



Jewish Faculty Network

Professor Trevor Young
Dean, Temerty Faculty of Medicine
University of Toronto

CC: Professor Lisa Richardson,
Associate Dean, Inclusion and Diversity
Temerty Faculty of Medicine
University of Toronto

Monday, December 19th, 2022

Dear Dean Young:

We write to you, as the Steering Committee of the [Jewish Faculty Network](#), to share our grave concerns and growing alarm about the ongoing campaign against colleagues at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine due to their legitimate criticism of the State of Israel. The campaign stems from a confidential letter from last year, signed by over forty U of T faculty that raised important concerns about a presentation given by former Liberal Party politician, Irwin Cotler. The criticisms voiced in the letter are legitimate, and well within the bounds of [protected academic freedom](#). Any attempt to label the letter, or any of its signatories, as “antisemitic” is completely invalid. Such an attempt is based on the discredited logic that conflates the State of Israel with Judaism, which is not accurate either historically nor currently.

The need to distinguish between legitimate protest and criticism of the State of Israel, on the one hand, and a concerning rise in antisemitism, on the other, has been made repeatedly, including by multiple Jewish and Palestinian authors and organizations. For example, the Jewish Faculty Network grew out of a statement in 2020, where [180](#) Jewish faculty at Canadian universities and colleges challenged this conflation and opposed the adoption of the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism at our universities and colleges.

Further, in the Jewish Faculty statement ([please see](#)), all signatories asserted that the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement is a legitimate, non-violent form of protest and political expression.

The statement also details how many Israeli and Jewish organizations and scholars have criticized the institutional adoption of the IHRA definition. Even the original author of what became the IHRA working definition, Kenneth Stern, has publicly challenged its [weaponization](#) by conservative supporters of the State of Israel. This current of opinion within Jewish organizations continues to expand. Since the Jewish Faculty Statement's release, [many mainstream Jewish organizations](#) have voiced their opposition to the institutional adoption of the IHRA definition, including the US-based Union of Reform Judaism (the largest synagogue movement in the US); J-Street; Americans for Peace Now; the Jewish Labor Committee; and Ameinu. No Canadian university has adopted the IHRA definition, including the University of Toronto, and at least [40](#) faculty associations and academic unions, including the umbrella Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), have explicitly rejected it.

This controversy at the Temerty Faculty of Medicine arises within a wider context. Two well-researched Canadian reports from the last year have identified and documented a renewed effort by conservative supporters of the State of Israel to conflate legitimate criticism of the Israeli state with antisemitism, and thus restrict academic freedom and freedom of speech. The Arab Canadian Lawyers Association has [detailed](#) the many ways that labelling criticisms of Israel as antisemitic results in unconscionable forms of anti-Palestinian racism, including the denial of Palestinian history, rights, and peoplehood. Independent Jewish Voices has authored a [report](#) on the ways in which Palestinian and Jewish critics of the Israeli state, as well as others in the academic context, face heightened risks due to spurious accusation of antisemitism. Both reports point to a dangerous climate of repression and reprisals that is insidious and harmful. Such an atmosphere constrains the goals of all antiracist movements, including challenging antisemitism, and, in the context of university life, is antithetical to the principle of academic freedom.

Given this context, we are growing increasingly worried about some of the public calls made in the aftermath of a personal reflection by Dr. Ayelet Kuper, published in *Canadian Medical Education Journal*. The publication has renewed public [calls](#) to punish TFOM faculty who stand falsely accused of antisemitism. Any attempt to institute such problematic calls will be resisted and opposed. Accommodating such pressure would produce the conditions that led to the censure of the University of Toronto by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT).

To be sure, there are incidents detailed within Dr. Kuper's report that indicate serious antisemitism. For example, statements like "all Jews are liars" or "Jews lie to control the university or the faculty or the world" are clearly antisemitic. They should be properly documented, verified, and investigated. Racism of all kinds, including antisemitism, must be rooted out within a comprehensive framework. Antisemitism, meaning anti-Jewish hatred and discrimination, cannot and must not be tolerated. However, to challenge oppression and all forms of racism by generating a hostile environment for those with legitimate criticism of the State of Israel is counterproductive and dangerous. Fighting one form of oppression while fostering another does not produce a safer environment for anyone.

We therefore disagree in the strongest possible terms with how our colleague recklessly and divisively described Palestinian solidarity advocacy as a cover for antisemitism. We further disagree with Dr. Kuper's assertion that criticism of the State of Israel, including opposition to Zionism as its founding ideology, are forms of antisemitism. Note that we are not a minority voice among Jewish organizations. A [2018 report](#) details that almost 60% of Jewish Canadians do not view criticism of the State of Israel as necessarily antisemitic. The same report notes that a large proportion of Jewish Canadians are critical of Israel and its policies towards Palestinians,

and almost half believe that accusations of antisemitism are often used to silence criticism of Israeli state policies.

With equal fervour, we reject Dr. Kuper’s hurtful depiction of Jewish colleagues who are critical of the State of Israel as “self-identified Jews,” implying that somehow our Jewishness is of a lesser variety than hers. And we condemn her equally problematic charge that these Jewish colleagues only provide cover to non-Jews who are “viciously antisemitic.” This logic leads her to make the reprehensible and hate-filled charge of “Jew-washing.”

We agree that real antisemitism must be dealt with seriously. We also urge you to continue upholding the academic freedom of our TFOM colleagues, including their protected right to legitimately criticize any state, including the State of Israel. It is vital that TFOM, as part of the University of Toronto more broadly, maintain [the University of Toronto Statement of Purpose](#) on such matters:

Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research. And we affirm that these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself. It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit.

Accordingly, we request that you issue a public statement that:

1. re-asserts the right to academic freedom, and states that you will specifically protect your faculty who have legitimate criticisms of the State of Israel;
2. affirms that you will protect from any institutional reprisals the faculty members who are being attacked;
3. re-affirms the findings of the University of Toronto Antisemitism Working Group that the university should not adopt any specific definition of antisemitism, including the IHRA definition.

We also request to meet with you early in the new year to discuss a comprehensive approach to antisemitism within a larger anti-oppression and antiracist framework.

We look forward to your reply, and to working with you on these pressing issues.

Sincerely,

The Steering Committee of the Jewish Faculty Network