CAIR

UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATOR'S GUIDE TO AN UNHOSTILE CAMPUS

By addressing complaints thoughtfully on a case-by-case basis and promoting open dialogue, universities can ensure that students feel safe while also upholding the right to engage in political discourse.

Maryam Hasan, Ed.D.

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CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.

Direct questions about this report to: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 453 New Jersey Avenue, SE, Washington, DC 20003, Tel: 202-488-8787, info@cair.com, www.cair.com

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INTRODUCTION

The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. CAIR's mission is to protect civil rights, enhance understanding of Islam, promote justice, and empower American Muslims. This guide is for administrators of higher education institutions who seek to create and maintain an unhostile campus environment for Muslim, Arab, and other students, faculty, and staff perceived to be Muslim or Arab. The guide is part of CAIR's Unhostile Campus Campaign, a project aimed at fostering a campus environment where Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, Jewish, and other students, faculty, and staff who oppose genocide enjoy free speech and academic freedom and are not subjected to state force or university discipline due to their viewpoints.

The definitions of the terms anti-Muslim racism or Islamophobia and anti-Palestinianism are included to provide the necessary context to identify and address these forms of prejudice. Readers may consider adopting these definitions into their own anti-bias policies. A key component of the guide is to outline the problems that create an unwelcoming campus atmosphere for those standing up for human rights, highlighting the experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and bias these groups face in academic settings. The guide offers practical strategies for creating an inclusive, respectful, and supportive campus environment that affirms the dignity and rights of individuals, allowing them to fully exercise their free speech and academic freedom.

This guide offers recommendations for best practices of university administrators, including promoting free speech and academic freedom and safely facilitating complaints from student protesters. It includes designing equitable policies that foster open dialogue while cultivating a campus culture that is open, welcoming, and inviting to Muslim, Arab, and other individuals who often face systemic hostility. It also explains how university administrators should establish support systems and respect the religious expression rights of Muslim students, ensuring they are informed of their entitlements within the campus community. By addressing these critical areas, the guide seeks to empower institutions to create spaces where diversity is celebrated and all members can thrive.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

ISLAMOPHOBIA

In short, Islamophobia is anti–Muslim racism. Islamophobia is a fear, hatred, or prejudice toward Islam and Muslims that results in a pattern of discrimination and oppression. Islamophobia creates a distorted understanding of Islam and Muslims by transforming the global and historical faith tradition of Islam, along with the rich history of the cultural and ethnic diversity of its adherents, into a set of stereotyped characteristics most often reducible to themes of violence, civilizational subversion, and fundamental otherness. Islamophobia must also be understood as a system of both religious and racial animosity that is perpetuated by private citizens as well as cultural and political structures.

ANTI-PALESTINIAN RACISM

Anti-Palestinian racism is a form of anti-Arab racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames, or dehumanizes Palestinians and their narratives.[1] It seeks to villainize both groups, intertwining anti-Muslim hate with anti-Arab and, specifically, anti-Palestinian racism. Anti-Muslim rhetoric is used to justify anti-Palestinian racism, and anti-Palestinian racism is also weaponized against those who are presumed to be Palestinian, including Muslims and non-Muslims. Anti-Palestinian racism takes on many forms, including (1)justifying violence against Palestinians, (2)failing to acknowledge Palestinians as an Indigenous people with a collective identity, belonging, and rights in relation to occupied and historic Palestine, (3)erasing the human rights and equal dignity and worth of Palestinians, (4)excluding or pressuring others to exclude Palestinian perspectives, Palestinians and their [non-Palestinian] allies, (5)defaming Palestinians and their [non-Palestinian] allies with slander such as being inherently antisemitic, a terrorist threat/sympathizer or opposed to democratic values.[2]

PROBLEMS OF A HOSTILE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

Efforts to suppress free speech and academic freedoms have increasingly targeted student protestors advocating against the genocide in Gaza[3]. These actions include the deployment of law enforcement to intimidate and penalize students engaged in peaceful demonstrations, creating an atmosphere of fear and discouragement. Rather than addressing the substance of these protests, authorities, and institutions often resort to punitive measures, overshadowing the legitimate concerns raised by those who support Palestinian human rights. In some cases, new policies have been introduced that undermine the ability of these groups to organize and express dissent, effectively silencing their voices under the guise of maintaining order. Although campus administration may lawfully impose content-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions on speech, these actions often appear to disproportionately target specific viewpoints, raising concerns about selective enforcement.

Anti-genocide student, faculty, and staff protesters from diverse backgrounds have increasingly faced a troubling array of punitive measures by university administrators, including doxing, censorship, bullying, and disciplinary charges. In some instances, university administrators minimized bias incidents or doxing of these groups. These tactics often aim to suppress dissent and silence advocacy against genocide[4], creating a hostile environment for peaceful student activism. Such tactics diminish the integrity of academic spaces as defenders of free expression and critical dialogue, replacing them with a climate of intimidation and suppression that stifles meaningful discourse on pressing global issues.

