

June 24, 2024

Harvard University
Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab Bias
Preliminary Recommendations

I. Introduction

On January 19, 2024, Interim President Alan Garber established two Presidential Task Forces: one devoted to combating anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias, and one devoted to combating antisemitism.

The Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab Bias was charged with examining the recent history and current manifestations of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias, identifying the root causes and contributing factors to such behaviors on campus, evaluating the characteristics and frequency of these behaviors, and recommending approaches to combat anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias and its impact on campus.

The full membership of the Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab Bias was announced on February 25, and the Task Force convened for its first meeting on February 27. Meetings were held weekly for the rest of the spring semester. During these meetings, we discussed our charge, developed plans for outreach across the University, and shared feedback from the listening sessions.

Our listening sessions commenced on April 1 and were largely completed by the end of that month. We held about forty-five sessions, with more than four hundred people from across Harvard's Schools in Cambridge, Allston, and Longwood registering to participate. These sessions included students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty, and staff. We also met with several affinity groups, ensuring a wide range of vital perspectives were heard. We learned early on that though the name and charge of our Task Force refer to Muslims and Arabs, we also had to focus particularly on Palestinian members of our community and those with diverse backgrounds who identify as pro-Palestinian as they had experienced a great deal of trauma and pain.

The goal of these listening sessions was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian as well as pro-Palestinian members of the Harvard community, including, among others, those from Jewish, South Asian, as well as African American backgrounds. We also solicited from participants in our sessions their hopes for Harvard and their recommendations on how to rebuild our fractured and polarized community.

II. Key Themes from Listening Sessions

The insights gathered from listening sessions were instrumental in identifying seven key thematic areas that encapsulate the primary concerns and aspirations of our communities. These themes – Safety and Security Concerns, Recognition and Representation, Institutional Response,

Freedom of Expression, Transparency and Trust, Relationships among Affinity Groups, and Intellectual Excellence. We will expand on these themes in detail — directly drawing from the listening sessions — in the comprehensive Task Force report we anticipate producing by the fall semester. In this document we provide a high-level summary of what we learnt from the listening sessions as that serves as the foundation for our initial recommendations and will guide our ongoing efforts to advise University leaders on combating anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias at Harvard.

Safety and Security Concerns: The listening sessions revealed a deep-seated sense of fear among students, staff, and faculty. Muslims, Palestinians, Arab Christians, and others of Arab descent as well as pro-Palestinian allies described a state of uncertainty, abandonment, threat, and isolation, and a pervasive climate of intolerance. People of color from other groups and identities — often Black and South Asian students – shared experiences of racism and hatred because they were allies, or because they were misidentified as Arab, Muslim, or Palestinian. Muslim women who wear hijab and pro-Palestinian students wearing *keffiyehs* spoke about facing verbal harassment, being called “terrorists,” and even being spat upon. The issue of doxxing was particularly highlighted as a significant concern that affects not only physical safety and mental well-being, but also future career prospects.

Recognition and Representation: Participants expressed a strong desire for recognition and representation of diverse experiences and identities. Palestinians spoke about their identity being erased by campus-wide or School-specific messages and their pain not being acknowledged. They felt that the words “Palestine” and “Palestinian” had in effect become taboo on campus. Students also said that Harvard lacked sufficient faculty and course offerings dedicated to Palestinian studies and the complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict — a reality that perpetuates a lack of understanding on campus about the current crisis in Gaza, which many in the community believe to be an ongoing genocide, and about the long-standing issues around recognition of Palestinian identity. There was a consistent call during the listening sessions to add “anti-Palestinian bias” to the name or at least to the charge of this Task Force to address this lack of recognition and representation.

Institutional Response: There was significant concern about the University’s perceived lack of response to pressures and damaging attacks from external agents, such as some high-profile donors. As a result, participants expressed a heightened sense of insecurity and felt unsafe, as the University seems to lack the requisite independence to protect them. Students felt that reporting distressing incidents, such as doxxing, did little to curb further targeting or address underlying biases. They stated that University administrators claimed there was little they could do, as these issues were related to free speech or outside Harvard’s jurisdiction. Moreover, students expressed frustration with the burden of having to document and share (and re-share) their experiences of harassment with multiple channels at the University, without receiving any significant response.

