

LETTER TEMPLATE – STUDENT GROUPS UNDER ASSAULT

To Whom It May Concern:

We write this letter in support of [name of group] at [name of university], a campus group that advocates for Palestinian rights and against Israeli state violence and racism. The university's disciplining of the group for political speech/condoning of the criticism by off-campus, partisan groups opposed to the activism of its members is cause for alarm since it seems that an attempt is being made to censor a student group and selectively deny freedom of expression and academic freedom.

Such repressive measures by the administration dictate to Palestinian/Arab/Muslim students and Palestine solidarity activists the means by which they must engage in political speech. But it is not up to the administration to prescribe the forms which political speech must take. Students should not be forced to engage in only the forms of speech that make Zionist or Jewish students comfortable. The disciplinary move against [name of group] constitutes punishment when the students have done nothing wrong, which runs the risk of chilling legitimate speech and endorsing anti-Palestinian/Arab racism and Islamophobia. It rewards Zionist students and groups for their transparent attempts to lobby the administration to silence [name of group], encouraging students to consult the administration or contact off-campus lobby groups any time they encounter difficult political speech.

Furthermore, by legitimizing the discourse of "hurt feelings" to shut down Palestinian rights activism [or imposing on students an interfaith dialogue as a programmatic solution, or asking that students provide the "other perspective"] the university seems to be endorsing the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is simply an interpersonal dispute between people who dislike each other because of their different religions or because of some primordial religious conflict, and between parties that share a parity in power. This is in opposition to the conflict's roots in colonialism and systematic violations of human rights between racialized groups who are embedded in a fundamentally asymmetric relation of power. We respectfully suggest that Palestinians, not university administrations, should decide how to represent the Palestine issue, and that their right to engage in free speech and self-representation should be upheld, not trampled upon as has been the case here.

[Name of group]'s critical engagement with Israeli policy is a laudable example of campus activism, anti-racist critique, and constitutionally protected free speech, and we hope that [name of university] will encourage and help facilitate that type of student engagement rather than suppress and penalize it. Indeed, giving the group a chance to share a perspective that is often suppressed or absent in mainstream media and even campus curricula will help produce a more informed student body on a key global issue of our times.

The decision to discipline/censure/not take action to defend the [name of group] can only be read in light of the pressure brought to bear on the administration by Zionist organizations that are known to be anti-Palestinian. [Name of university]'s decision is now and will continue to be understood as censorship of political speech critical of Israel and censorship of lawful activism

on behalf of Palestinian human rights and antiracist solidarity/BDS activism. We can only conclude that fairness and the fundamental mission of the university to protect freedom of thought, critical disagreement and the political speech of its scholars and students, regardless of race, religion, and nationality, have been superseded by other values. What are the values to take the place of fairness, equality, intellectual freedom and freedom to speak politically? Several administrations have recently proposed “civility” while condoning the uncivil speech of outside pressure groups that are anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic (<http://www.ijan.org/resources/business-of-backlash/>).

In fact it is not antisemitic to criticize the conduct of the state of Israel (<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/548748b1e4b083fc03ebf70e/t/55a006a3e4b01f5eb3cfd32e/1436550819443/Legal+FAQ+BDS+March+2015.pdf>). It is not “hate speech” to challenge violations of international law and internationally recognized human rights standards. Such criticism is no less protected because some individuals may find it upsetting. As the U.S. Supreme Court recognized in *Terminiello v. Chicago*, speech “may indeed best serve its high purpose when it induces a condition of unrest, creates dissatisfaction with conditions as they are, or even stirs people to anger. Speech is often provocative and challenging. It may strike at prejudices and preconceptions and have profound unsettling effects as it presses for acceptance of an idea.” Protection of free speech rights “is nowhere more vital” than on campuses (*Keyishian v. Bd. Of Regents of Univ. of State of N.Y.*). In addition, numerous academics, including Israelis, have argued recently in widely read scholarly works that it may instead *really* be antisemitic *not* to criticize the state of Israel for its thoroughly documented violations of Palestinian human rights, rather than turning the other cheek, and to conflate Jewish identity with unquestioning support for the state of Israel by upholding the coupling of Jewish identity with the Israeli state than many Jewish scholars have challenged. To deny students and faculty their right to explore these issues on a university campus that prides itself on tolerance and diversity would dishonor [name of university]’s historical mission, violate fundamental academic freedoms, and needlessly incite unreason and disunity on the [name of university] campus and beyond.

The mission of a university is to secure, promote and protect the freedom of speech and thought of its students and scholars. It is not the mission of a university to provide an uncritical venue for the state of Israel to propagate its political message. It is not the mission of a university to censure student activism for fear of repercussions in the form of loss of alumni, corporate or foundation dollars, as has been rumored. Indeed, [name of university] should be doing everything in its power to allay fears that special interests of outside pressure groups have any influence on campus decisions affecting the constitution of student groups or the free expression of ideas that trouble a powerful status quo.

Furthermore, administrators should remember that in a post-9/11 moment, Arab and Muslim students already feel targeted and scrutinized for their political allegiances and beliefs, and state surveillance has established a climate where many feel anxious about public political activism or expression of criticism of U.S. state policies and foreign policy. The university must be the space where students, regardless of their religious and racial background or their political beliefs, feel safe and it is a shame when campuses become places where students who already feel vulnerable are made to feel more unsafe

We urge all universities to resist outside pressure to punish students for their political speech, and to respond with the respect for students' constitutional rights and academic freedom that it is the university's duty to protect and to promote. For our part, we will stand by such students to defend their constitutional rights to free speech when they exercise them, and challenge attempts to silence them solely for their political views.

Sincerely,

[name of authorial organization]