The perpetuation of Islamophobia on campuses contributes to the marginalization of Muslim, Palestinian, Arab, and other students, including those perceived to belong to these communities. Discrimination against these groups often goes unaddressed, with reports of bias and harassment ignored, leaving students feeling unwelcome and excluded from the broader campus community. This neglect exacerbates their vulnerability to Islamophobic attacks, hate crimes, and racial profiling, creating an environment where they feel targeted, threatened, and unsafe. In the May 2024 report, "Hostile: How Universities Target Anti-Genocide Protestors While Enabling Anti-Palestinian Racism and Islamophobia," CAIR documented the different ways in which many university administrators have created hostile campus environments for Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, and other students, faculty, and staff in support of opposition to genocide.

Compounding this issue is the enabling of anti-Palestinian racism, which is frequently conflated with Islamophobia. By conflating anti-Palestinian racism with Islamophobia, institutions and individuals often fail to recognize anti-Palestinian racism as its own form of systemic racism that affects Palestinians regardless of their religious identity. This conflation also perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Muslims and Arabs, as well as Jews, by implying that these groups are inherently antagonistic toward one another, thereby undermining

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efforts for mutual understanding and peace. Many incorrectly view Palestine-Israel as a religious conflict – Muslims versus Jews. As a result, Muslims may experience anti-Palestinian racism over their perceived support for Palestine. Palestinians may experience Islamophobia, irrespective of their religion.[5] Scholars and activists have critiqued this conflation, noting its erasure of the diverse religious backgrounds of Palestinians and its oversimplification of Israel's occupation[6] and apartheid[7] by reducing it to a matter of religious belief. Such framing perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Muslims, Arabs, Palestinians, and Jews, suggesting these groups are driven by preordained animosity and making peaceful coexistence seem unattainable. This misrepresentation not only distorts the realities of these communities but also undermines efforts to address systemic racism and build inclusive, safe campus spaces for all.[8]

HOW TO CREATE AN UNHOSTILE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Administrators should avoid making abrupt or unclear changes to campus policies in response to protests and instead promote free speech and academic freedom in policies and the school culture to create an unhostile campus environment. In unanimity with the First Amendment, university policies should be designed to teach the value and joys of academic freedom and freedom of speech that are fundamental to higher education in the U.S. University administrators should permit the following:

1. **Demonstrating in public viewing areas and during accessible times**
    a. Allow students to protest in public viewing areas
    b. Provide times to protest that are easily accessible for all campus community to attend

2. **Expressing personal views on genocide, occupation, and apartheid**
    a. Encourage non-intimidating expressions of personal views on genocide, occupation, and apartheid
    b. Train faculty and staff to facilitate open, welcoming, and inviting free speech in classrooms and on campus
    c. Maintain a campus environment that does not restrict the free expression of political phrases such as "From the River to the Sea," and "Free Palestine"
    i. While some listeners may find such phrases offensive, feeling offended is not sufficient reason to bypass First Amendment protections for freedom of speech, label a political phrase "hate speech," or otherwise censor it[9]

3. **Displaying cultural and political symbols**
    a. Protect students' rights to display flags that display their national or ethnic origin, including the Palestinian flag and its colors, during student events, at peaceful protests, and within their personal spaces. Policies about the display of flags or other symbols must not single out the Palestinian flag for censorship
    b. Protect students' rights to wear their national origin and ethnic colors, including Palestinian colors and keffiyeh, the traditional Middle Eastern scarf.

4. **Hosting vigils or designing memorials**
    a. Palestinian events, such as vigils honoring the deceased in Gaza, should be equally respected and permitted to proceed if they adhere to widely accepted and practiced university policy
    b. Respect student artwork memorializing the deceased in Gaza

PROTECT STUDENT PROTESTORS

To create an unhostile environment on campus, university administrators should take it upon themselves to uphold free speech values and ensure that their own university policies on these subjects avoid discrimination.[10] Student, faculty, and staff protesters advocating for Palestinian human rights should be allowed to conduct peaceful demonstrations without law enforcement assigned to disperse them. When administrators call on law enforcement to disperse protestors on campus, law enforcement officers have frequently used batons, tear gas, and/or pepper spray and have made unnecessary arrests.[11] This deployment or approval by administrators creates a hostile campus environment filled with fear and intimidation and jeopardizes the safety of students, faculty, and staff.

