

# School board must apologize to Palestinian-Canadians

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In recent years there has been much public debate about fighting hate and racism in Canada, whether it is against Black people, Indigenous people, Muslims, Jews, Asians, members of the LGBTQ2 community, or other marginalized groups. However, one community that continues to be the target of racism, particularly by some public institutions and right-wing politicians, is Palestinians.

The latest public incident took place recently in London, Ontario when the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) issued its school dress code. In the online FAQ (frequently asked questions) section which explained the policy, a “Free Palestine” t-shirt was used as an example of attire which “promotes or incites violence”. Unfortunately, despite calls by Palestinian advocacy and anti-racism organizations for the TVDSB to issue a public apology for this racist incident on its Website, it has yet to do so.

Reacting to complaints from Palestinian-Canadian and Muslim organizations, the School Board did quietly remove the image from its website about a week after it first went up. However, this removal cannot take the place of a public apology to the affected students who attend TVDSB schools, nor does it explain why the TVDSB would attack the freedom of expression rights of their students or the broader Palestinian-Canadian community.

Many Palestinians came to Canada as immigrants and refugees, fleeing Israeli oppression and brutality in historic Palestine, and later from Israeli occupied territories. The TVDSB’s actions are notable for their disregard of this history, and for their insensitivity to decades of suffering that Palestinians have endured at the hands of their Israeli oppressor.

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The “Free Palestine” slogan is an obvious call for freedom from oppression and brutal colonial domination, much as the “Free Ukraine” slogan is a call for freedom for the people of that nation. The TVDSB’s use of the “Free Palestine” message in its FAQ as one that would incite violence is clearly racist and offensive to the district’s Palestine-Canadian students and community, as well to those who sympathize with the Palestinian struggle for justice.

This is the most recent example of anti-Palestinian racism by an Ontario school board. Last year, Canadian journalist Desmond Cole wrote about a series of anti-Palestinian racist incidents at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) – from a Black student suspended for saying “Free Palestine” during morning announcements, to the banning of a book from school libraries which included journal entries by Palestinian children, to a student being told by a teacher to remove a keffiyeh (a traditional Palestinian scarf) or leave the classroom.

One incident which caught the attention of the Washington Post was that of a TDSB educator sharing anti-oppression resources on Palestine with colleagues, who was suspended, investigated, and publicly accused of anti-Semitism for simply doing his job. He was later fully exonerated and restored to his position.

The Arab-Canadian Lawyers Association published a report earlier this year in which they defined anti-Palestinian racism as a form of racism that silences, excludes, erases, stereotypes, defames or dehumanizes Palestinians and their narratives. Sadly, anti-Palestinian racism in Canada has become far too common, with those who call for freedom and justice for Palestinians, or criticize Israel's brutal oppression of the Palestinian people, attacked with defamatory accusations of antisemitism by powerful pro-Israel lobby groups.

The TDVSB should also note that well respected international human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Israel-based B'Tselem, have recently issued reports detailing how Israel is practicing Apartheid against Palestinians, a crime under international law. Even former Israeli attorney general Michael Ben-Yair says his country is an "Apartheid regime."

Since the incident, the TVDSB has apologized privately to groups and individuals who have contacted the Board directly. However, such instances of racism are not properly dealt with through private exchanges behind closed doors. When racism in our institutions occurs we need to discuss it publicly, understand its origins, and collectively implement mechanisms to prevent it from occurring in the future.

The TVDSB needs to explain publicly how and why this incident occurred, and what it will do to ensure it does not happen again. It also needs to incorporate zero-tolerance for anti-Palestinian racism into its equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) frameworks. Otherwise, without collective accountability, hurtful and offensive incidents like this are bound to happen again.