

Dear Mayor Schewel and Durham City Council Members:

September 22, 2018

I am writing in regard to a letter sent to you described on the <https://voice4israel.com/> website as:

“Voice4Israel board member Mike Ross wrote this open letter to the Durham City Council on August 16 objecting to the Council’s demonization of Israel and the Mayor Pro Temore’s perpetuation of the myth that Israel indiscriminately targets civilians.”

See Appendix below for the letter, also [online](#). In it Dr. Ross makes statements that are not factual and makes accusations against you, Mayor and Council members, that are not warranted and, in my opinion, are defamatory. I admire the courageous stand that you have taken and know life has not been made easier for you given the pervasive and sustained and often harsh push back you have been subjected to. You are great defenders of truth and justice. I cannot let Dr. Ross’s letter go unchallenged.

Context

I will be repeating here some remarks that I made in a previous e-mail I sent to Jillian Johnson in regard to an open letter sent to her by Dr. Adam Goldstein (“Don’t Retweet Anti-Semites: An Open Letter to Durham City Council Member Jillian Johnson”) on August 28 because Ross and Goldstein are addressing the same issue – Ms. Johnson’s retweet of the following statement:

The tweet under discussion

“What deserves unequivocal condemnation is the killing of over 160 Palestinian protesters in Gaza by Israeli forces since March, including dozens of children. “

It is clear that Dr. Ross has not heeded the admonition Mayor Schewel directed to the Voice for Israel organization in his wrap up statement at the end of the discussion regarding the policy statement, that included this remark:

**Mayor Schewel’s admonition at the council meeting on April 16
directed to the Voice for Israel organization.
Dr. Ross is chair of the board of that organization**

**“It does not help this discussion to say things that are not true in order to whip up support for yourself.” at timeline point 11:24 at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5mWJ2K9-7I&feature=youtu.be>.**

“Things that are not true - 7 Ross statements”

* Ross statement: “In so doing, you seemed to want to perpetuate the distortion that Israel was indiscriminately killing civilians in Gaza.”

Ross’s “you” above refers to the Mayor and every member of the Council. And shouldn’t have. The tweet is not a distortion. It’s factual. As I said in my earlier letter to Ms. Johnson: A Reuter’s World Report dated September 14, 2018 gives the death toll as 177. A Middle East Monitor article dated September 11 gives the total of children killed as 39. While the statement is critical of Israeli forces, it is accurate.

* Ross statement: “The vast majority of Gazans who have died were terrorist organization members, intent on mayhem, deviously hidden among civilian demonstrators.”

Presumably Ross's "terrorist organization" is a reference to Hamas. Hamas, like any other political operative, is going to take advantage of an active situation, but no, the "vast majority of Gazans" who died were not Hamas members; many weren't even near the fence. Amnesty International has documented the killing of demonstrators who were shot in the back, meters away from the fence, paramedics, children and even journalists. These articles by Amnesty International provide some specifics:

- April 27, 2018 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/israel-arms-embargo-needed-as-military-unlawfully-kills-and-maims-gaza-protesters/>
- May 14, 2018 - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/israel-use-of-excessive-force-in-gaza-an-abhorrent-violation-of-international-law/>
- June 6 Video Amnesty International did on the shooting of Razan al Najjar at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZt2AfCT_wk.

The Atlantic Monthly published photos that give some sense of what the protest scene looks like: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2018/09/photos-25-fridays-of-protest-in-gaza/570889/>

* Ross statement: "The tweet's misrepresentation..."

No, it is not a misrepresentation any more than it is a distortion, as rebutted above.

* Ross statement: "I wish you had not retweeted this, as it suggests an alignment with the goals of Hamas to destroy Israel. It encourages the belief in our community, that such desires were the true motivation for your insistence that the City Council Statement single out Israel."

The statement mentions Israel in a quote in its preamble sentence. It does not single out vis-à-vis any other country with military-style training when it comes to deciding where the Durham police force might get its training. The Mayor has made this clear in a conversation I had with him and which I publicized in a letter to the editor in the Durham Herald Sun. Furthermore, Ross goes on to say that the Council's letter encourages the belief that the true motivation of the Council was to destroy Israel. That is outrageously defamatory and is actually absurd. Ross heard the statements of the Council members at the meeting and has probably spoken directly with some of the members. It's beyond comprehension that he would make an accusation like that and publicize it on the Voice for Israel website. [Link](#)

* Ross statement: "This decision was made after your countenance of a two hour City Council Meeting segment, largely devoted to putting Israel on trial."

It was an open forum. If Ross has criticism of a statement made from the floor, he should rebut it

* Ross statement: ". Members of the City Council, please consider whether the demonization of Israel..."

No, it is not demonization any more than it is a distortion or misrepresentation of the facts, as rebutted above. "Demonizing Israel" is rhetoric often used by those who do not like to hear anything critical said about Israel. Goldstein's letter to Ms. Johnson used the same phrase. The statement did not demonize Israel. The tweet under discussion and the mayor's wrap up statement at the Council meeting ("...", but I also believe that the survival of the Jewish state is dependent on doing justice to the Palestinians and I do not believe that we are. ") did rightfully criticize Israel. That is not demonizing Israel. Saying that criticizing Israel is demonizing Israel is like saying abolitionists demonized plantation owners.

Ross reference: "Where no crimes are on hand they must be fabricated..."

The number of killings of Palestinian protesters was not fabricated.

Ross statement: "This quote I believe can be applied to the deliberate misrepresentation of the Gaza violence, inherent in the tweet."

"Misrepresentation" already rebutted.

Conclusion

My criticism of Dr. Ross's statements is not an attack on him personally. I do not know him. But I must say that I am puzzled that a man of his intelligence and education whose life is centered on a caring profession, will make statements that are not true and that are often defamatory and he makes them publicly.

I do feel an obligation to point out the problems with statements like those. The Council policy statement issue has drawn national and international attention and there are forces who are working hard to have the statement rescinded. Those who wish to silence the legitimate criticism (that's in the context of the statement, not in the statement itself) of a country, any country, for its human rights abuses are complicit in the perpetuation of those abuses. Those who wish to do that should be challenged.

It is understandable that Drs. Ross and Goldstein cherish Israel. Would that they would express that love as tough love as Mayor Schewel did. Their concern is focused on how Israel is portrayed. Would that they would express concern for the unarmed Palestinian protesters the Israeli forces killed. That would actually be to address the underlying cause of the criticism of the Israeli government, the target of their pushback. That would be a gratifying resolution. One benefit of the vociferous public pushback by Voice for Israel is that it offers an occasion to spotlight Israeli government's human rights abuses.

Thank you for your consideration of my critique and for your ongoing good work to make Durham a wonderful community for all of its citizens.

Sincerely,

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