

# Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada

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## Preface

by James L. Turk, Director, Centre for Free Expression Toronto Metropolitan University

*For more than four decades, the increasing polarization of Middle East politics has been at the centre of serious threats to academic freedom and freedom of expression in universities and colleges in Canada and around the world. Current flashpoints are the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism.*

BDS was initiated in 2005 on the first anniversary of the advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice<sup>1</sup> in which the West Bank barrier was declared a violation of international law. BDS, coordinated by the Palestinian BDS National Committee, calls for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel to pressure it to withdraw from the occupied territories, remove the separation barrier in the West Bank, grant full equality for Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, and recognize the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties.

In 2016, the IHRA adopted its Working Definition of Antisemitism<sup>2</sup> and began pressing governments and non-governmental institutions and organizations to formally adopt it. Controversy centres on several of the "contemporary examples of antisemitism" that are included with the IHRA definition, and which relate to expression about the state of Israel and its policies.

Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada, written by Sheryl Nestel and Rowan Gaudet and published by Independent Jewish Voices, is the first broad and detailed examination of the experiences of faculty and students whose work is critical of the policies of Israel toward Palestine

and Palestinians or who actively attempt to change those policies through their support of BDS and opposition to the adoption of the IHRA definition.

While focused primarily on Canada, the report briefly touches on the experiences faced by European academics, artists, and students who publicly support Palestinian rights. The report provides useful profiles of the major organizations that challenge Canadian academics and students who are critical of Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

This is followed by a detailed ethnography to help elucidate the structures, norms, emotions, and behaviours that create the chilly climate in relation to any discussion of Palestine/Israel that supports Palestinian concerns or perspectives. The ethnography is based on a survey of 40 faculty members, 23 students, 7 activists, and 7 representatives of organizations from 21 universities in 7 provinces.

The picture they draw is deeply concerning. Those surveyed report serious violations of academic freedom, from political intervention into hiring decisions to effective pressure to self-censor in relation to writing or speaking about Palestine, harassment by pro-Israel advocacy groups and media outlets, attacks from academic colleagues, harassment on the grounds of their ethnic or racial identity, classroom surveillance, and interference by their university administration. A number of academics reported encountering Islamophobia and/or anti-Palestinian racism from colleagues, students, and at campus events and protests. Academics who had contractual appointments or were still tenure-track felt particularly vulnerable. Numerous respondents indicated they had suffered significantly from the emotional stress of working in a hostile environment.

A strength of the report is that it tells of these matters in the respondents' own words. We need to hear what they say.

Vigorous debate, contesting ideas and perspectives, criticizing policies and practices of institutions and governments, trenchant analysis, and informed advocacy are the lifeblood of the university and of a genuine democracy. That's the way we advance knowledge and promote more social justice in the world. But, as this report makes clear, when it comes to Palestinian human rights, too often academic freedom and freedom of expression are undermined, and with them the possibility of finding just solutions to intractable problems.

I hope this report will be widely read and will contribute to finding a better path for dealing with differences that, if unresolved, will harm all of us.

## Executive Summary

Focused on the Canadian context, this report seeks to shed light on the wave of suppression of speech regarding Palestine that is sweeping North America and parts of Europe. It documents the impact of reprisals, harassment, and intimidation faced by Canadian activists, faculty, students, and organizations in relation to scholarship and activism in solidarity with the struggle for Palestinian human rights. There is a connection to be made here between these attacks and efforts by pro-Israel advocacy groups to market the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA), a document that has come under vigorous attack by defenders of academic freedom and Palestinian human rights. While its proponents argue that this definition will not threaten freedom of expression or inhibit criticism of Israeli policies, the findings of this report demonstrate that these basic rights are already under threat and could be further imperilled

if the IHRA were to be widely adopted.

