

AUFA Statement on Academic Freedom in times of war and conflict

The Athabasca University Faculty Association (AUFA) unequivocally supports the academic freedom of its members. This freedom includes the right to pursue research and open inquiry in an honest search for knowledge that is free from institutional censorship, including that of the government.

AUFA acknowledges that the freedom from political and institutional censure is especially critical at times of war and conflict where scholarly voices are an important corrective to widespread disinformation campaigns.

AUFA supports the anti-racist and decolonial initiatives in Canadian educational institutions and opposes anti-Palestinian racism, antisemitism (whether it is anti-Jewish or anti-Arab) and Islamophobia, and all forms of colonial oppression against Indigenous people, along with all forms of racism and hatred. We will strive to ensure our members are free from experiencing bigotry and hate in our classrooms and campuses.

AUFA is committed to protecting the security and safety of all scholars who are targeted because of their scholarship and political work. We call upon our institution to implement measures to safeguard our members.

AUFA acknowledges that targeted attacks against scholars who support the Palestinian struggle have a chilling effect on the academic freedom of our members in their classes, in their research, and at AU more broadly. These repressive tactics must be challenged, and scholars must be free from all forms of recrimination and harassment that may occur due to the nature of their research.

Background

In the past number of weeks, we have observed a rapid and alarming escalation in the narrowing of permissible speech in Canada, including increased attacks upon academic freedom at several universities across Canada and the US. Disciplinary actions are being issued against students, faculty, student organizations and unions that have spoken out or issued statements critical of Israeli policies or expressing solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. Opposing all forms of racism, including [anti-Palestinian racism](#), [Islamophobia](#) and [antisemitism](#) remains imperative. At the same time, we also note the increased targeting of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, and allied communities of students, faculty, and staff across universities.

Bolstering our commitments to academic freedom through our unions and faculty associations is important, particularly given the well-established pattern across university administrations of harassing and sanctioning the aforementioned groups.

In the current context, the list of incursions on academic freedom and free speech is growing, with the list that follows a very partial iteration of the scale and scope of repression happening within universities:

- On October 17, 2023, the Ontario Minister of Colleges and Universities (Jill Dunlop) publicly named and denounced several Ontario professors and students on the floor of the legislature, accusing them of celebrating terrorism and being antisemitic. The minister then urged university administrations to hold the professors to account. As noted by [CAUT](#), these remarks constitute a serious infringement on the principle of university autonomy: “It is highly unusual for allegations of misconduct on the part of professors to be made in any legislature in Canada, and for good reason. By statute, universities are granted institutional autonomy so they may fulfill their mission and conduct their internal affairs free from interference of political or other special interests. Such autonomy is necessary to maintain academic integrity and uphold academic freedom.”
- In early November, Dr. [Yipeng Ge](#), a fourth-year resident physician of Public Health and Preventative Medicine at the University of Ottawa was suspended from his program by the University of Ottawa Faculty of Medicine. Dr. Ge was suspended because of his social media posts advocating for the human rights of Palestinians, including rights to healthcare and the right of physicians in Palestine.
- On November 18, Samantha Pearson, AASUA member and Director of the University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre was fired from her position based on the allegation that she signed an October 26th open letter calling for an immediate ceasefire, and used the centre’s name in locating herself in civil society. In an unprecedented move, the President of the University of Alberta released a [statement](#), announcing Pearson’s dismissal. The organized backlash against Pearson’s alleged signature centered on the phrase “unverified” being used in the open letter, in reference to accusations of sexual violence by Palestinian fighters on October 7th.
- In keeping with broader patterns of attempted and actual political interference on scholarly events related to Palestine, [Winnipeg South Centre MP Ben Carr](#) has publicly stated that an event scheduled for November 24th at the University of Winnipeg, "Palestine and Genocide: Reflections on Imperialism, Settler-Colonialism, and Decolonization," appears to lack academic integrity, [may incite anti-semitism and hate](#), and is requesting that the university reconsider hosting it.

The repression of speech through firings, canceled venue bookings, doxxing, and other disciplinary actions extends beyond universities (for example, media outlets, school boards, private corporations, political bodies, policing bodies, hospitals, art galleries and more). Sheryl Nestel and Rowan Gaudet from Independent Jewish Voices have compiled a substantive report on the Canadian context in [“Unveiling the Chilly Climate: The Suppression of Speech on Palestine in Canada.”](#)

For example, academic, activist and artist networks across Canada have expressed deep concern over the [sudden departure](#) of Indigenous curator Wanda Nanibush from Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) on November 22. Leaked emails sent by the organization Israel Museum and Arts, Canada (IMAAC) to the AGO on October 16 has spurred concerns that Nanibush’s public comments on the Israeli occupation and bombardment of Palestine may have played a role in the decision.

