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FAAfAA Statement on “University of Maryland Joint President-Senate Task Force on Antisemitism and Islamophobia”

The Faculty against Antisemitism and for Academic Freedom group was formed in spring 2024 to address the issue of antisemitism and attacks on the state of Israel, and threats to academic freedom on the campus of the University of Maryland, College Park. We are over thirty current and emeritus faculty in the Colleges of Arts and Humanities, Behavioral Sciences, Business, Engineering, and Natural Sciences. The steering committee of the group issues the following statement in response to the findings and recommendations “University of Maryland Joint President-Senate Task Force on Antisemitism and Islamophobia.”

In the academic year 2023-2024, the campus, like many others, witnessed demonstrations that called for freeing “Palestine, from the river to the sea.” The slogan was a call to destroy the existing state of Israel. Voiced immediately after the interrupted genocide by Hamas of October 7, 2023, these slogans amounted to support for an effort to destroy the state of Israel by force of arms. While these activists have a first amendment right to express their views, the University also has the same responsibility to denounce antisemitism as it does to denounce racism against peoples of color. Yet both President Pines original mandate that the Task Force should examine both antisemitism and “Islamophobia,” and the Task Force implantation of that mandate obscured the core issue in two ways.

First, the Task Force Report reads as if [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance](#) (IHRA) definition of antisemitism does not exist. Readers do not learn that since 2016 the United States State Department and thirty-one other governments have adopted its assertion that antisemitism could “include...denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor.” Yet this is exactly what Hamas, and the campus organization Students for Justice in Palestine, repeatedly asserted in many demonstrations. Antisemitism historically has always spread lies about the Jews. The assertion that Zionism or Israel are forms of racism is among the most recent of those falsehoods. The Task Force Report does not clearly and unequivocally denounce efforts to destroy the state of Israel by force of arms as itself a form of antisemitism, one incompatible with the University’s support for diversity and inclusion.

Second, though the University of Maryland campus was not the scene of slogans or actions attacking Muslim or Arab students, the mandate and its implementation created a mistaken equivalence between antisemitism and “Islamophobia.” The task force relied on the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of the term: “irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against Islam or people who practice Islam.” This definition in itself is misleading, since it fails to acknowledge that the term had its origins in *political*, not *scholarly*, efforts to deflect criticism from Islamist terrorist organizations and states, whether the Islamic Republic of Iran, Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, or the offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood known as Hamas.

Especially since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States, instances of Islamist terrorism in Europe, and the Hamas attacks on Israel, the term “Islamophobia” has been deployed to dismiss any suggestion that such organizations have any connection at all to interpretations of the religion of Islam or to deflect scholarly and journalistic attention from the existence of distinctively Islamic forms of antisemitism. It has been an absurd endeavor, since all of the above organizations have insisted for many decades that their resort to terror and murder in attacks on the United States, European countries, their fellow Muslims, and above all Israel, are justified by their distinctive “Islamist” interpretation of the religion of Islam. By adopting this definition unquestioningly, both President Pines’s charge and then the Task Force Report reproduce its political implications, which are neither neutral nor objective.

It is not “irrational” or an expression of antagonism to the religion of Islam or Muslims to describe Hamas as a terrorist organization and to draw attention to founding charter and subsequent statements that express a hatred of Judaism and Jews that fuels its effort to destroy the state of Israel. When the United States government places Hamas—and Hezbollah—on its list of terrorist organizations, it is not engaging in “Islamophobia.” Rather it is responding to facts and political realities. When students on campus denounce the views of Students for Justice in Palestine they are not engaging in “Islamophobia.” However, when SJP and others chant that “Palestine” should be “free, from the river to the sea” they are endorsing an ongoing war to destroy the state of Israel. And that, according to the definition of antisemitism adopted by the United States government, and thirty other governments, is a form of antisemitism. The Taskforce Report addresses none of these issues which have been the topic of national and international debate for several decades.

Yet before and after October 7, Israelis’ fears of Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran were perfectly rational, as all of these organizations had asserted publicly for decades that they wanted to destroy the state of Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran’s proxies, had waged terror attacks on Israeli civilians for the past two decades. The same is

the case regarding the rational fear by the governments of the European Union regarding Islamist terror following mass-casualty attacks in Britain, Belgium, France, Spain and Germany, or the rational fear of the United States government that chants of “death to America” in Teheran are combined with actual threats to American interests. In all these cases, those inspired by Islamist ideology justify their acts of terror by reference to a specific interpretation of the religion of Islam known as “Islamism.” In so doing, they turn a conflict over borders and territory into a war of religion.

