the needs of their students, staff, and faculty in these fraught times. There is also little doubt in our minds that in the midst of these challenging moments, many universities did not get it right when it came to protecting the fundamental right of peaceful protest on campus.

I am writing to offer my support, assistance, and recommendations, as well as to ask about what your action plans look like on these critical issues.

It is essential that educational institutions remain place where everyone is free to pursue knowledge, without fear of punishment or reprimand, in the pursuit of higher learning, advocacy, and critical thought – even if that means we have to have uncomfortable conversations on campus. Indeed, that is what is at the heart of academic freedom.

Throughout various meetings and roundtables held across Canada with Canadian Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students, staff, and faculty, it has become abundantly clear that far too many of them have faced negative consequences for their advocacy. This backlash has included deliberate silencing, harassment, threats and violence on campuses across the country, and has also been faced by allies advocating for Palestinian human rights.

This has coincided with a stark rise in incidents of Islamophobia and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian hate, which have been documented by civil society organizations and police services. We heard clear testimony at the Justice Committee on this issue: dangerous vitriol, physical attacks on campus, racial profiling and online smears, at times reinforced or echoed by prominent leaders, have contributed to a dangerous climate for many college and university community members.



Sadly, reports of these tensions have been weaponized against students, staff and faculty exercising their Charter-protected rights and freedoms.

[The Centre for Free Expression](#) has previously called on college and university presidents to uphold the principles of freedom of expression and to resist calls to “police legal expression on campus” which would “destroy the foundation on which academic communities are built.” This includes supporting the rights of university members to engage in democratic and peaceful methods of protest and advocacy.

Young people, over the decades, have a history of activism and anti-war sentiments. They care deeply about human rights and the sanctity of life. They often mobilize to advocate for a better place for all. Sometimes, their activism becomes disrupting or uncomfortable. It’s understandable when lives are at stake.

College and university campuses must remain spaces where dialogue is encouraged; where everyone feels safe to express their views on important issues and global events. No one should be personally targeted because of their opinions, their faith or their origin. No one should be subject to verbal attack or prevented from freely moving about their campus.

Hate and violence should not be allowed. However, uncomfortable and complicated topics should be debated on campus. If not there, then where?

In the spirit of being helpful, I offer the following recommendations:

**1) Support the freedom of expression, academic freedom, safety and well-being of students, staff and faculty:** Within appropriate boundaries, including ensuring that hate and violence are clearly denounced as unacceptable forms of speech or action, students, faculty, and staff must be supported in their efforts to pursue and share knowledge in accordance with their values and principles and be free to call on their institutions to respond to their concerns.

Additionally, colleges and universities have a responsibility in assuring their communities that freedom of expression, academic freedom, safety and well-being, and the academic integrity of all students, faculty, and staff will be firmly and equitably upheld.

I know that these will be contentious discussions, which is why it is also critical that any proposed disciplinary actions must be fully open and transparent.

**2) Provide clear direction on the difference between feeling safe and being uncomfortable:** The right to a “safe space” does not mean that others are not allowed to express views or opinions on issues that someone may disagree with.

In Canada, we have a long history of students and other members of the academic community freely expressing their views on important social issues of the day without repercussions. We need to understand that safety does not necessarily guarantee protection from being uncomfortable; colleges and universities must remain spaces where differing viewpoints are exchanged respectfully, not cancelled.

Students, faculty, and staff must not be penalized or labeled for raising their voices in opposition of Canada’s, or any foreign government’s, actions and are within their rights to advance their proposed remedies. **This also means unequivocally rejecting any strategy, definition, or approach that threatens, in its application, to harm the right to criticize any foreign government or ideology.**



**3) Provide clear guidance on the meaning and impacts of anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab hate and racism, and Islamophobia:** In the report, [“Strengthening the Pillars: Report of the TMU External Review”](#), the Honourable J. Michael MacDonald provides recommendations that can have wide application. This includes advice that universities should provide “learning opportunities, with student input and involvement, on anti-Palestinian racism, anti-Muslim racism, and antisemitism, as prevalent examples of systemic discrimination”. We specifically recommend that colleges and universities create designated Special Advisors to the Presidents to advise on civil liberties, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian racism.

**4) Increase representation of Muslim, Palestinian and Arab faculty members:** As well, Justice MacDonald recommends institutions use “available mechanisms to increase the diversity of full-time faculty” to better reflect the student body, including increased representation of Muslim, Palestinian and Arab faculty members.

**5) Dedicate resources** to support students, faculty, and staff. Further to designating Special Advisors to the Presidents to provide advice on civil liberties, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian racism, ensure the provision of mental health supports, as well as training for equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) staff, as well as the wider university community, on anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Arab racism.

I understand that this is a very delicate matter. I encourage you to be thoughtful in your preparation for the start of this coming academic year in the context of the ongoing violence in Gaza. I thank you for your kind attention to these issues and remain available to you as a resource and support. I look forward to receiving correspondence from you underlying your proposed course of action to protect all students, by September 30, 2024.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amira Elghawaby', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Amira Elghawaby

Canada’s Special Representative on Combatting Islamophobia