Freedom of Expression: Participants raised concerns about restrictions on freedom of expression, resulting in their feeling unable to share their views frankly. Many Muslim, Arab, Palestinian, and pro-Palestinian students, staff, and faculty, including Jewish allies, said they continue to fear negative consequences if they speak publicly on issues they care about,

especially those related to Palestine, human rights, social justice, and critiques of Harvard's global engagements and investments. The constant threat of harassment, physical violence, or damage to their careers and reputations forces these community members to choose between suppressing their views or facing negative consequences that affect their safety and future career prospects.

Transparency and Trust: A recurring theme was a lack of trust in the University's and Schools' leaders and administrators. Participants stressed the need for greater clarity and transparency in the communication and enforcement of policies. They felt their experiences were not being acknowledged or, when they were, not given the same attention as those of other stakeholders. They also expressed concern that the University was struggling to protect independence of decision-making due to its fundraising considerations and that this in turn affected the University's ability to uphold its stated values. The lack of response from various administrators to complaints further eroded trust in the University and its leadership.

Relationships among Affinity Groups: Participants expressed a need for improving dialogue and engagement among the affected affinity groups. There was a clear call for the creation of interfaith and multicultural spaces – both physical and programmatic. Participants also questioned the decision to establish two Task Forces rather than a single unified one, suggesting that this could exacerbate divisions among affinity groups.

Intellectual Excellence: Participants raised concerns about the failure of the University to effectively support high-profile, structured intellectual engagements around contentious issues such as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They raised concerns about lack of support for faculty who have sought to undertake such intellectual work; they pointed to student efforts to achieve this that have gone unsupported by the administration; and they pointed to a lack of sufficient course or other offerings on the Palestinian experience. They raised the concern that the University was in fact failing to activate its most core mission – excellence in research and teaching – in relation to the clearly challenging intellectual questions emerging from the conflict.

III. Initial Recommendations

The initial recommendations in this document are focused on short-term, actionable items rather than long-term ones that may entail substantial changes in institutional policies, curricular and co-curricular improvements, and rethinking of the structure of religious life on campus.

To develop and propose long-term recommendations, the Task Force will dedicate the summer to conducting research into the historical, political, and sociological origins of anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian bias on campus. We will also analyze collections of qualitative and quantitative data for understanding the issues we face, collate and evaluate existing policies that relate to those issues, and explore opportunities for creating bridges across divides by fostering pluralism through intentional and creative engagement with diversity. The findings from this research will serve as a basis for a comprehensive report, which we anticipate will be submitted in the fall semester.

Based on feedback from Harvard community members (including feedback submitted in Fall 2023 before the formation of the Task Force), wide-ranging discussions among Task Force members, as well as consultation with University leaders and other stakeholders, our Task Force recommends the following near-term measures to address the biases that our communities have experienced, and foster an environment where, in the words of Interim President Garber, “each of us can feel safe to participate fully in the life of the University, whether we are studying, teaching, conducting research, or working in other ways.”

Safety and Security Concerns

Ensure that all students, staff, and faculty feel safe and secure as members of the Harvard community. As one participant put it, “no one is safe until we all feel safe.” While the University’s values statement expresses a commitment to respect for all people regardless of their backgrounds, we believe this commitment should extend to safety and respect. While we evaluate the adequacy of current policies, there are some short-term steps that could be taken. With this in mind, we propose the following actions for the University, Schools, and relevant Units:

- A) To address the physical safety concerns raised by our communities, we should ensure that the 24-hour safety helpline provides rapid and real-time support, as well as chaperones and safe transportation options in cases where this is warranted.
- B) Doxxing is a major concern for students who have been affected directly or indirectly, as well as for faculty and staff who have found it challenging to assist impacted students. The University should:
 - Publicly and immediately denounce doxxing as an abhorrent activity. We are emphasizing this because participants in our listening sessions, as well as members of the Task Force, have noticed that even highly visible and public instances of doxxing, such as the “doxxing trucks” around campus, were not publicly condemned by the University.
 - Publicize the current policies on doxxing, for example, through a single, University-wide webpage as well as mass email to all members of the Harvard community – students, staff and faculty. This should include information on what doxxing is, how to identify it, penalties for those who engage in it, and resources available for those who have been targeted.
 - Building upon previous efforts, compile and publicize a comprehensive set of resources for those affected by or at risk of doxxing. This should include expert cybersecurity advice, legal counsel, and services like DeleteMe.
 - Provide resources and training for designated staff and faculty from across the University on how to *empathetically* support and address the concerns of students and faculty dealing with doxxing and other forms of harassment.
- C) Offer and actively promote a sufficient range of counseling services, peer support groups, stress management programs, as well as pastoral counseling. These services must be culturally competent in addressing affinity-specific experiences and can complement and enhance HUHS and chaplaincy services currently in place.

Recognition and Representation

Address the lack of recognition expressed by many Muslim, Arab, and especially, Palestinian members of the Harvard community, as well as those who support Palestine.

- D) We recommend revising our Task Force’s name to the “Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim, Anti-Arab, and Anti-Palestinian Bias” to address the wider but necessary scope of affected community members.
- E) While we recognize that Harvard will be issuing fewer university-wide statements, it is crucial that statements from University and School leaders express solidarity for all groups equally, without overlooking affected groups. Leaders should learn from past mistakes and aim for adequate balance in their responses, taking care not to give the impression that they are taking sides on contentious issues. It would be beneficial for leaders to maintain lists of trusted leaders from across the campus’ diverse communities who might be called upon to provide confidential feedback on particularly sensitive draft messages. The University should ensure that faculty with subject expertise have been consulted before messages are released.
- F) While we discuss our recommendations regarding enabling Intellectual Excellence in more detail below, here we should note that the University can address the specific issue of lack of recognition of the Palestinian experience by expanding curricular offerings related to Palestinian studies and seeking to recruit tenure-track faculty to enable this effort. This would also help educate our diverse community and deepen the academic exploration of the Middle East at Harvard. In the short-term, we recommend that the University fund a one- or two-year visiting professorship in Palestinian studies, with the appointment beginning in the spring semester 2024-2025.

Institutional Response

Address the significant confusion and misunderstanding that exists among students, faculty, and staff about existing policies and procedures related to bias incidents and discrimination. We plan to assess the impact these policies have had in the current context and examine areas for improvement in the coming months. In the meantime, we recommend the following:

- G) At the start of the 2024-25 academic year, students at all Harvard Schools should receive clear information regarding the policies and procedures for filing formal complaints about bullying, bias, and other incidents of discrimination. The current policies must be clarified, and both the policies and rationale must be communicated. Any activity that occurs over the year should be handled according to existing policies. If policies are modified during the year, then a clear and public statement should be issued detailing the change, the process by which the decision was made, and the rationale behind it.

- H) Staff members, whether tasked with implementing these policies and procedures or offering guidance and support to students, should undergo suitable training, if they have not done so already, to execute their roles effectively, expeditiously, and empathetically.
- I) The University should initiate efforts to establish a more transparent, accessible, complainant-friendly, and responsive process for filing formal complaints about bias incidents and discrimination. In doing so, the University will also need to clarify what actions, despite being antithetical to fostering community, are neither illegal nor a violation of our policies. Additionally, the University should equip itself to provide aggregate statistics about complaints filed and their resolutions.

Freedom of Expression

Establish a climate that enables Harvard students, faculty, and staff to express views on the plight of the Palestinian people and related issues without fear of institutional pressure. We recommend:

- J) The University should explicitly and publicly reaffirm its commitment to free expression and open debate. This commitment should include safeguarding political speech and critique, upholding the rights to protest and dissent, and ensuring that academic freedom is not infringed upon by political considerations. It may be especially helpful for the Committee on Open Inquiry to include in its work the production of a Harvard statement on free expression.
- K) As Harvard community members return to campus for the fall semester, Harvard's Schools should ensure that their policies on protest and dissent are clearly and effectively communicated to all students, faculty, and staff. This is a crucial step towards addressing the ambiguity about these policies that we heard exists among many students and even among some staff responsible for applying them.

