Aug 29, 2024

To the Police Services Board

I am a Toronto resident living in the Armour Heights neighbourhood and I would like to submit a statement related to the Public Order Policy Consultation. For background, I live in a neighbourhood with a lot of Jewish families, Jewish schools, synagogues, kosher establishments and Jewish owned business. The increase in police presence around these neighbourhoods has not gone unnoticed and is very much appreciated. We are all aware that the police operate within a budget, and I imagine that budget has been stretched in the last 11 months given the dramatic increase in racist attacks, protests, counter protests and rallies. You do important work; I thank you for that work and have advocated for an increase in funding to city hall.

I’m also very pleased that this public consultation is taking place. Like many in my community, I’ve been to more rallies and gatherings in the last 11 months than in the last 11 years. It’s allowed me to see what I believe is the good and the ‘needs improvement’ around this kind of work

Overall, in my experience, the police have always been polite and respectful. They do what they can to prevent or minimize escalation. There has been a lot of discussion about why the police aren’t stopping what seem to be crimes that are occurring right in front of them. Overall, I believe the police are good people who want to do their jobs well. The only logical explanation in my mind is that there may be a need for education so everyone on the front lines recognizes hate speech vs free speech. People need to be taught what are terrorist symbols and what constitutes antiemetic speech. From the river to the sea is a call for the elimination of the entire population from the State of Israel. Globalize the Intifada is a call for the death of all Jews worldwide. These are threatening and grossly antisemitic chants. I would recommend zero tolerance for hate speech and the ability to recognize hate speech when it happens.

I am also on faculty at the University of Toronto. I often need to go to campus for my work and walking by the encampment last spring was scary and demoralizing. Although the university continually sent updates that they would not tolerate any laws and rules being broken, the encampment continued to break laws and rules for many weeks with no repercussions. I don’t claim to understand the legal issue with respect to private property, the university getting public dollars in funding, what the police are allowed or not allowed to do on campus etc. I do know however that the school year is starting again in a few days and I am very concerned about what campus is going to look like, how the Jewish students are going to be attacked and harassed, and how unsafe I may feel when I’m on campus. I believe that there should be resources and training for the police to assist campus security and to manage university encampments and protests.

Having attended several rallies in the last year, walked by many protests unintentionally and seen video of many online, I’m always struck by the fact that the anti-Israel protestors keep their faces covered. It seems to me that if you believe you’re not doing anything wrong, there should be no need to conceal yourself. My understanding is that several jurisdictions in the US are working towards laws to make masking at protests illegal. I believe that currently in Toronto it is illegal to conceal your identity while committing a criminal offence. Protesting obviously isn’t illegal, but chanting hate speech is. I again would encourage zero-tolerance to hate speech and application of the law against concealing your identity when committing a crime.

I live right near the Avenue Road bridge and need to cross it daily. For many weeks antisemitic protestors blocked traffic and came into the local neighbourhoods. My family and I felt unsafe. We have since installed a Ring doorbell and are much more regular about turning our home alarm on at night.

My daughter was trying to walk home form having lunch on Avenue road,and needed to be escorted over the bridge in a police car

It feels violating for people who don’t live anywhere your neighbourhood to be walking around your streets and your local supermarket chanting slogans that essentially mean they want you dead (globalize the intifada) and they want your ancestral homeland wiped off the map ( from the river to the sea), never mind being accused of murdering babies.

The police officers are all lovely and polite but it was very frustrating that no action was being taken during the bridge takovers. Action was finally taken but only after a Jewish deli was attacked with a firebomb and after “coffeegate”. I have no way of knowing if there was a connecting but that’s my recollection of the timing

I don’t know if there are any laws broken when people walk around Jewish neighbourhoods wearing keffiyehs, carrying Palestinian flags, harassing children and calling people baby killers. It certainly feels like there should be laws against that and that everyone should feel safe in their own neighbourhoods.

In summary I would like the thank the Toronto Police Services for their increased visibility in Jewish neighbourhoods, for the important role they play in keeping the peace at rallies and protests and continue the call for increased funding to be able to perform this work. I also feel there’s a real need for education around what constitutes hate speech, definitions and examples of antisemitism that are perhaps less obvious and zero tolerance for committing these crimes.

Thank you