

June 15th, 2024

Recommendations by the Working Group on Islamophobia, Anti-Arab and Anti-Palestinian Racism

During the 2024 spring semester, the working group on Islamophobia, Anti-Arab and Anti-Palestinian racism met on a regular basis (approximately once every two weeks) to develop recommendations to improve campus climate as per the mandate of the letter by President Freeman (dated January 18th, 2024). This report presents a summary of those recommendations. We used a four-pronged approach to develop these recommendations. First, we discussed our own observations and experiences as members of the faculty, staff and student communities of Boston University. Second, we engaged with other colleagues (faculty, staff and students) on campus, in and outside the classrooms, to develop a sense of the challenges faced by them. Third, we studied and analyzed the work done at other institutions in relation to our mandate, and fourth, we worked collectively on four main areas which we believe require urgent attention and sustained support from the university. These include (in alphabetical order), 1) communication, 2) Imam, prayer and community space, 3) pedagogy, research and scholarship focused on Arab, Muslim and Palestinian studies and 4) support for students, staff and faculty in and outside the classroom.

Before we go into specific recommendations, we do want to mention that we greatly appreciate the opportunity given to us by the university administration. We also want to acknowledge that Boston University has overall performed much better than many other institutions where our colleagues, particularly those who work on issues in the Middle East, Arab and/or Muslim societies, have seen the space for critical discourse shrink by the day. Yet, there is still *much* room for improvement, especially given the rise of Islamophobia, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism in many parts of the world, including the US. It is with this spirit of continued engagement and improvement, and the hope that our analysis and suggestions will help the university create a safer, intellectually rigorous and equitable environment for *all* groups, at the present moment and in the future, that we provide these recommendations. We also want to note and acknowledge that ours is not the only group that has been deeply affected by the pain and suffering of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim communities and their allies. Other groups of faculty, staff and students, including the Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine (FSJP), Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and a petition consisting of hundreds of BU Alumni have shared their grievances and recommendations. We encourage the university leadership to constructively engage with these communities that represent a diverse group of faculty, students and staff. Additionally, as members of the BU community we fully appreciate the importance of a strong and fiscally sound investment plan for the continued growth and sustainability of the university and its operations. However, investment in weapons of war and violence that cause harm and suffering in *any* community (including, but not limited to Muslim, Arab and Palestinian communities) are antithetical to the core values of the university. We therefore recommend that the university rigorously review its investments to ensure that it does not financially support, or invest in, organizations, corporations and institutions that cause harm or suffering to any society or community.

Second, we are pained by the rising hateful rhetoric on university campuses and reject all forms of hate and bigotry, whether it is antisemitism or anti-Palestinian racism or Islamophobia. However, we do not believe that a meaningful response by our university, or any university, would be to adopt narrow and controversial definitions that limit free speech or legitimate criticism of *any* state or political ideology. We firmly believe that the university should remain a place of intellectual engagement and be always ready to debate definitions, rather than adopting a single definition that would stifle speech and robust critique, which are at the core of academic freedom and intellectual inquiry.

Recommendations

Communication: We believe that the university leadership needs to recognize that for many members of the BU community, its communication around the human suffering in Gaza, Palestine and the occupied territories has seemed inadequate and biased. For example, the email on October 10th, 2023 by the university leadership did not even mention the word Gaza or Palestine. Many faculty, staff and students at BU have deep personal ties to Palestine. There are many who have lost loved ones or have had their homes destroyed in Palestine. There has been little and only sporadic mention of the personal grief and suffering of the Palestinian community at BU. Similar issues have played out at the college and school level. For example, we note that the message on October 16 from CAS Dean's office was prefaced by participation in an event at Hillel to mourn Jewish deaths. Good intentions notwithstanding, the absence of a parallel participation in a formal setting mourning Palestinian deaths can easily be perceived as unequal compassion being extended to different communities. This, in turn, points to perhaps a wider structural absence, that of an institutionally sanctioned, cultural space for Arab and Muslim students at BU. On a

more general level, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the very words “Palestine” and “Palestinian.” The terms are often avoided or used with reluctance. It has also been pointed out that there is significant self-censorship, where students, faculty and staff might have second thoughts about even identifying themselves as Palestinian for fear of reprisal or hesitate to talk about Palestine for the same reason. This is emblematic of the culture of fear around being Palestinian and naming Palestine, a fear that is a legacy of decades of covert and overt practices of censure in the US academia at large as recent [polling data](#) has shown, and a concern we emphasize in this report.