Transparency and Trust

Take steps to rebuild trust between the University and community members.

- L) The University must reaffirm and be consistent with its declared values. The current values [statement](#) from 2018 emphasizes “Respect for the rights, differences, and dignity of others; honesty and integrity in all dealings; conscientious pursuit of excellence in our work; accountability for actions and conduct in the community; and responsibility for the bonds and bridges that enable all to grow with and learn from one another.” Recent events present an opportunity to revisit this values statement to ensure it addresses the challenges currently faced by our community and to create a shared understanding of the University’s commitment to uphold and live up to these values. We would also suggest considering the inclusion of safety in this values statement.
- M) To rebuild trust, the University’s leadership and its faculty need to engage with community members directly through open fora, smaller conversation sessions, and

attendance at community events. It is imperative that leadership demonstrates empathy and understanding towards all students, staff, and faculty and maintains transparency as much as possible regarding their actions and decisions. When appropriate, leadership should also acknowledge mistakes, discuss efforts to mitigate their impact, and outline strategies to prevent future occurrences.

- N) Harvard should find ways to publicly highlight and clarify its adherence to fundraising best practices that protect academic freedom and institutional independence. Practices could involve issuing standard language to be shared during fundraising meetings that describes the guardrails in place to protect those values. Keeping in mind the important, supportive, and at times quite visible role alumni and donors can play, we also encourage the University's and the Schools' alumni and development offices to expand current engagement efforts by striving to augment their networks to fully reflect and represent the diversity of our students, staff, and faculty.

Relationships among Affinity Groups

Foster Pluralism and Create Bridges of Understanding. Intentional engagement with diversity and the commitment to learning from it must be affirmed as a crucial part of a Harvard education. There should be a concerted effort to provide students, faculty, and staff with the frameworks, tools, opportunities, and experiences to engage with difference. These initiatives could take the shape of curricular, co-curricular, or extracurricular activities. The following initiatives may be pursued in the short term:

- O) On-campus residential spaces, particularly the College Houses and First-Year Dorms, provide an ideal opportunity for students to engage with the remarkable diversity of residents. Currently, however, these spaces, especially the Houses are often characterized by “silos” with a minority of residents being fully engaged in House life. Recent events have exacerbated polarization in residential spaces. For example, some students chose not to have meals in the dining halls of their assigned House and went to other Houses where they felt “safer” or “more comfortable.” Indeed, one student characterized going into the dining hall as entering a minefield. Building bridges across such divides is important. We suggest that *all* students be incentivized to participate in a range of creatively designed community building activities through which residents get to know one another. The research of Harvard psychologist Mina Cikara has shown that when people get to know other people as individuals, their group or affinity identity becomes less important, and they are less likely to fall into fearful and hateful patterns. Similar initiatives could be introduced in other University housing for graduate students.
- P) Faculties across the University could organize community conversations during orientation engaging with issues related to diversity and pluralism using the case method. Elinor Pierce's *Pluralism in Practice* (Orbis 2023) may be a helpful resource in this regard. The book is based on Diana Eck's transformative General Education course on Pluralism which utilizes the case method to explore issues related to religious conflict and public leadership in the United States.

- Q) Religious illiteracy needs to be addressed as it is a significant factor contributing to stereotypes and prejudices. It is characterized not only by ignorance of the beliefs and practices of specific religious traditions but also by a lack of understanding about the nature of religion as a cultural phenomenon deeply embedded in and influenced by various contexts, historical, political, and social. To help address this problem in the immediate short-term, the University could make available the HarvardX course, “World Religions through their Scriptures.” It includes a short introductory online module on religious literacy that could be re-purposed for orienting students, faculty, staff, and administrators at the beginning of the fall semester. For those interested, it also includes well-designed modules on Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.
- R) Support initiatives that seek to build intra- or inter-group cohesion by launching a funding window through which students, staff, and/or faculty at the University can apply for small grants to host events that help build cohesion within and/or across specific communities, especially those that have felt marginalized and excluded. These initiatives could include funding student-led activities that build community across affinity groups and faculties through various arts-based initiatives. They could also include University-organized (by DEI offices, for example) visits to cultural and religious institutions, neighborhood outings, art exhibitions, cultural fairs, and on-campus facilitated discussions with members of the Boston area’s own diverse communities. The Office for the Arts could explore the possibility of bringing Middle Eastern, particularly Palestinian, and American Muslim artists and musicians to campus.

