

To: <chancellor@unc.edu>, <president@duke.edu>

Dear Chancellor Guzkiewicz and President Price,

I am a resident of Chapel Hill since 1998, serve as Pastor of the Church of Reconciliation (Presbyterian Church USA), and co-founded the Abrahamic Initiative for the Middle East, an interfaith non-profit working toward a just and sustainable peace in Israel-Palestine. I grew up in Lebanon where my parents were professors, and have traveled in the region, as recently as 2013.

I am writing to express my admiration for the March 22-24 Gaza Conference held at UNC. I was present for the Saturday morning lectures, and was impressed with the quality of the presentations. Shai Tamari and the conference planners did an excellent job assembling top talent from across the country and Gaza itself. It was a splendid opportunity to discuss a difficult topic in an academic setting.

I am aware that propagandist Ami Horowitz and others have attacked the conference as "Israel bashing" and "anti-Semitic." These are not informed, rational responses to the conference, but smears and distortions. As such, they do not deserve to be taken seriously. Regrettably, you have been besieged with the usual onslaught from those few among us who are beside themselves whenever the government of Israel's policies and practices are criticized. Indeed, Israel did come in for legitimate criticism from the panel of scholars, activists, and civil servants, as well it should as the dominant power in the conflict directly responsible for a dire humanitarian crisis. However, in every instance, the criticism offered was factual, evidence-based, and constructive in tone. Moreover, there was also legitimate criticism of Palestinian authorities and U.S. foreign policy. It was all respectful, professional, and appropriate, exactly what one would expect from a jointly-sponsored UNC-Duke event.

I trust you have seen the article "Why So Much Fuss About A Conference in North Carolina?" by Lara Friedman, herself Jewish, one of the panelists, who vigorously defended the conference against these smears. I agree with her in every respect, except one. Whereas she found the Palestinian rapper Tamer Nafar's presentation annoying (though she did say she did not consider it to be anti-Semitic), I saw it as edgy and tongue-in-cheek. Humor and satire are part of the ecosystem of resistance, so it clearly belongs in a conference on the Gaza conflict, and I commend the conference planners for including it.

Unfortunately, I suspect that the real motive behind the false charges and loud complaints leveled at the conference is to penalize and eventually shut down all criticism of Israel's siege of Gaza, no matter how richly deserved. On these controversial issues, free speech on campus, a pillar of academic freedom, is now also under siege.

Sincerely yours,

Rev. J. Mark Davidson, Pastor
Church of Reconciliation (Presbyterian Church U.S.A.)
110 N. Elliott Rd.
Chapel Hill, NC 27514