As critics of the term “Islamophobia” have pointed out, it conflates criticism of a particular political current that rests on a fanatical fundamentalist interpretation of a major religion with antagonism to Islam in general. This is precisely what the leaders of Al Qaeda, Hezbollah and Hamas seek to convince their followers and the world, because they insist that they, and they alone, possess the real and true version of Islam. Further, the term suggests that criticism of, for example, a document such as the [Hamas Charter](#) of 1988, one that combined Jew-hatred based citations to Islamic sacred texts with reference to the notorious antisemitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is a criticism of all Muslims and thus it, too, is a form of racism. By relying on this politically loaded term, the task force report immunizes Islamist ideological fanaticism from criticism. Paradoxically, this effort to silence criticism suggests the erroneous idea that organizations such as Hamas do indeed speak for all believers in Islam. Hence the use of the term “Islamophobia” has the effect of doing precisely what it seeks to prevent: that is, stimulating suspicion and fear of Islam and Muslims in general. The Task Force report reads as if the authors are not aware that Muslim liberals have been making these points for decades.

The refusal to write frankly about these issues is evident throughout the report. On page one, the authors refer to “the traumatic loss of life and human agony caused by the attacks in Israel on October 7, 2023...” (1). Historians immediately recognize such sentences as a way to avoid speaking clearly about the agency of actors. The report does not refer once to Hamas or to the overwhelmingly documented fact that on October 7, it massacred 1,139 Israelis and kidnapped about 250 people as hostages. It justified this massacre in the language of Islamist religious fanaticism. It is broadly understood as the worst attack on the Jewish people since the Holocaust... It was a [genocidal act](#) interrupted only by the belated arrival of the Israeli Defense Forces. It was an act of mass murder that represented an obvious and clear connection. [between Islamist ideology and Islamist terror](#). The first paragraph of the section “Grasping the Moment” (3) repeats this avoidance of focus on Hamas and its absolutely central role in starting the war in Gaza with an act of mass murder. Instead, it refers vaguely to “highly polarized environments...when both sides

have decades-old histories of struggles and bloodshed, which have resulted in traumas that exacerbate the fear of the moment.” (3)

These are lines of moral equivalence and historical vagueness that obfuscate the difference between Israel and Hamas. They are not an apologia for the attack of October 7, but without naming Hamas and discussing the ideology that inspired it, as well as the years of massive preparations of construction of an underground system of tunnels designed to wage war against Israel, they stop short of stating the necessary denunciation of the barbarism of that day. Without historical specificity--without naming who did what to whom--the Task Force Report dwells in the realm of clichés and generalities. In so doing, it falls far short of what one expects from scholars at a major research institution.

Similarly, when focusing on the events on campus judging by reports made to the University of Maryland police, the Task Force’s insistence on equating antisemitism and Islamophobic acts turns out to be mistaken. Appendix 4, a letter from the campus Department of Public Safety to the Task Force of October 28, 2024, indicates no “hate/bias” incidents on campus aimed at Muslim, Arab or Palestinian students. The police reports made in 2023/2024 describe such reports as “anti-Jewish.” Even if one uses the dubious concept of “Islamophobia,” the police recorded no such episodes.

The reality of 2023/2024 was that a highly organized national effort led by Students for Justice in Palestine chanted slogans calling for the destruction of the state of Israel and thus objectively, and often subjectively, supported Hamas in its war against Israel. Yet the Task Force declined to offer any extensive interpretation of the ideas, goals, and methods of SJP. This lack of focus on a major source of antisemitism on campus, this unwillingness to call it by its name and criticize it, will leave a legacy of disappointment and bitterness among Jewish students who feel ignored by the report.

As regrettable as its failure to discuss the connection between Islamist ideology and terrorist practice, is the inadequacy of the report’s discussion of antisemitism. I am the only scholar at the University of Maryland who has published on the nature of antisemitism in its conventional Nazi and right-wing forms, as well as on its emergence in Communist and radical leftist states and movements, and among the Islamists. The report refers to the antisemitic attacks by right-wing antisemites in Charlottesville, Pittsburgh and Poway but says nothing about antisemitism when it comes from these other sources.

The Task Force Report turns the discussion into one about the *feelings* of Jews on campus, but their feelings are a secondary matter. Students for Justice in Palestine, like other organizations, have the free speech right in this country to attack Israel and call for its destruction. Yet the University also has an obligation to denounce such justifications of

terror just as it would denounce justifications of terror aimed at any other group of people. In the real world of adult politics, the chant for a non-existent country called “Palestine” to be “free from the river to the sea” is a call to wage war against the Jewish state until it is destroyed. Yet the Task Force Report never clearly denounces such appeals or describes them as what they are: Islamist, forms of Jew-hatred. They are incompatible with appeals to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and rightly lead anyone, Jewish or not, who thinks Israel has a right to exist in peace, to a bitter conclusion that diversity, equity, and inclusion does not apply to those who support Israel’s right to exist.