The contribution of this report is two-fold: 1) the amount and quality of information gathered here is unprecedented and speaks to the worrisome prevalence of harassment and suppression of speech on Palestine on campuses and in Canadian civil society; and 2) it surpasses a simple documentation of instances of repression by employing an ethnographic methodology to analyze the so-called “chilling effect” and its impact on governmental, institutional, and individual decision making. This research project situates itself firmly within the realm of critical qualitative inquiry which seeks to employ qualitative research for social justice purposes, including making such research available for public education, social policy formulation, and the transformation of public discourse. Our inquiry is also shaped by decolonizing methodologies of social science research that seek to challenge institutions, academic and otherwise, which prioritize colonial forms of knowledge production and maintain institutional commitments that impede indigenous self-determination. Finally, we follow the directives proposed by queer, feminist, and antiracist research methodologies which entreat us to consider how our positions in social hierarchies of race, class, sexuality, and citizenship mediate our experiences.

In all, the researchers collected 77 testimonies from 40 faculty members, 23 students, 7 activists, and 7 representatives of organizations. Testimonies were collected from participants in Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Alberta. Among the academics responding were representatives of 11 disciplines from 21 Canadian universities.

Interviewees recounted that their experiences included: political intervention into hiring, attempts to prevent access to event venues and the attempted cancellation of public events on Palestine, as well as targeting and doxing, including the inclusion of 125 Canadian academics and activists on the website of Canary Mission, an organization which purports to document “individuals and organizations that promote hatred of the US, Israel and Jews on North American college campuses.” Threats of violence and genuine acts of violence were experienced by student activists, and these often contained racial and sexual slurs including threats of sexual violence. Students were subject to warnings and disciplinary measures by university administrators whom respondents often described as being hostile to Palestine solidarity activism on campus.

Faculty respondents reported restrictions on academic freedom, self-censoring of expression on Palestinian human rights, discriminatory treatment by academic publishing platforms, harassment by pro-Israel advocacy groups and media outlets, attacks from colleagues, political interference by university administration, classroom surveillance by pro-Israel student groups, and anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab racism. Indeed, the suppression of speech on Palestine has significant consequences in academia, where it threatens principles of academic freedom and encourages surveillance of critical intellectuals and activists and of the oppositional knowledge that they produce.

As our research reveals, the precarious employment conditions of over half of Canada’s university teachers mean that because of the “chilly climate” around speech on Palestine untenured or pre-tenure faculty are reluctant to pursue academic or activist work in this area, for fear of endangering contract renewals or future career prospects including, the access to publishing platforms so central to the academic tenure and promotion process.

Unsubstantiated allegations of antisemitic intent and support for terrorism are commonly levelled against pro-Palestine academics and activists. Significantly, Palestinians, Muslims, and non-Arab racialized participants appear to have borne the brunt of direct attacks on their scholarship and activism. The emotional impact of harassment and suppression was felt most acutely by the the Palestinian students and faculty interviewed. Jewish activists were not immune to attack and were often characterized by opponents as “kapos” or “self-hating Jews.”

We also document how both on- and off-campus Israel-advocacy organizations have been at the forefront of efforts to suppress speech and activism on Palestine. As University of Pennsylvania political scientist Ian Lustick has argued, the pro-Israel organizations have constituted a “vigilante” force which has made it “increasingly difficult to criticize Israel without fear of lawsuits, accusations of anti-Semitism, demands for political balance in staging of events, blacklisting of participants, or other forms of personal or institutional harassment.”<sup>1</sup>

Despite the proliferation in recent years of attacks on Palestine solidarity activism, public recognition of the grievous violations of Palestinian human rights has grown. This report signals that an atmosphere of repression and recrimination related to discourse and activism around Israel/Palestine is ubiquitous and insidious and should be unacceptable in a democratic society.

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

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*Featured image: The Palestinian flag being waved at a rally in New York City on 18 September, 2021, during the anniversary of the Sabra and Shatila massacres (MEE/Zainab Iqbal)*

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