

Removal of Humber College Student Over Pro-Palestinian Stickers

APR Incident Report © the CJPME Foundation, published 26 June, 2025

Summary of Incident

On November 2, 2023, Hani Alaf, a Syrian-Canadian postgraduate student at Humber College, engaged in a peaceful protest by placing stickers around the Lakeshore campus. These stickers, which displayed the Palestinian flag along with the phrase "Boycott Israeli Apartheid," were intended to highlight and protest against Israel's systemically racist policies in Palestine.¹ Alaf's action was a form of political expression rooted in international human rights advocacy.

However, the college's response was swift and severe. Two days after the stickers were posted, while Alaf was in class, he was approached by a member of the college's public safety department. He was instructed to leave the campus immediately. Alaf reported that he was accused of spreading hate speech, engaging in antisemitic rhetoric, and vandalizing property.² This reaction by the college sparked a significant controversy, as it appeared to conflate his support for the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions Movement and anti-apartheid stance with antisemitism and hate speech, raising concerns about the college's suppression of political expression and academic freedom.

The incident quickly escalated, leading to a broader discussion on the rights of students to engage in political protests without fear of undue penalization. The punishment taken against Alaf, which many perceived as an infringement on his freedom of speech, catalyzed a series of organized protests and expressions of solidarity by other members of the Humber College community.

Why is this incident considered Anti-Palestinian Racism (APR)?

The incident involving Hani Alaf at Humber College exemplifies a form of Anti-Palestinian Racism (APR). According to the Arab Canadian Lawyers Association's (ACLA) report³, APR takes various forms, including defaming Palestinians and their allies by labeling them as inherently antisemitic or terrorist sympathizers, which is a direct attempt to discredit and marginalize their voices and activism. This pattern aligns closely with what occurred to Alaf.

In Alaf's case, his peaceful protest through stickers that read "Boycott Israeli Apartheid" was quickly labeled, according to Alaf, as hate speech and antisemitism by the college, leading to his suspension from campus. Such a response by the institution reflects the broader societal and institutional tendency to mischaracterize criticism of Israel's systemically racist occupation policies as antisemitism, effectively silencing and excluding Palestinian perspectives and their supporters from public discourse.⁴ This alignment with the APR framework highlights a systemic issue where advocacy for Palestinian rights is swiftly and unfairly equated with racism against Jews, muddling legitimate political criticism of systemic racism with hate speech.

The ACLA report elaborates on this, explaining that these actions against Palestinian advocates often play out publicly, further damaging their reputation and standing within their communities and beyond. This public dimension serves to deter others within the community from expressing similar views, thereby amplifying the silencing effect and contributing to a wider environment of fear and suppression around Palestinian advocacy. This creates a racist climate of political persecution against Palestinians.

Additional Background to the Incident

In their initial response to the incident involving Hani Alaf, Humber College management, represented by Emily Milic, the associate director of communications, emphasized that Alaf had breached college policies by placing "unauthorized materials" on campus property. This infraction was cited as the reason for requesting him to leave the campus. Additionally, when addressing queries about whether the stickers' messages were considered antisemitic, Milic avoided a direct response, thus indicating that the content of the stickers was not the primary reason for the action taken against Alaf.⁵ This approach underscored the college's focus on enforcing its policies regarding unauthorized postings, rather than addressing the implications of their action on pro-Palestinian activities on campus.

On November 7, 2023, just a few days after Alaf's removal, dozens of students participated in a walkout at Humber College. This walkout served as a public demonstration against what was seen as the college's heavy-handed approach to handling Alaf's peaceful political expression.⁶ The students who walked out called for a reassessment of the college's policies regarding free speech, particularly concerning political statements and protests that might be critical of governmental policies or international issues.

Additionally, the incident garnered media attention, further amplifying the conversation around academic freedom and the rights of students to engage in political debate without fear of retribution. The media coverage highlighted the tensions on Canadian campuses regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, underscoring the challenges faced by institutions in managing these tensions without infringing on rights to free expression.

Resolution;

Following a significant protest and further public scrutiny, Humber College acknowledged that its initial response to Hani Alaf's actions was overly harsh and inappropriate, expressing regret over the handling of the situation. This acknowledgment led to a re-evaluation of their policies, allowing Alaf to return to campus and initiating a review of the college's student conduct policies to better respect and protect free speech and political expression.⁷

Despite these corrective measures, the response from the college did not fully satisfy the community's demands. Students and faculty continue to advocate for a formal apology and stronger commitments to safeguarding free expression, underscoring ongoing concerns within the college community about the need for more comprehensive actions to address and rectify the root issues highlighted by the incident.⁸

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¹ Jabakhanji, Sara, "Humber College voices 'regret' after student removed from campus for posting Palestinian flag stickers," Nov. 07, 2023, CBC, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/humber-student-boycott-israeli-apartheid-1.7020897>

² Jabakhanji, Sara, "Humber College voices 'regret' after student removed from campus for posting Palestinian flag stickers," Nov. 07, 2023, CBC, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/humber-student-boycott-israeli-apartheid-1.7020897>

³ "Anti-Palestinian Racism: Naming, Framing and Manifestations," April 25, 2022, Arab Canadian Lawyers Association, accessed Mar. 22, 2024 at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61db30d12e169a5c45950345/t/627dcf83fa17ad41ff217964/1652412292220/Anti-Palestinian+Racism+Naming%2C+Framing+and+Manifestations.pdf>

⁴ Jabakhanji, Sara, “Humber College voices 'regret' after student removed from campus for posting Palestinian flag stickers,” Nov. 07, 2023, CBC, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/humber-student-boycott-israeli-apartheid-1.7020897>

⁵ Patel, Tanzila, “Humber students stage walkout after student pulled from class,” Nov. 12, 2023, Skedline, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <http://skedline.com/2023/11/humber-students-stage-walkout-after-student-pulled-from-class/>

⁶ Patel, Tanzila, “Humber students stage walkout after student pulled from class,” Nov. 12, 2023, Skedline, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <http://skedline.com/2023/11/humber-students-stage-walkout-after-student-pulled-from-class/>

⁷ Patel, Tanzila, “Rally supports Lakeshore student voices on Israel-Palestine conflict,” Nov. 10, 2023, Humber News, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <https://humbernews.ca/2023/11/lakeshore-student-briefly-suspended-from-school-over-pro-palestine-stickers/>

⁸ Patel, Tanzila, “Rally supports Lakeshore student voices on Israel-Palestine conflict,” Nov. 10, 2023, Humber News, accessed Oct. 22, 2024 <https://humbernews.ca/2023/11/lakeshore-student-briefly-suspended-from-school-over-pro-palestine-stickers/>