We want to emphasize that specific messages conveyed at BU cannot be considered independent of the wider context of US universities and politics: the systematic undermining of speech advocating for Palestinian, Muslim or Arab rights across the country—including the use of sheer brutal physical force—already sets the context for how communication within BU is being read, interpreted, and understood. Communications from the BU administration also set the standard in another way: they have the power to either prevent or embolden individual faculty who may target students on the basis of their Muslim, Arab or Palestinian identities and who may resort to the weaponization of antisemitism.

Recommendations:

1. Communication from the university, especially its leadership, should acknowledge the loss of life as well as the material, physical and cultural destruction in Palestine, and the complete destruction of educational institutions in Gaza. Such communication should demonstrate empathy towards all of its community members, not just towards one particular group.
2. We recommend that all communication ensures that the human element remains at the forefront of the conversation and avoids simplifications that lead to racist tropes (e.g. tropes like “all Palestinians are terrorists,” or assuming that calls for Palestinian freedom and that critiques of Zionism are inherently antisemitic).
3. We recommend that the university affirm its commitment to free speech, including speech that advocates for the rights of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslim communities, and to upholding of international law (an example of a university statement could be found [here](#)).

Imam, Prayer Space and Halal dining options: Unlike most of its peers, BU does not have a permanent Imam, nor does it have adequate and permanent space for Muslim prayer services. This issue impacts the Muslim community on both the CRC and Medical campuses. The current prayer space in GSU can barely accommodate ~20 community members, which is inadequate when put in the context of the size of Muslim community members on campus. Furthermore, there is no dedicated space for Arab, Muslim and Palestinian community members to engage, network or hold events. While the issue of prayer space is an acute issue, we note that many members of our community are not Muslims and belong to other faith groups. Therefore the need for adequate space goes beyond simply a prayer space for the Muslim community.

Recommendations:

1. We recommend the hiring of at least one permanent Imam as soon as possible. The hiring committee should include faculty, students and staff. In addition, we recommend hiring of additional (part time if needed) imams / chaplains who can cater to the needs of various other denominations (e.g. the Shi’ite community).
2. We recommend a permanent space for the needs of the Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian community. This should include a prayer space (open 24 hours) that could be used for five daily and Friday noon prayers (~150-200 attendees) as well as a meeting room that can be used for events, lectures and community events. We also recommend a permanent space for Friday prayers at the medical campus that can accommodate ~150-200 congregants from 12-2 pm on Fridays throughout the year.
3. We recommended halal dining options for students, faculty and staff including those that are open late at night for students on CRC and medical campus.

Pedagogy, Arab and Muslim Studies: Our committee is deeply concerned by limited support by the university for scholarship, research and learning opportunities around Palestinian, Arab and Muslim Societies and communities. Lack of faculty lines, lectureships and academic programs has not only impacted the university’s ability to foster a culture of inquiry, understanding and intellectual engagement, it has also limited the university’s ability to provide a balanced, nuanced and historically accurate perspective to students who are eager to learn and engage with complex topics. There is a strong sense of disappointment by members of the university community whom we spoke to with regards to the university’s lack of investment in Muslim, Arab and Palestinian studies. Beyond the absence of

rigorous and intellectually rich programs, we note that there are no opportunities for visiting scholars and lecturers, who can share lived experience and deep understanding of the historical and contemporary issues. While there are several scholars who broadly work in this area, there are unfortunately no academic programs on Arab and Palestinian Studies, Muslim and Arab Societies or Islamic studies. We note that several institutions, both in the [region](#) and across the country, have vibrant and robust programs of research, pedagogy and scholarly engagement.

Recommendations:

1. The university should invest in academic programs, faculty lines, lectureships and student engagement opportunities with a focus on Palestine, the Arab world and Muslim Societies. We recommend investment in endowed chairs, lectureships (and/or visiting scholar positions) as well as programs that support at-risk scholars whose work focuses on Palestine, Arabs and the Muslim world. Here, we would also like to share a proposal by several members of the university faculty from diverse disciplines to revive and expand a program on Muslim studies (that includes, but goes beyond, the Middle East and North Africa region). Additionally, we recommend that the university allocate financial resources at this stage so that more content on Palestine Studies can be introduced in the near future to address the inequity in our current offerings and student demand.
2. We recommend that the university ensures that there is no bias or prejudice against hiring of faculty or staff, during tenure or promotion with regards to their scholarship, activism or political views in support of Palestine, Arab or Muslim communities. Recent developments across the country have shown that a large number of faculty from across disciplines at all levels have been fired, suspended, or removed from the classroom for pro-Palestine [speech](#). As such, we recommend that the university develop specific protocols and policies to ensure that our current faculty and staff, as well as those who we hire to increase our course offerings are appropriately evaluated without prejudice or bias. We recommend that the university task a committee to help design protocols for eliminating bias (against scholars who are/work on Muslim, Arab and Palestinian studies) when it comes to hiring, promotion, retention for different faculty and staff lines, drawing upon and adding to current best practices developed by DEI initiatives.
3. We uplift Boston University's [commitment to recruiting a diverse faculty](#). Indeed, our findings revealed that most BU students who felt discriminated against overwhelmingly turned to Arab and Muslim faculty for support—including, dominantly, Muslim faculty on impermanent contracts who do not have service obligations. The service burden on faculty of color is well-documented in higher education research and we believe that BU can help ameliorate this inequity through expanding its commendable initiatives toward diversifying its faculty and staff. In this case, we would advocate hiring underrepresented faculty of color for future positions in Palestine Studies, Middle East Studies, Muslim Studies, and related fields.
4. We recommend the university make material, financial and physical resources available for Palestinian scholars, practitioners and artists to come to campus and engage in dialogue, teaching and informal interactions with students, faculty and staff.

