

Second Letter: 80 Organizations Concerned about UMass Sponsorship of Political Event and Faculty Misconduct

SENT VIA EMAIL

April 30, 2019

Dear Chancellor Subbaswamy,

Our 80 organizations were pleased to learn that you recently informed the academic sponsors of "Not Backing Down" that they have a "special obligation" to ensure that especially in "today's hyper-polarized environment" this highly controversial event presents opposing points of view and does not become an "echo chamber." We commend you for recognizing that the May 4th event, as advertised, will offer a single perspective about a complex and highly controversial topic, and will in no way be "the meaningful exchange of ideas" that is essential to the academic mission of your university.

What is particularly troublesome about this event, however, is not just the homogeneity of viewpoints of the event's organizer and speakers, which identify this event as clearly partisan. More importantly, as the event's [press release](#) makes clear, this is not an educational event but a political rally whose purpose is to incite political hatred towards Israel and its supporters, including Jewish and pro-Israel students on your campus. Events like this do nothing to educate. Rather, their intention is to promote hateful lies, factual distortions and political propaganda whose effect is to divide the campus community, shut down genuine debate and discourse, ostracize and marginalize those who disagree with the views espoused, and inject dangerous hostility and hate onto campus.

For these reasons, we remain concerned that three academic departments are listed as named-sponsors. As we acknowledged in our original letter, we recognize that private citizens and NGOs like The Media Education Foundation have a right to rent university space and express their political opinions, and we are not asking you to shut this event down. Renting space to a private group for a political event is one thing; official departmental sponsorship of such an event is something altogether different. It is reprehensible that faculty are attempting to brazenly exploit their academic positions and the reputation of the University of Massachusetts to promote their own politics. And in "today's hyper-polarized environment," where hatred can easily erupt into violence — as we tragically saw in San Diego this past weekend — the academic legitimization of this event provided by the named-sponsorship of three UMass academic units is a fundamental breach of the public trust in your university to both carry out its academic mission and to protect the safety and well-being of your students.

If the event's academic sponsors do nothing to change this politically motivated and directed event into a truly educational one, we once again call on you to take immediate action:

- **Rescind all named university sponsorship of this political event and ensure that no academic unit or other university entity is connected to this event in any way.**

- **Provide us with assurances, highlighting relevant university policies and procedures, that UMass faculty will not be permitted to use their academic position or the university's name or resources to promote personal, political agendas that compromise the university's academic mission and imperil the safety and well-being of UMass students.**

Sincerely,

Academic Council for Israel
Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity (AEPi)
Alums for Campus Fairness - National
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Riverside
Alums for Campus Fairness - UCLA
AMCHA Initiative
American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists
American Institute for Jewish Research
American Jewish Congress
American Society of the University of Haifa
American Truth Project
American Values
Americans Fighting Antisemitism
B'nai B'rith International
BEAR: Bias Education, Advocacy & Resources
Bobcats for Israel at Ohio University
Boston Israel Action Committee
Bulldogs for Israel (Brooklyn College)
Campus Anti-Semitism Task Force of the North Shore
Center for Righteousness and Integrity
Club Z
Coalition for Jewish Values
Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA)
Creative Community for Peace
Dartmouth Students for Israel
Davis Faculty for Israel
Eagles Wings
Endowment for Middle East Truth (EMET)
Facts and Logic About the Middle East (FLAME)
Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors
Hasbara Fellowships
Hillel at the University of New Mexico
Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel
Iranian American Jewish Federation

Iranian Jewish Women's Organization
Israel Allies Foundation
Israel in NYC
Israel Matters
Israel on Campus Coalition
Israel Peace Initiative (IPI)
Israeli-American Civic Action Network
Israeli-American Civic Education Institute
Ithaca Area United Jewish Community
Jewish American Affairs Committee of Indiana
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)
Middle East Forum
Middle East Political and Information Network (MEPIN)
National Conference on Jewish Affairs
National Council of Young Israel
NCSY
NH4Israel
North Carolina Coalition for Israel
Proclaiming Justice to the Nations
Rabbinical Alliance of America
Religious Zionists of America
Russian Jewish Community Foundation
Scholars for Peace in the Middle East
Simon Wiesenthal Center
Slugs for Israel (University of California Santa Cruz)
StandWithUs
StandWithUs Saidoff Legal Department
Stop Anti-Semitism Now
Stop BDS on Campus
Students and Parents Against Campus Anti-Semitism
Students Supporting Israel at Columbia
Students Supporting Israel at Drake University
Students Supporting Israel at San Jose State University
Students Supporting Israel at UCLA
Students Supporting Israel National
Swarthmore Alumni Against Antisemitism on Campus
Swarthmore Students for Israel
The Israel Christian Nexus
The Israel Project
Tufts Friends of Israel
WoMen Fight Antisemitism
World Jewish Congress, American Section