Instead, let the protesters educate others about their concerns by not interfering in peaceful protests. The administration should develop safety plans that protect protesters without infringing on their ability to assemble or express dissent. The safety plans should include regular training for campus security to de-escalate tensions, prevent confrontations, as well as prohibit intimidation tactics used against student protestors. Campus security, as well as other campus administrators, should be provided with specific training to avoid anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian racism. Universities should avoid using police force to suppress student expression and instead uphold their human rights responsibilities by facilitating peaceful protests, protecting students from violence and intimidation, and ensuring all students' rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are respected, regardless of viewpoint.[12]

FOSTER OPEN DIALOGUE AND EDUCATION

Administrators should serve as mediators rather than adversaries during student demonstrations to create an unhostile campus environment. Additionally, students should be permitted to invite mediators and advocates (faculty and staff) to meetings between them and administrators. Administrators must be transparent by clearly communicating protest policies, including designating visible spaces that are safe and inclusive for all student protesters. Administrators should refrain from taking punitive actions against students participating in peaceful protests and engage in good faith negotiations with student protesters, who have organized clear, legitimate, and widely supported demands for divestment from companies that profit from occupation, apartheid, and genocide.[13] When both parties come to an agreement, commit to timelines for accountability. It is essential to include marginalized communities in the decision-making process for these policies and to ensure that students are aware of an open-door policy for any complaints they may have. Administrators should assert their commitment to free speech and uphold their responsibility as leaders of higher educational institutions by acting to serve the needs of the campus community.

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ADDRESS ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-PALESTINIAN RACISM

CAIR received 8,061 complaints nationwide in 2023, marking the highest number of complaints CAIR has ever recorded in its 30-year history. Nearly half of all complaints received in 2023 were reported in the final three months of the year. The 2023 wave of anti-Muslim incidents, a 56 percent jump over the previous year, surpassed the period following the implementation of President Trump's Muslim Ban, which saw a 32 percent jump over the previous year.[14] Criticism of Israel's government or Zionism is not inherently problematic.[15] Administrators should adopt clear policies that condemn all forms of hate, protect free speech, and provide education to help students and staff understand these distinctions. By addressing complaints thoughtfully on a case-by-case basis and promoting open dialogue, universities can ensure that students feel safe while also upholding the right to engage in political discourse. These are ways university administrators should address Islamophobia on campus:

1. Identify and collaborate with local and national organizations, like CAIR, that align with the university's mission and consider their resources. Sign up for their email newsletters and follow them on social media to stay informed. Collaborating in an organized manner strengthens individual efforts and furthers the movement against prejudice and hate.
2. Encourage students, faculty, and staff to work together on practical community projects with people of various diverse backgrounds to build interpersonal relationships and develop solutions to shared problems.
3. Organize coalitions of community leaders representing different cultural/ethnic/religious groups and community sectors (such as schools, businesses, etc.) to examine existing policies and determine what needs to change.
4. Challenges can be transformed into opportunities for growth and collaboration. In instances where a place of worship is subjected to vandalism, it is essential for the community to come together to facilitate its restoration. This collective action will not only demonstrate our unity but also exemplify the strength of our community in a manner that fosters positivity and resilience.
5. Attend training in Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism to foster empathy and create a more inclusive community.
6. Conduct a campus climate survey to better understand Islamophobia and/or anti-Palestinian racism as it is experienced on campus.
7. Ensure that resources to combat doxxing are accessible to students targeted by malicious external actors for participating in protests.

Establishing support systems for students facing Islamophobia is essential for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. Schools must act swiftly to investigate reports and discipline those responsible for harassment. It's also important to eliminate any hostile environments by offering counseling services, promoting awareness of Islamic culture, and fostering open dialogue. Additionally, training staff and students to recognize Islamophobic behavior and setting clear reporting protocols can help cultivate a culture of respect and understanding. By addressing these issues, we can effectively support affected students and enhance the educational atmosphere for everyone.

RESPECT THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF MUSLIMS ON CAMPUS

Administrators create an unhostile campus environment by protecting and respecting the religious practices of Muslims [16]. CAIR provides "An Educator's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices" [17] which details religious observances practiced by American Muslims that university administrators, faculty, and staff should know. For instance, Administrators should provide Muslims with a clean, safe space to pray and congregate for Friday sermons to facilitate a sense of belonging on campus. Muslims and Arabs who choose to wear religious and ethnic articles of clothing, such as hijabs for women or kufis for men, including wearing keffiyeh, should be protected through accommodating policies. Additionally, the observance of religious holidays like Ramadan and the festival of Eid-ul-Fitr should be honored at the same level as other holidays on campus, such as Christmas and Hannukah. In these ways, administrators can support Muslim students and influence a decrease in Islamophobia on campus.

CONCLUSION

This guide emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic hostility, including Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism, while safeguarding free speech and academic freedom. By promoting clear policies, protecting the rights of protesters, fostering open dialogue, and respecting religious practices, universities can actively combat discrimination and create safe spaces for Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, Jewish, and other students, faculty, and staff who oppose genocide. The recommendations aim to empower campuses to uphold human rights, celebrate diversity, and support all students, faculty, and staff in thriving without fear of harassment or exclusion. Adopting these strategies ensures that academic institutions remain true to their role as defenders of free expression, critical dialogue, and social justice.

Endnotes

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