Strengthen Religious Life and Interfaith initiatives.

- S) Many Muslim students, faculty, and staff, and presumably those from other religious minority groups, have voiced frustration over the unintentional yet prevalent lack of understanding about their specific holidays, religious observance requirements, dietary needs, and other factors that influence their experience within the Harvard community. To address these concerns, possible initiatives that can enhance religious and spiritual life can include (we recognize that some of these might be more feasible in the medium to long term):
- Publicizing and enhancing as needed the [multifaith calendar](#) hosted on the Harvard Divinity School website with detailed holiday entries, as well as accommodation policies and contact information for inquiries. Related efforts may eventually extend to evaluating the current holiday schedule and considering potential changes to enhance inclusivity and potentially even piloting a program that provides a floating holiday for observing a day of cultural or religious significance and includes a provision for new employees to utilize unearned vacation time for religious observances.
 - Publicizing and augmenting as needed designated individuals at the University who have received specialized training on religious, ethnic, and cultural sensitivity issues, and are available as resources to help answer or direct questions that may arise in these areas.

- T) Harvard’s Muslims need to have dedicated spaces for prayer and communal gathering across Harvard’s campuses. This has been a long-standing issue of concern. While the University has made progress in this area, more needs to be done, especially in some of the graduate Schools where students have complained that some of the spaces are inadequate. The recently allocated prayer space in Sever Hall could be made permanent and refurbished, or other options centrally located near Harvard Yard need to be explored.

Intellectual Excellence

Redouble on intellectual engagement. The best way for the University to acknowledge pressing public events is by advancing our academic mission through classes, conferences, scholarship, and teaching that draw on the expert knowledge of its faculty.

- U) We recommend that the Office of the Provost should undertake a Harvard-wide audit of academic resources related to Islam, the Middle East, and Palestine studies, as well as Arab, Middle Eastern, and Islamic Studies (particularly the lived experiences of Muslim, Arab and Palestinian communities in the U.S. and around the world) across the University’s faculties. This includes:
- Courses: A University-wide review – potentially in coordination with the Task Force on Combating Antisemitism – could examine the course offerings dedicated to Islam, the Middle East, and Palestine studies. Such a systematic review should then endeavor to address gaps identified, by leveraging existing resources as well as visiting faculty and other scholars who may be invited through various programs, including the Scholars at Risk program that could bring scholars from Gaza to Harvard. Funding could also be established for innovative course offerings that equip students with the tools to understand and navigate conflicts and disagreements.
 - Faculty: While we recognize this is a longer-term objective, Harvard’s Schools should work to increase the representation of Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian faculty on campus. These would enrich the community of researchers at these Schools and serve as mentors and role models for students.
- V) It is crucial that Harvard students have the opportunity to observe examples of constructive and meaningful dialogue among members of our community. Potential initiatives could include:
- A high-profile series of talks, attended by the President or Provost, between pairs of individuals who disagree vehemently on controversial issues but do so productively.
 - Recognition of faculty, student leaders, and programs and initiatives that are promoting constructive dialogue on campus about interfaith and/or intercultural issues. Examples of such programs and initiatives include the Middle East Initiative Dialogues series at Harvard Kennedy School and events at the Weatherhead Center, such as the panel titled “Pernicious Prejudice: Scholarly Approaches to Antisemitism & Islamophobia.”

- Inviting a series of speakers to campus to discuss ways to encourage interfaith dialogue and build bridges across religious divides. This lecture series would be high profile campus-wide events attended by University and School leadership, with renowned speakers who have worked on interfaith issues.