Young Jewish Conservatives
Zionist Organization of America
ZOA's Fuel for Truth

Cc: University of Massachusetts President, Marty Meehan
Chair Commonwealth of Massachusetts Joint Committee on Higher Education, Anne M. Gobi
Chair Commonwealth of Massachusetts Joint Committee on Higher Education, Jeffrey N. Roy
Hillel at UMass Amherst Executive Director Rabbi Aaron Fine

On Apr 23, 2019, at 7:30 AM, Tammi Rossman-Benjamin wrote:

Dear Chancellor Subbaswamy,

We are 80 civil rights, education, religious, faculty and student organizations that span the political spectrum, writing to express our deep concern that three UMass academic units have been named as sponsors of a political [event](#), whose apparent goal is to incite animosity towards supporters of Israel, including Jewish and pro-Israel students on your campus. Although we recognize that the event itself is protected by the First Amendment, we believe that its departmental sponsorship constitutes an unacceptable violation of the university's academic mission, will encourage acts of politically motivated aggression and violence on your campus, and is a fundamental breach of the public trust. We call on you to rescind all university sponsorship of this event and to assure us that in the future, UMass faculty will not be permitted to use the university's name or resources to promote their personal political agendas at the expense of academic integrity and the safety and well-being of UMass students.

The May 4th event, entitled "Not Backing Down: Israel, Free Speech, & the Battle for Palestinian Rights," is being organized by the NGO Media Education Foundation (MEF), whose director is Sut Jhally. Jhally is also chair of the UMass Department of Communication, which is co-sponsoring the event along with the UMass Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and the Resistance Studies Initiative UMass. According to a [press release](#), which included Jhally's official UMass email address, the event will feature "prominent activists" for a "panel on backlash against pro-Palestinian voices" and include a discussion of "recent attacks on Rep. Ilhan Omar and other progressives who have spoken out against Israel's 50-year military occupation of Palestinian land and criticized pro-Israel pressure groups for conflating legitimate criticism of Israeli government policies with 'anti-Semitism'."

As described in the press release, this is not an educational event but a political rally. Rather than aiming to promote an understanding of a highly contentious and polarizing issue by including speakers with a variety of perspectives, this event includes speakers with only one extremely partisan perspective and clearly aims to promote a political cause and encourage political action. Providing the imprimatur of three academic departments to such a politically motivated and directed event violates the core academic mission of the university, suppresses student expression and impedes the free exchange of ideas so essential for any university. As Brown University President Christina Paxton recently stated in the *Brown Herald*, "If the University starts taking political positions, we run the risk of undermining

academic freedom on campus. If we say we're the university that opposes Israel, how can we have scholarship and debate on what's happening in the Middle East?"

Moreover, the event organizer and several speakers — particularly Roger Waters, Linda Sarsour, Marc Lamont Hill, and Sut Jhally — as well as Rep. Ilhan Omar, are all outspoken anti-Israel activists who have engaged in expression deemed antisemitic not only by the vast majority of world Jewry, but also by the standards established by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism, which has been adopted by dozens of countries including the [United States](#). These activists' antisemitic expressions include charges that Jewish Americans are more loyal to Israel than America, calls for the elimination of the Jewish state, comparisons of Israelis to Nazis, and other false and defamatory accusations about Israel and Israel's supporters that draw on classic antisemitic tropes. Official departmental sponsorship of this event will provide the appearance of academic legitimacy to the kind of political hatred that will undoubtedly be purveyed by these speakers -- hatred that can't help but encourage open hostility towards Jewish and pro-Israel students on your campus.

As a private citizen and director of an NGO, Jhally has the right to express these views publicly, just as his NGO has the right to rent space from UMass for the purpose of expressing such views. However, we believe that Jhally is engaging in an unacceptable conflict of interest when he exploits his position as a UMass professor and department chair and the university's name to promote his own personal animosity towards Israel and its supporters. Such behavior appears to be in violation of the UMass Amherst [Principles of Employee Conduct](#), which state that "University employees are entrusted with public resources and are expected to understand their responsibilities with respect to conflicts of interest...and to conduct themselves in ways that foster... tolerance for the view of others."

To be clear, although events like these do nothing to encourage discourse, debate and resolution but instead are intended to silence opposing views and incite hatred towards those who hold them, we are not asking that this event be shut down. However, action is required, and we are requesting that you take the following steps:

- **Rescind all named university sponsorship of this event and ensure that no academic unit or other university entity is connected to this event in any way.**
- **Provide us with assurances, highlighting relevant university policies and procedures, that UMass faculty will not be permitted to use their academic position or the university's name or resources to promote a personal, political agenda that compromises the university's academic mission and imperils the safety and well-being of UMass students.**

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

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