



April 17, 2019

**VIA EMAIL AND FIRST-CLASS MAIL**

Kenneth L. Marcus  
Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue S.W.  
Washington, DC 20202-1100

Dear Assistant Secretary Marcus:

We write to respectfully urge you to investigate and determine whether the University of North Carolina (UNC) and Duke University misused federal funds to promote a one-sided “academic” conference that was hostile to Israel and blatantly anti-Semitic.

On March 22-24, 2019, the University of North Carolina hosted a conference called “Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics and Possibilities,” which was co-sponsored by Duke University. The conference reportedly used \$5000.00 in grant money from the U.S. Department of Education, derived from a four-year \$235,000.00-per-year grant to UNC and Duke’s Consortium for Middle East Studies. (See <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/politics-government/article229272714.html>.)

Even before the conference took place, Beth El Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Durham-Chapel Hill, wrote to the leadership of Duke and UNC to express concern about the conference’s anti-Israel bias: “Based upon the current composition of invited speakers, the conference program fails to meet Duke and UNC’s high academic standards because it lacks both presenters to articulate a mainstream Israeli perspective and anyone who can suggest actions that might improve relations between the two from an Israeli perspective.” (<https://voice4israel.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Letter-from-Beth-El-regarding-Gaza-Conference.pdf>.)

**A One-Sided Taxpayer-Funded Conference Hostile to Israel**

Despite these expressed concerns, the UNC-Duke conference was reportedly one-sided and hostile to Israel. In a blog post, North Carolina Hillel wrote that the “conference featured speakers who demonized Israel for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and included too few perspectives from scholars who could have provided balanced context and multiple viewpoints on this challenging subject. Organizers missed the opportunity to convene a rich, educational

forum that the UNC and Duke communities deserve.” (See <http://northcarolina.hillel.org/home/what-we-do/blog/blog/2019/04/12/nc-hillel-calls-for-academic-review-of-gaza-conference.>)

### Blatant Anti-Semitism at the Conference

In addition to its anti-Israel bias, the UNC-Duke conference included an offensive and horrifying anti-Semitic performance by a rapper named Tamer Nafar. The performance came to light when a filmmaker named Ami Horowitz posted a video of Nafar’s performance, which included other anti-Semitic interactions Horowitz experienced with faculty and others at the conference. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6e7efB93jk.>)

As the video reflects, Nafar told the audience, “This is my anti-Semitic song.” He advised the audience not to think of Rihanna or Beyoncé when they sing it, but instead to “think of Mel Gibson” – the anti-Semitic actor who claimed that “Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world.” “Go that anti-Semitic,” Nafar said. Encouraging the audience to join him – because “I cannot be anti-Semitic alone” – he enlisted the audience’s help in singing repeatedly, “Oh! I’m in love with a Jew.”

In the video, the audience – which presumably included university staff, students, faculty, “scholars” and others – can be heard singing along and laughing. It was sickening and disgusting.

### UNC’s and Duke’s Inadequate Response

The universities’ response to this debacle was shamefully inadequate. When local media outlet ABC11 asked UNC about Horowitz’s video, the university attacked the video instead of the anti-Semitic conference, claiming that the video was “heavily edited,” and justifying the anti-Israel and anti-Semitic vitriol expressed at the conference as “academic freedom.”

Even after ABC11 provided UNC with the “raw, unedited version of the performance,” UNC failed to condemn it. Instead, UNC emphasized the “academic freedom” of the “scholars” who organized the conference and chose the speakers and performers. (See [https://abc11.com/politics/holding-asks-for-investigation-in-rappers-anti-semitic-performance-at-unc-event/5243623/.](https://abc11.com/politics/holding-asks-for-investigation-in-rappers-anti-semitic-performance-at-unc-event/5243623/))

UNC’s Interim Chancellor Kevin M. Guskiewicz eventually issued a statement that weakly criticized the performance as “contain[ing] disturbing and hateful language.” (See [https://abc11.com/politics/holding-asks-for-investigation-in-rappers-anti-semitic-performance-at-unc-event/5243623/.](https://abc11.com/politics/holding-asks-for-investigation-in-rappers-anti-semitic-performance-at-unc-event/5243623/)) The Chancellor did not condemn the anti-Semitic performer by name, nor did he condemn the conference organizers for inviting the performer and tolerating his anti-Semitism. The Chancellor failed to address the rest of the one-sided conference that was hostile to Israel.

Duke's President Vincent E. Price and Provost Sally Kornbluth also issued a statement that broadly condemned anti-Semitism. (See <https://abc11.com/politics/holding-asks-for-investigation-in-rappers-anti-semitic-performance-at-unc-event/5243623/>.) But their statement failed to acknowledge the anti-Semitism at their own conference, and failed to condemn Nafar and the conference organizers who invited him and permitted the conduct. The Duke officials completely ignored that the conference was one-sided and hostile to Israel.

Significantly, North Carolina Hillel requested that an investigation be commissioned to "inquire if the conference met rigorous academic standards devoid of bias" and "to determine if additional anti-Semitism or discrimination occurred that could contradict UNC policies." To our knowledge, UNC and Duke have ignored Hillel's request and have not committed to undertaking an investigation.

After the Conference, Swastikas and Anti-Semitic Posters at UNC

It cannot be a coincidence that days after the conference, swastikas were found drawn on the UNC campus. In addition, anti-Semitic posters were found on bookshelves and tables in UNC's Davis Library. According to North Carolina Hillel, "[t]he fliers include references to 'an evil Jewish plot,' and the missive, 'do everything you can to fight the silent covert Jewish attempt to enslave and kill good Americans.'"

What happened is wrong and unacceptable. UNC and Duke should face consequences for legitimizing and normalizing a hateful, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic conference, and using taxpayer funds to do it. The Department of Education should investigate this incident and deny both universities future federal funding until they demonstrate that their Middle East programs and events are truly educational and not just a mask for hateful, anti-Semitic and anti-Israel propaganda. We are grateful that Congressman George Holding of North Carolina has already written to Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, urging the Department of Education to investigate this incident.

Thank you for your continued leadership in fighting anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry. We appreciate your considering our concerns and look forward to hearing from you. Please know that the Zionist Organization of America is here to help in any way.

Respectfully,



Morton A. Klein  
National President



Susan B. Tuchman, Esq.  
Director, Center for Law and Justice