May 9, 2024

Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) Canada Student Submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights Re: Study of Antisemitism

More Repression Will Not Make Jewish Students Safer

Submitted by: Anna Swanson, MFA Candidate at the University of Guelph

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We are Jewish students across Canada who support the call for a permanent ceasefire, an end to genocide in Gaza, and full human rights for all Palestinians. Our immediate concern is for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians currently facing full-scale military invasion in Rafah, and all Palestinians facing escalating violence and genocide at the hands of the Israeli military.

It feels complicated, in the face of this imminent danger and ongoing genocide, to write a letter about antisemitism. But we feel compelled to speak about antisemitism directly in light of current hearings the federal government’s Justice and Human Rights Committee is undertaking on the topic of antisemitism.

We notice that, of all the applications put forward, the witnesses approved to testify, especially in this first round representing Jewish students, overwhelmingly represent the view that Jewish students are under threat on Canadian university campuses and require additional protection. Here’s what we would say if we were there, drawn from the experiences of our student chapters across the country.

We, too, are Jewish students.

We are Jewish students begging our governments not to support genocide in our names.

We are Jewish students begging our universities not to invest endowments with arms manufacturers, whether the weapons are used by the Israeli military or elsewhere.

We are Jewish students begging our elected representatives not to implement repressive policies that criminalize and silence dissent in our names.

We are asking you to understand that Jewish people are not a monolith. That we have a wide range of political opinions and views.

We are asking you to understand that anti-Zionism and criticism of the state of Israel are not, in and of themselves, antisemitic.

Support or criticism of Israel is not a matter of Jewish identity but of political opinion, with Jewish students on both sides.

Jewish people have a wide diversity of views and political opinions. To assume that we all share the same view, and that if you’ve heard from one Jewish person you’ve heard from all Jewish people, is a type of antisemitism. Jewish opinions about the actions of Israel are split, with
support for the Israeli government’s actions declining most dramatically in the younger generation, a typical age for university students. Because of this, and the divisiveness of opinions on this subject, there is no single Jewish organization or student group that represents all of Jewish opinion, not even groups that call themselves umbrella service organizations or multi-denominational or student unions.

If you are not used to hearing from a large number Jewish students who criticize Israel, part of the reason is that it carries significant risk for many. These students worry about future employment, online harassment, doxing, retribution, and relationships to their communities.

We see a concerning trend across the US and Canada where claims of antisemitism, and policy adopted in the name of preventing antisemitism, are used as an excuse to suppress or criminalize student protests, Palestinian solidarity movements, and even the right to express certain political views in public. They have been used as justification for calling in extreme police violence to break up otherwise peaceful solidarity encampments.

If we are afraid for Jewish student safety on campuses with Palestinian solidarity encampments, it is because we have seen the police violence that students, including Jewish students, face when administrators call in militarized police forces. It is because we have seen the way particular factions of pro-Israel counter-protesters have violently attacked many peaceful encampments already.

We are afraid that this trend will escalate to McCarthy-era levels of repression in the US, affecting society well beyond the university campus, and with these hearings on antisemitism we are worried that Canada may be considering a similarly disastrous path.

Many of us have witnessed first-hand the discrepancies between the actions of aggressive pro-Israel counter-protesters on our campuses, and the way those experiences are later depicted online as experiences of antisemitism.

It’s also frightening to face that kind of aggression and intimidation ourselves, on our own campus grounds. Many of us have experienced being yelled at, physically intimidated, pushed, threatened with doxing, and more, simply for holding signs or otherwise expressing our views. Many of us have been targeted by other Jews specifically because we are Jewish and supporting Palestinian solidarity.

Continuing to uphold freedom of expression and academic freedom will do more to support and protect us than any legislation that purports to prevent antisemitism in isolation from racism and other forms of oppression. Tools like the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which conflates criticism of Israel with antisemitism, are dangerous and misleading and should not be part of university policy. Instead, we hope to see governments and universities prioritize and fund work to prevent antisemitism as part of a combined effort to oppose racism, antisemitism, and all forms of oppression, and which approaches these forms of
oppression as interconnected. Many Jewish students also fit into multiple marginalized groups, and only an interconnected approach can support the entirety of their identities.

Antisemitism is real and dangerous and we take it seriously. There have been shootings in synagogues, bomb threats, threats of death, swastikas defacing public spaces, and hate speech aimed at Jews simply for being Jewish. Most of us live in this country because our relatives fled anti-Jewish violence during pogroms or the Holocaust. We know how real these dangers are, but we do not want them to be weaponized against other groups, or used to undermine academic freedom.

If, in their effort to protect one specific group of students in isolation, universities resort to policies and legislation that chill or silence freedom of expression, this could hurt the entire academic community. We do not want special treatment for Jewish students, but respect and safety for all students.

We ask our government to recognize that the real danger of antisemitism comes overwhelmingly from white nationalist, neo-nazi, and other far right groups, not movements for Palestinian solidarity, which include many Jewish members. And the types of policies that are often suggested to “protect” Jewish students often end up instead supporting the goals of far-right groups who want to undermine academic institutions.

If we can distinguish true threats of antisemitism from instances where Jewish people experience fear or distress based on a difference of political views, we will be better equipped to fight against the real threats when they arise.

We are asking you not to allow the real dangers of antisemitism to be co-opted as a tool of political and academic repression.

Not in our names,

Anna Swanson
Independent Jewish Voices Guelph

Endorsed by:

Independent Jewish Voices Canada (IJV) is a grassroots organization grounded in Jewish tradition that opposes all forms of racism and advocates for justice and peace for all in Israel-Palestine. IJV has 23 active chapters in cities and on university campuses across the country.