

LETTER TEMPLATE – FACULTY UNDER ASSAULT

To Whom It May Concern:

[Name of authorial organization] condemns in the strongest possible terms the negative actions taken against [name of faculty] by [name of university]. This negative action constitutes a blatant violation of Professor [name of faculty]’s academic freedom and an insidious assault upon [him or her] and on those who uphold the right to honest and ethical critique in the academy. We are gravely concerned about this attack on a leading scholar in [name of discipline] whose important scholarship has made [him or her] a significant voice in [his or her] field.

We strenuously protest the targeting of Professor [name of faculty] for [his or her] political viewpoints, which should be protected under the First Amendment, and demand that the university protect [his or her] rights to engage in political discourse on and off campus. Indeed the negative actions against Professor [name of faculty] are part of a larger pattern of systematic squelching of free speech that, in effect, supports human rights violations against Palestinians by disciplining or censoring those who speak out about these violations by Israel. By labeling any and all critique of the Israeli state as “anti-Semitic” or “uncivil,” and discrediting any such criticism as a form of impermissible or hate speech, any individual with the temerity to issue a position that challenges the status quo is subject to silencing or dismissal. This creates a chilling climate for scholars and students and endorses anti-Palestinian/Arab racism.

[Name of faculty]’s academic speech and political views are protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. That dissent from the status quo (even when in the realm of protected speech) can become grounds for censure or job loss should trouble every one of us in academe or social justice movements. At stake is the preservation of the university’s integrity in which critical thought should flourish, not be monitored and punished.

Nonetheless, any claim that students, or colleagues, have the *right* to be free from what they consider uncomfortable criticism or from being subjected to views contrary to those they hold, is profoundly threatening to the fundamental tenets of university life and intellectual community, and the concept of free speech itself. Mental and moral discomfort are often essential conditions for serious learning and thoughtful consideration of views that challenge our preconceptions. While both federal and state law as well as university policy protect students from discrimination or antagonism based on their religious, ethnic, gender and other identities, no law could possibly protect students or faculty from hearing challenges to their political, religious or cultural beliefs simply on the grounds of their identification with them, so long as such discourse is conducted in a non-coercive and non-violent manner.

In fact it is not antisemitic to criticize the conduct of the state of Israel. 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, and to conflate Jewish identity with unquestioning support for the state of Israel by upholding the coupling of Jewish identity with the Israeli state that many Jewish scholars have challenged. To deny students and faculty of all backgrounds 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.

It seems that “academic freedom” has become a privilege, rather than a right, extended only to those who would preserve the status quo, and an alibi behind which those who hold power protect their positions while dispensing with the rights and views of oppressed peoples and movements, and the colleagues who align with and support those struggles. This action by [name of university] is a profound infringement of the freedom of intellectual inquiry on which the university is ostensibly based. Any organization, internal or external, that seeks to limit the free and full deliberation of any viewpoint, or the representation of perspectives inimical to it, trespasses on a principle of academic life so fundamental that the university would be unimaginable without it.

[Name of authorial organization] encourages critical analysis of the impact of Israeli occupation and apartheid on Palestinian civil society, including students and educators and its ongoing racist policies against and ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian population. Yet it is apparent that faculty who allow their students to exercise *their* academic freedom to learn and think about political movements and to engage in antiracist analysis and activism are being singled out and censored by campaigns of intimidation and harassment that aim to suppress and silence criticism of the Israeli state. The collusion of university administrators with such repressive and racially biased campaigns sends a chilling message to U.S. scholars that they do not have academic freedom in the case of teaching about Israel/Palestine, that there is a “Palestinian exception to the First Amendment” (see: <http://www.usacbi.org/category/academic-defense/>).

Indeed the decision to [discipline or fire or deny tenure to] Professor [name of faculty] can only be read in light of the pressure being brought to bear on universities across North America and Europe by Zionist organizations. Such actions reward Zionist scholars and other campus advocates of Israeli hegemony and racist policies for their frequent, transparent attempts to lobby administrations to silence critical speech, and encourages faculty to self-censor and desist from political activity. [Name of university]’s decision is now and will continue to be understood as censorship of academic speech critical of Israel and censorship of lawful activism on behalf of Palestinian human rights, as in the case of the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign which was boycotted by 5,000-7,000 scholars. Several administrations have recently proposed “civility” as a guideline for academic discourse while endorsing the uncivil speech of outside pressure groups that are anti-Arab or Islamophobic (see: <http://www.ijan.org/resources/business-of-backlash/>).

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 academic speech for fear of repercussions in the form of loss of corporate or foundation dollars, as has been rumored. [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 design of curricula or the free expression of controversial ideas.

We urge all universities to resist outside pressure to punish faculty for their academic speech, and to respond with the respect for faculty's constitutional rights that it is the university's duty to protect and to promote. For our part, we will stand by such faculty 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]