



Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, D.C. 20515

April 15, 2019

The Honorable Betsy DeVos  
Secretary of Education  
Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary DeVos,

A number of my constituents have reached out to me expressing concern over what they tell me are reports of severe anti-Israeli bias and anti-semitic rhetoric at a taxpayer - funded conference, "Conflict Over Gaza: People, Politics, and Possibilities," held between March 22nd-24th at the University of North Carolina (UNC), in conjunction with Duke University (Duke).

The Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies, which co-sponsored the conference, applied for and received a federal grant through the Department of Education (DOE) worth \$235,000.

According to first-hand accounts, the conference had a radical anti-Israeli bias.

Reportedly, speakers and panelists distorted facts and misrepresented the complex situation in Gaza. A video recently surfaced depicting the main musical performer, rapper Tamer Nafar, singing a brazenly anti-semitic song.

Examination of the official program reveals that several of the conference's speakers are actively involved in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Prior to the event, local religious and community organizations, academics and citizens wrote the universities expressing concern that the conference lacked balance and appeared designed to promote a radical agenda. Apparently, these concerns were ignored, with no mainstream speakers or panelists included in the three-day conference.

If these reports are accurate, I have difficulty understanding why tax dollars should be spent on such an activity.

To determine the facts, I urge the Department of Education to investigate the "Conflict Over Gaza" conference and provide me with answers to the following questions:

1. What policies does the Department of Education have in place to ensure taxpayer funded federal grants are not awarded to organizations promoting a biased anti-Israeli agenda?
2. Did the conference organizers invite any mainstream pro-Israel groups or speakers to participate in the conference? If not, why not?
3. Did any of the presentations include dialogue promoting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement? If so, which presentations?
4. Did any of the presentations glorify acts of violence? If so, which presentations?
5. Were funds from the Department grant awarded to the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies used to finance any aspect of the event? If so, how much money was used and for what purposes?
6. Were items of clothing and other gifts given away to attendees? If so, did this merchandise convey any political messaging and were they purchased with taxpayer dollars?
7. In your opinion, did the conference present an overtly biased characterization of the situation in The Middle East?
8. If the reports of extensive anti-Israeli bias are true, is that grounds to revoke the remainder of the federal grant awarded to the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies.

Honest academic debate featuring diverse perspectives and a wide-range of views is critical in a democratic society and a central tenet of America's educational system. However, it is irresponsible, immoral and unproductive for taxpayer dollars to fund overtly biased advocacy camouflaged as academic discourse.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

  
George Holding  
Member of Congress