

Australian Jewish Democratic Society

A Progressive Voice among Jews
A Jewish Voice among Progressives

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Sophie Nguyen
UMSU President
president@union.unimelb.edu.au

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Dear Sophie Nguyen,

Re: The motion passed by the UMSU on 29 April 2022 in support of Palestine

The Australian Jewish Democratic Society (AJDS), founded in 1984 has consistently called for a just, negotiated resolution of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians that provides security and freedom for all peoples. Our members include people who self-describe as post-Zionist, Zionist and non-Zionist.

We ask the UMSU to seriously reconsider its language and intent in its references to Jews and Zionism in the motion of 29 April 2022 in support of Palestine. Its immediate effect is to cause unneeded anxiety for Jewish students and is antithetical to free open and respectful debate on campus. It would have been much more productive to speak of the actions of the Israeli state, without ignorantly defining Jews as only those who have “Jewish faith”. Your axiomatic statements about Jews, Judaism and Zionism, even if unintended, have a too familiar ring of antisemitism. How can you condemn “antisemitism against students of the Jewish faith and stand(s) in solidarity with Jewish students”, when the UMSU narrowly defines Zionism only “as a racist, colonial ideology”?

In reality Zionism is a complex and extremely diverse idea that includes Jewish religious expression all the way to political expression. Politically it encompasses everything from far-right fascist ethno-nationalists to progressive elements who unreservedly support Palestinian national and human rights and decry oppressive and discriminatory actions of the Israeli government. There are, of course, non-Zionists and anti-Zionists with a variety of attitudes towards the state of Israel.

In fact, the language in the motion is similar that used by Islamophobes who somehow manage to distinguish between Islam as a religion and community and Islam as an ideology. The line in your motion referring to Judaism as just a faith, is familiar from Soviet antisemitism and it does not need to be revived. We guarantee that the UMSU would never pass a motion about the core values of the “Islamic faith”, when “ummah” – the idea of nation or community is so central to Islam. Thus it is with Jews.

In this context, we are also very conscious of attempts to close down free speech on Israel/Palestine by weaponising such documents as the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism. The use of terms such as colonialist, racist or apartheid state are part and

parcel of public debate in describing the current situation. Any group, whether student, Palestinian, or Jewish should be able to undertake political advocacy without being embroiled in accusations of antisemitism.

We strongly suggest that you refer to the Joint statement against Antisemitism developed by the Australian Jewish Democratic Society and the Australian Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) in 2020 [<https://ajds.org.au/antisemitism-3/>].

With best wishes,

Dennis Martin

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