Universities must intensify efforts to eradicate campus antisemitism: Sergio R. Karas for Inside Policy

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By Sergio R. Karas, June 2, 2025

As the Trump administration cracks down on antisemitism at American universities and colleges, anti-Jewish hate continues to flourish in Canada thanks to lax enforcement of hate speech and anti-discrimination laws – and a lack of political will to stand up for Canada's Jewish community.

Like in the United States, many of the ringleaders of antisemitic "pro-Palestine" protests and campus disruptions in Canada are foreign students. Waves of antisemitic protests, sparked by the Hamas terror attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, have terrorized Jewish communities in both countries.

Indeed, some foreign students in Canada have even misused their visa privileges to attempt to commit criminal acts. For instance, in September 2024, Canadian authorities arrested Muhammad Shahzeb Khan, a Pakistani national in Canada on a study permit, for allegedly planning an attack on the Jewish community in New York. He told an undercover law enforcement officer that "October 7 and October 11 were the best days to target Jews."

The Trump administration's ongoing battle with Havard University is the latest sortie in a larger war against antisemitism in academe.

The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently issued a formal demand to Harvard , requiring detailed records concerning its international student visa holders. In a letter addressed to the university, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem stated that Harvard must provide information about any illegal or violent activities involving these students or risk losing its certification under the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). The program allows noncitizens to study in the United States.

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Noem emphasized that hosting foreign students is a privilege, not a right, and accused the university of fostering a hostile environment for Jewish students by failing to adequately address antisemitism. She also pointed out Harvard's financial reliance on its more than 10,000 international students and criticized its administration for allegedly enabling antisemitic and extremist views. The letter demanded records of student misconduct, threats to safety, disciplinary actions related to protests, disruptions to learning, and visa-related coursework. It warned that failure to comply within the designated period would lead to automatic withdrawal of Harvard's SEVP certification.

This was no empty threat, because the Trump administration just announced that it will no longer allow Harvard to host foreign students. Additionally, DHS announced the withdrawal of $2 million in grants to the university, and the Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism froze further multibillion-dollar funding after Harvard declared it would not comply with the federal government's demands. The matter is now before the courts. Other universities, such as Cornell, Northwestern, Brown, Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia, have come under scrutiny from the White House for failing to adequately address antisemitism on their campuses.

Many foreign students organized anti-Israel protests that featured violence committed against Jewish students: the case of Mahmoud Khalil, a Syrian graduate student and Greencard holder by marriage, who led protests at Columbia University and is currently in deportation proceedings in the United States for his role and alleged ties to the Hamas terrorist organization, is just one example.

Canada also has serious problems with vetting the foreign students it lets into the country to study at Canadian institutions. Consider the case of Chiheb Esseghaier, a Tunisian national who came to Canada as an international student in 2010 to pursue doctoral studies at the Université du Québec. In 2013, authorities arrested him for plotting to bomb a passenger train travelling from New York to Toronto; he was later convicted. Investigations revealed that Esseghaier became radicalized after arriving in Canada due to his isolation and exposure to radical sermons at a local mosque. His case is frequently cited in Canadian security policy discussions as an example of the potential risks associated with insufficient monitoring of international students. Canadian authorities have long recognized the need to strengthen security screening in the international student program, yet they have failed to do so.

In Canada, Designated Learning Institutions (DLIs) must report the enrolment status of international students twice a year, in spring and fall, to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), to verify compliance with study permit conditions. They must submit the information within 60 days of receiving the request. While DLIs do not directly report criminal activities to IRCC, they must update a student's enrolment status if the student is suspended, expelled, or withdrawn due to criminal conduct. Criminal matters are typically reported to local law enforcement under provincial or institutional policies, and law enforcement agencies may pass along serious offences to IRCC or the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), potentially affecting the student's immigration status.

Following widespread pro-Palestinian illegal protest encampments setting up on American campuses, students across major Canadian universities set up similar tent cities, including at the University of Toronto, McGill University, the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, the University of Ottawa, and Western University, to name a few. The protests, intended to express solidarity with Palestinians, were also rife with antisemitism and calls for violence against Jews.

McGill's "peaceful" protest in late April 2024 quickly turned into a hotbed of intolerance. Students at McGill rejected the university's offer of concessions (despite similar proposals leading to conflict resolution at other universities) and sent masked individuals to follow and harass senior administrators at their homes and offices. The encampment at McGill displayed profane graffiti and even featured a hanging effigy of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu donning a striped outfit that resembled the uniforms that Jews were forced to wear in concentration camps during the Holocaust, a deeply offensive and disturbing image. International students have reportedly been active participants in pro-Gaza protests across Canada. According to CityNews, the protest encampments at the University of Toronto included international students, particularly those from regions directly affected by the conflict. Assistant Professor Chandni Desai confirmed their involvement. *University Affairs* also mentioned that many international students, especially those with personal or familial ties to the Middle East, participated in the protests.

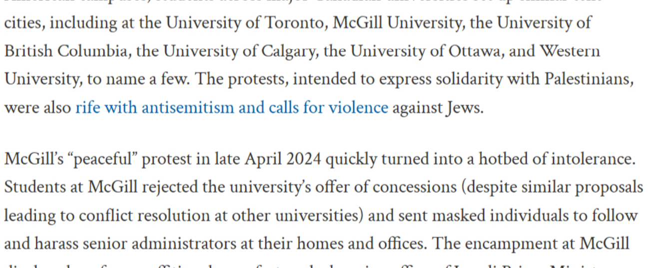
Many universities have failed to uphold their own codes of conduct in responding to encampments and antisemitic incidents. The codes prohibit actions such as disrupting university activities, intimidating or threatening others, unauthorized occupation of campus property, and vandalism. Despite this, universities allowed protest encampments to continue for weeks, even as students blocked access to buildings, defaced property with hateful symbols, and targeted Jewish students and faculty with harassment. These actions directly violate rules against disruption, harassment, and unauthorized use of university spaces. However, universities took little or no disciplinary action against those involved. In many cases, campus authorities and local police declined to intervene, framing these events as protected free speech rather than enforcing rules or laws broken by the protestors. As a result, they permitted antisemitism to grow unchecked, creating unsafe, hostile environments for Jewish students and while failing to protect the broader academic community.

Although some frame the campus encampments as free speech, many student protesters are breaking the law and violating university codes of conduct. Students are free to protest peacefully, however, they must also comply with university policies and Canadian law. Free speech allows individuals to express their opinions, even controversial or unpopular ones, but when the expression of an opinion crosses into illegal activity, such as vandalism, trespassing, or the incitement of violence, it is no longer protected under the banner of free speech.

It is time for governments and academia to act: the current reporting requirements for international students are inadequate and must be significantly strengthened. DLIs should be required to report not only foreign student registration, academic progress, and attendance to IRCC at regular intervals (e.g., each semester), but also incidents involving misconduct or disciplinary actions. This should include information about students' known illegal activity, violent or threatening behaviour towards students, staff, or faculty, participation in protests that result in disciplinary action, support for designated terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, and obstruction of the academic learning environment.

The federal government should impose conditions on study permits to ensure that international students comply with their primary purpose – studying full-time in Canada. These conditions should include regular reporting of enrollment status by DLIs, mandatory notification to IRCC if a student withdraws or reduces their course load, and linking study permit validity to academic performance. Ottawa should also restrict work eligibility to students actively enrolled full-time and in good standing. Conditional permits with periodic reviews may be issued to high-risk applicants, and Post Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) eligibility should depend on consistent compliance with all the rules and obligations imposed by universities. Students should also be required to take a mandatory orientation on rights and responsibilities upon arrival in Canada. The minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship should have the authority to administratively revoke the study permits and visas of international students who pose risks to the public or national security, like the authority enjoyed by the United States Secretary of State.

Evidence from the United Kingdom demonstrates that more stringent monitoring of foreign students has contributed to improved compliance with visa conditions. Under the UK's Tier 4 visa system, universities must maintain sponsorship responsibilities, including reporting students who fail to attend classes or withdraw from their programs. Institutions that fail to comply can lose their sponsorship status, a powerful incentive that has helped reduce visa abuse, according to the Home Office.



A study by the Migration Policy Institute found that countries that integrate academic monitoring into their immigration systems, such as Australia and New Zealand, experience higher rates of student retention and better compliance with visa regulations. Additionally, orientation programs on rights and responsibilities have been shown to reduce cultural misunderstandings and improve international student integration. In Australia, the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act* mandates such sessions, helping students understand their legal obligations and supporting social cohesion on campus.

While Canada has taken some steps to address university obligations through legislation such as the *Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act, 2024*, which requires publicly assisted colleges and universities to implement and report on anti-racism and anti-hate policies, there is room for more robust enforcement.

Canada should adopt elements of the US approach, such as linking compliance with these obligations to institutional privileges or funding eligibility to proactive efforts against antisemitism. Canada should also adopt policies like those in force in the UK and Australia that mandate educational institutions to monitor and report academic compliance by foreign students and require those students to undergo initial orientations to understand their responsibilities.

Canada should also implement policies and legislative initiatives such as the *No Visas for Anti-Semitic Students Act* introduced in the US Congress to combat university encampments and antisemitic harassment. This law aims to revoke visas for international students of pro-terrorist protesters, enabling immigration officials to remove foreign students engaged in illegal activities.

Canada must take vigorous and unequivocal action , sending a clear message to international students and educational institutions – protestors who spread antisemitism and hate on campuses will be dealt with swiftly and harshly.

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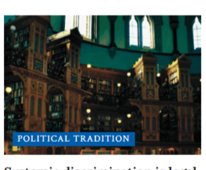

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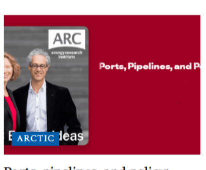

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