Moreover, we are seeing the escalation of the clampdown on academic freedom across academe in the US and Europe as well. For example, the unprecedented decision of the [Harvard Law Review](#) to pull a publication by Palestinian doctoral candidate, Rabea Eghbariah, from the journal after it had gone through the standard editorial process; the [revocation of job offers](#) from law students who have signalled their support for Palestinians; the [cancellation](#) of a series of conferences, cultural events, ceremonies and positions with connections to Palestinians and with connection to advocacy for Palestinians/critique of Israel, and so on. Radhika Sainath details the extent of some of this repression in an article for the *Boston Review*, "[The Free Speech Exception: Support for Palestinian rights is facing a McCarthyite backlash](#)".

Universities and colleges across Canada have a responsibility to ensure that all their members are free from censorship, violence, intimidation, doxxing, harassment, and bullying. Universities also have the responsibility of [protecting and promoting the right to academic freedom](#) and [freedom of speech](#) on their campuses.

More Context:

Given the long histories of repression of scholars, activists and artists have identified the "[Palestine exception to free speech](#)" that documents "...the systemic cancellation of on-campus events, administrative sanctions against student groups and faculty, and punitive scrutiny of professors who conduct research or speak about Palestine." There are several high profile cases of this in the US and Canada. Events at York University in the late 2000s led to the unprecedented step of [CAUT publishing a stand-alone book](#) on questions of political and donor interference in a SSHRC-sponsored academic conference on different state models and resolutions to the ongoing human rights violations and violence in the Palestine/Israel context. The suppression of academic freedom has included attempts to stifle scholarly analysis, and in particular, the analytic that Israel is an apartheid state. See [Israel, Palestine and the Politics of Race](#) by Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Abigail Bakan for more information. For more information on the conditions under which Palestinians live, see [Mapping Israeli occupation](#).

In what [Henry Reichman](#) (professor emeritus of history at California State University) describes as "extraordinarily unusual" and "inappropriate", Isaac Herzog, President of the State of Israel, has also written a letter to "University and College Presidents Across the United States", urging them to fight antisemitism. As Jasmin Zine, Greg Bird and Sara Matthews have articulated in the [December 2020 CAUT Bulletin](#), the version of antisemitism articulated and forwarded by the state of Israel has equated criticism of Israel state policies with antisemitism. That the head of the state of a foreign country is attempting to influence views in colleges across North America is a dangerous encroachment on academic freedom.

Second, the long-standing attempt to silence Palestinian academics, activists and artists, as well as non-Palestinians critical of the Israeli state, is meant to undermine the [international human-rights consensus that the actions of the Israeli state in the occupied territories are crimes](#)

of apartheid. This includes the ongoing forced evictions and transfer of Palestinians in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, including Sheikh Jarrah - which are **illegal** under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the Fourth Geneva Convention. For a detailed explanation as to how the forced transfers of Palestinian people constitutes war crimes and crimes against humanity under international humanitarian and criminal law, see the [open letter](#) of members of the Palestinian Canadian Academics and Artists Network (PCAAAN) to the Hon. Marc Garneau (Minister of Foreign Affairs). [See *Human Rights Watch* [report](#), “A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution” for more information on how policies of the state of Israel constitute apartheid. The prominent Israeli human rights organization [B'Tselem](#) has similarly decried Israeli policies as a form of apartheid.]

Moreover, there is a growing consensus that the current catastrophic violence being enacted against Palestinians by the Israeli state constitutes a “textbook case of genocide”, as articulated by [Raz Segal](#) (associate professor of Holocaust and genocide studies at Stockton University), and [Craig Mokhiber](#) (the now former director of the New York office of the UN high commissioner for human rights), to name a few. This proposed motion comes at a time when Palestinian people are experiencing [extraordinary violence and suffering](#) at the hands of the Israeli state. As of November 22, at least 5840 Palestinian children have been killed in Gaza since October 7th, with more than 14,500 people killed in total. At least 53 [journalist and media workers](#) have been killed since October 7th, 2023, as well as [108 UNRWA staffers](#). Over 1.7 million people in Gaza are estimated to be internally displaced. With the health care and educational infrastructure in Gaza targeted by Israeli forces, the conditions on the ground are catastrophic. These numbers do not include those imprisoned, and injured, nor those killed, detained and injured in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

AUFA has bravely and unabashedly [condemned](#) past climates of censorship of teaching, researching and speaking about human rights and international law violations against Palestinians and Palestine in the past, we are seeking this support now.