Factual Matters

Given the fact that the Task Force had twenty-six members and devoted much time devoted to interviews, this historian would have expected to see testimony from students, faculty, and staff, with identities absent if necessary, regarding specific events. Instead, the authors substitute their own gloss on what others on campus said to them about their experiences. One looks in vain for the texture and detail of the reports of individuals about their experiences in the past academic year. Thus, the report leaves behind only an uninformative account of what many people went through.

The Task Force Report referred to “multiple letters by groups of faculty,” and linked to one signed by seventy-five faculty in the College of Arts and Humanities, and to one that I wrote and that was co-signed by four faculty in the School of Business. But the report fails to mention that seventy-five members of the AHRU faculty signed a letter which placed the attack by Hamas in the “context” of “a 75-year history of the dispossession of Palestinians from their homes and land.” That seventy-five faculty members supported this partisan and historically inaccurate view is indicative of decades in which anti-Zionist views have gained a foothold in the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences at this and other universities. Scholarship, that of mine and many others in the United States, Europe and Israel, which is broadly sympathetic to the state of Israel, and which offers a different historical interpretation of those seventy-five years is too rarely heard by University of Maryland, College Park students. Yet the Task Force did not raise the absence of a pluralism of scholarly views on the faculty as a fundamental problem that needs to be addressed. It should have done so.

The attack of October 7, 2023, made perfectly clear that for Hamas, and for whomever supports it and repeats its propaganda, anti-Zionism is clearly also a form of Jew-hatred, that is, *antisemitism*. Significant numbers of faculty at the University of Maryland, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences, view Israel as an oppressive state whose policies and for some whose essence has led to the terrorist campaigns waged against it. They do so while insisting that this has nothing at all to do with

antisemitism. The Task Force Report expresses concern about fears by faculty that “support for Palestine could impact their careers.” On the contrary, antagonism to Israel is a predominant view in the Middle East Studies Association, and can serve to enhance, not damage careers. The Task Force Report does not acknowledge that the existence of an anti-Zionist climate in the academy raises the real, not irrational, fear that we are entering into a new era of job discrimination against Jews and non-Jews who show sympathy for the state of Israel or who dare to examine antisemitism in its Islamist forms. Yet the Task Force Report has nothing to say about this issue.

The Task Force’s flawed analysis leads to a series of mistaken recommendations.

The University should **not** “pursue and implement an institutional structure for training the campus community about antisemitism and Islamophobia;” it does not at present have the personnel that would be needed to conduct such a project. Further the word “training” is not appropriate for a university where such matters are properly the role of faculty, not the administration, and where these issues are the subject of research, teaching and learning by faculty and students. As explained above, the report indicates that the University currently lacks experts in the faculty who could explore antisemitism in all its various dimensions, nor does it have a faculty that has yet to offer evidence of a critical perspective on the concept of Islamophobia itself. Rather, Deans and the Provost office should examine what has gone wrong in the field of Middle East Studies, both at the University and around the country, so that it has become a political instrument in favor of boycotts of Israel. In order to develop a balanced account of these difficult issues, the University must have faculty who express skepticism about the claims of expertise in a sub-discipline that has become politicized and which refuses to examine antisemitism in its Islamic form, before and even after the Hamas assault of October 7, 2023.

We need University leaders who will restore pluralism of perspectives on the faculty and ensure that the University of Maryland does not become one that participates in a new era of discrimination against Jewish and non-Jewish job candidates in sensitive fields who dissent from the anti-Zionist orthodoxy in parts of the faculty.

The administration should **not** be involved “education and training programs around Islamophobia and antisemitism” because, as this report indicates, it does not possess the expertise to do so. More importantly, the way to address these issues is to hire tenure-track and tenured faculty who have demonstrated scholarly expertise in examining antisemitism in the Islamic world and among leftist organizations. In History and related fields, continuation of faculty hires in modern European history also remains crucial for teaching and research on the subject of antisemitism.

Various suggestions about dialogue and mutual understanding sound pleasant and appropriate, but they ring hollow in view of the intellectual shortcomings and resulting bias of this Task Force Report.

The report calls itself a “Joint President-Senate Taskforce.” Yet the University Senate as a whole has seen the report for the first time this week. As a member of the Senate, I will request that the Senate take up this matter, debate the report, and its recommendations. Policy recommendations that emerge from the events of 2023-2024 and that differ from those in this report need to be discussed and evaluated by the Senate.