Support for students, staff and faculty: We note that some of the most worrying findings from our meetings and conversations with the university community was to hear about all the ways in which there has been retaliation against students (ex. In grading, during exams, or in conversations in the classroom or office hours etc.) as well as retaliation against staff, post-docs and untenured faculty for speaking up about Palestine. We are deeply troubled by instances of doxxing, efforts by some students (on medical campus) to have a student expelled simply for their support for Palestinians, and lack of a clear mechanism to protect community members who have faced doxxing or have been targeted for expressing their support for Palestine. We are also concerned about the lack of a clear mechanism to report prejudice or bias by instructors who single out students (during classes, in exams or grading etc.) that is fair, empathetic, and protects vulnerable students. We are also very concerned about the *judicial* affairs process that seems arbitrary and targets students for participating in protests that did not even occur on campus, and for which students were no longer facing criminal charges. We recommend that the university analyzes, reflects and revisits its policy on disciplinary hearings in a manner that is fair to *all* students, protects the constitutional rights of the students and ensures that the campus remains a vibrant place for engagement, understanding and expression of opinion without the risk of doxxing, harassment or disciplinary actions that target a particular group or community. Similarly, we want to ensure that all members of the teaching staff (lecturers, tenure track and tenured faculty members) do not feel that their careers will be jeopardized (e.g. in cancellation of contracts, denial of tenure or promotion) simply because of their support for Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims.

Recommendations:

1. We recommend that the administration pursue a task force with faculty and students to better align its free speech policy with the Chicago Principles for free expression and open inquiry, [which the BU Board of Trustees adopted in 2020](#). Specifically, given the university has already taken a pledge to align with the Chicago Principles, then it should prepare a committee to address the material conditions (including financial and curricular) that BU must create in order to avoid discrimination or (re)produce excessive privilege toward one ideology or field, while making open inquiry possible. Relatedly, we ask that the university constructively engage with any financial divestment proposals concerning BU's relationships with militarism and international violence that impact *any* community, domestically or internationally, emerging from student, staff and faculty groups.
2. We recommend that the university issue clear communication about doxxing and ensure that it clearly spells out the repercussions for students/other members of the community who are involved in releasing other students' private information.
3. We recommend that the university create the space for medical students who are interested in establishing groups that support humanitarian missions without facing penalty or backlash or a compromise of their future careers.
4. We recommend hiring of staff (especially in the student facing roles) from Muslim, Arab and Palestinian communities on both the CRC and the Medical campus to ensure that students are provided with support and advice that is understanding of the challenges faced by Muslim, Arab and Palestinian students, thoughtful, culturally conscious and appropriate and empathetic.
5. We recommend that the university revise its current policies on disciplinary actions and student code violations as it relates to students being arrested for attending protests or exercising their first amendment rights. The current policy is that the university files charges not because a student's conduct in and of itself violates the student code of conduct, but simply because the police department has arrested them. Since we know that certain groups (e.g. people of color) are much more targeted by police officers for arrest than others, following the lead of the carceral system in this regard not only unduly targets Muslim, Arab and Palestinian members of our community, it also disproportionately impacts all of our students of color. The current policy renders the right to pursue an education as a BU student contingent upon racialized policing practices, and should be revised.
6. We recommend that the university create and provide a list of available resources (intellectual, instructional, material, psycho-social and legal) that students, staff and faculty facing discrimination or policing can utilize as needed.
7. [Finally, we recommend that the university leadership share its response to these recommendations, provide a timeline for enacting them, and follow through with its commitment to create a safe, inclusive and equitable environment for *all* its community members.](#)