

May 3rd, 2016

Dr. Mamdouh Shoukri
Office of the President
York University
1050 Kaneff Tower
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, ON M3J 1P3
Email: president@yorku.ca

Re: Your efforts to create an inclusive and respectful environment at York University

Dear President Shoukri,

As a community of organizations interested in a vibrant and open exchange of ideas on Canadian campuses, we want to applaud your hard work to establish and maintain such an environment at York U. We have followed the media coverage of various incidents at York U. over the past few months, and have been thrilled to see how carefully you've fostered an open, diverse, and sensitive culture at York.

Each of the undersigned organizations has had a number of student members – Muslim, Christian and Jewish – who have attended York U. in recent years, and these students speak fondly of an environment where they felt welcomed and valued. Many of them point to York's rich and long-standing tradition of diversity and inclusion within the university's rich multi-cultural community. We understand that these impressions are due in part to the university's established principles and policies on inclusion and diversity, and the university's many programs promoting inclusion and harmony on campus.

We were especially impressed by the Committee on inclusion that you set up at York. Clearly, inclusion is an important and broad issue that should factor in the perspectives of individuals across the academic community. It's exciting to see an advisory committee that includes members from so many different departments and disciplines: such a committee is sure to provide a rich perspective on whatever issues may be brought before it.

We have heard of calls to purge the York U. inclusion committee of certain viewpoints, and this seems entirely inappropriate. How can an "inclusion committee" be set up in such a way that it excludes certain viewpoints? Any group or individual that pushes for

such an approach is clearly more interested in a committee which silences viewpoints rather than one which gives voice to broad perspectives.

York U. is a valued academic institution within Canada's democracy. In your statements to the media, it is clear that you stand against all forms of racism and intolerance on campus. At the same time, you have demonstrated the wisdom to know that you cannot and should not seek to erase all controversy. Students at York, like all Canadian citizens, should expect to put up with some controversy in our free and democratic society. In fact, by fostering a marketplace of diverse viewpoints, York U. helps young Canadian citizens mature in this way.

Some of the criticism you have faced centers around the university's approach to boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) activism. It is regrettable that many refer to the BDS movement as "anti-Israel." The objectives of BDS align with international law and Canadian policy on the conflict, as BDS calls for an end to Israel's occupation and colonization of all Palestinian land^{1 2} and the dismantling of Israel's Wall³; full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel;⁴ and respect for the rights of Palestinian refugees.^{5 6} It's not "anti-Israel" to expect Israel to meet its obligations under international law. Groups or individuals who may characterize proponents of the BDS movement as "anti-Israel," or even "intolerant" or "discriminatory" are disingenuous and seek to mislead. Nevertheless, if such voices exist on campus, they should nevertheless be heard alongside all other voices within York's democratic fora.

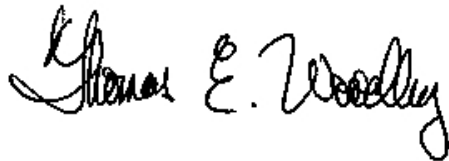
It is also regrettable that some Jewish students state that they feel unsafe at York U. The mainstream BDS movement in no way targets Jews, whether in Canada or in Israel. Instead, the BDS movement calls only for a change in Israeli government behaviour. There is no reason for such students to feel fearful of BDS activism at York – they are obviously not responsible for the decisions of a government half a world away. Of course, any student of any background who faces a real threat of any sort should immediately contact campus police or Toronto police. Canada has a comprehensive criminal code to deal with any threatening or illegal behaviour.

We have all heard stories of citizens in our society who live in fear for various reasons, and it is deeply saddening to everyone. Even in a liberal democracy like Canada, women can sometimes feel threatened or unsafe, not to mention members of the LGBT community, or members of other minorities in our society. Nevertheless, Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not try to guarantee "freedom from fear" as this would be impracticable. Those who insist that you ensure that all students at York "feel safe" are setting an impossible goal, and waiting to blame you when you fail. It is best, as you have sought to do at York U., to welcome all views, and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to share and understand perspectives with others in a respectful environment.

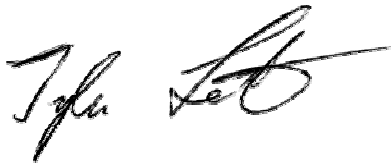
The community organizations which have signed this letter represent the diverse community in the GTA – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, atheist and others. Our collective goal is to ensure that the York U. administration acts in a manner consistent with its

stated goal of encouraging inclusion and diversity. Our desire has always been, and remains, to work with you and your administration to achieve this goal. We thank and support you for the meaningful ways you have consistently dealt with issues at York, and recognize York as a North American leader in cultivating a vibrant, diverse and inclusive campus community.

Sincerely,



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Tyler Levitan
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Steve Berube, Marianna Harris

Rev. Steve Berube and Rev. Marianna Harris
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¹ Canada considers Israel's presence in the West Bank a military occupation and opposes Israel's colonies (a.k.a. "settlements"): "Canadian Policy on Key Issues in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Global Affairs Canada Website, Government of Canada, http://www.international.gc.ca/name-anmo/peace_process-processus_paix/canadian_policy-politique_canadienne.aspx?lang=eng accessed Feb. 23, 2016

² The UN Security Council resolution 242 of 1967 calls on Israel to withdraw from the territories it had recently occupied, in accordance with the UN Charter, and the Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 49, which prohibits the colonization of militarily occupied land.

³ The International Court of Justice decision of 2004 called for the dismantling of Israel's Wall.

⁴ "Human Rights," Global Affairs Canada Website, Government of Canada, <http://www.international.gc.ca/rights-droits/index.aspx?lang=eng> accessed Feb. 23, 2016

⁵ UN Resolution 194 mentioned in the BDS manifesto enshrines the legal rights of Palestinian refugees.

⁶ Ibid., "Canadian Policy on Key Issues in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict"