

LDB Urges University of Houston to Condemn Anti-Semitic Student Messages

February 15, 2017, Washington, D.C: Today, Brandeis Center urged the Chancellor of the University of Houston to condemn anti-Semitic social media postings by students of the University of Houston (UH). The Brandeis Center is a national civil rights legal advocacy organization, best known for its work fighting anti-Semitism in higher education.

LDB President Kenneth L. Marcus commented, “These messages revive bigoted anti-Semitic and discriminatory tropes and could create an environment that Israeli students, Jewish students, and other students, will reasonably perceive to be hostile.” Marcus urged the President of UH and Chancellor of the UH system, Renu Khator, to recall the words of the Department of Education: “we must be vigilant about maintaining safe, respectful, and nondiscriminatory learning environments for all students in our schools and institutions.”

The Brandeis Center has reviewed numerous social media postings using anti-Semitic stereotypes, imagery, and generally racist language to describe Israel and “Zionists.” The content, mostly originating from Twitter, has been from a handful of different accounts of current UH students. The posts made by students include holocaust related humor, such as “what’s the difference between jews and boy Scouts? Boy Scouts come back from camp” and “How do you get a Jewish girls number? You roll up her sleeve.” Some posts expressed support for the Intifada, a term long associated with violence against innocent Israeli Jewish civilians; for the convicted terrorist, Ramea Odeh; and for designated terrorist organizations, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). References to “f*****g Zionists” and “yahoodi [Jews]” are made throughout the posts.

Anti-Semitism, as well as anti-Semitism rebranded as anti-Zionism, has become seemingly ubiquitous within the academic landscape of the United States. It is up to the leadership of every university to see it as their duty to confront that which creates an unsafe environment for their Jewish students, and all students.

The full text of LDB’s letter can be found below:

February 15, 2017

Renu Khator
Chancellor, University of Houston System
President, University of Houston
University of Houston
212 E. Cullen Building
Houston, Texas 77204

VIA E-MAIL (rkhator@uh.edu)

Dear Chancellor Khator:

We write on behalf of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law (LDB) to express concern over anti-Semitic social media postings by current and former University of Houston students, which we have reviewed and verified, demonstrating a long-standing problem on your campus. In these messages, your students have praised Adolf Hitler and derogated Jewish people as “zionist scum,” “fucking Yahood,” “dirty yahoodi.” Such conduct, if not firmly and directly addressed, sends a message that Jewish students are not welcome at the University of Houston. We urge you to counter that message quickly and firmly.

The U.S. Department of Education reminded us that “we must be vigilant about maintaining safe, respectful, and nondiscriminatory learning environments for all students in our schools and institutions,” noting that Jewish students are among those who are “especially at risk of harassment,” and urging educators like yourself to “anticipate the potential challenges” that they may face (*see attached* U.S. Department of Education, Dear Colleague Letter (Dec. 31, 2015)).

The social media postings, revealed late last month, include a mixture of inciting violence against Jews and Israelis; displaying anti-Semitic, racist, and homophobic sentiment; praising Hitler; endorsing terrorist organizations, and endorsing terror. The postings include:

In March 2015, a current UH junior tweeted, “I blame the yahood [Jews],” and in May 2015, he tweeted, “. . . Fucking Yahood [Jews] man.” In June 2015, he tweeted : “Shia LaBeouf looks like a dirty cave dweller now,” and replied to a comment with: “for a dirty yahoodi [Jew], yes he does.”

In August 2013, a 2016 UH graduate tweeted: “whats the difference between jews and boyscouts? Boy Scouts come back from camp.” In March 2013, he tweeted, “How do you get a Jewish girls number? You roll up her sleeve.” He also posted a series of vulgar homophobic tweets, including in August 2014, “Omg tumblr is host to some of the most faggot-y faggots in all of human history,” and in June 2014, “. . . you should suck my nuts dry you faggot.”

On January 1, 2017, a current UH Senior and UH SJP activist posted an image on Twitter, which appeared to be the new background of his iPhone. The image featured a large bird carrying a Nazi flag, with a swastika. He wrote, “New year calls for a new background that fits the existing conditions.” In May 2014, the same student tweeted, “Fuck that shit! I support what the PFLP & PLO have done in their cause to free the Palestinians.” The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) is designated by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,^[1] and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is a group responsible for scores of terrorism since its creation.^[2] In February 2014, the student tweeted, “Watching this documentary on Human Organ Trafficking. Israel takes in more illegally gained organs than any other nation. Fucking Zionists,” invoking the age-old anti-Semitic blood libel, as explained in LDB’s *Fact Sheet on the Elements of Anti-Semitism*^[3] (*see attached*).

In March 2016, UH’s SJP shared a post on Facebook to attend an event, “Solidarity with Rasmea Odeh.” Rasmea Odeh is a convicted Palestinian terrorist and member of the PFLP involved in a Jerusalem supermarket bombing which killed 2 college students in 1969.

In November 2015, UH’s SJP shared an event on Facebook, promoting a demonstration they were co-sponsoring in front of Houston’s General Consulate to Israel. The Facebook event stated, “We affirm that we stand against Israel, its Zionism, and its imperialist US backers. We affirm support for the Palestinian resistance, that it will ensure Palestine’s survival and will ultimately deliver the Palestinian revolution. Long Live the Resistance! Long Live the Intifada!” The term “intifada” has long been associated with violence against innocent Israeli Jewish civilians.

Screenshots of all of the above listed postings are attached in the Appendix.

While we do not dispute the right of students to express themselves, even hurtfully or outrageously, these messages revive bigoted anti-Semitic and discriminatory tropes, and we are concerned that these types of statements, and similar statements, could create an environment that Israeli students, Jewish students, and other students, will reasonably perceive to be hostile.

We urge your administration to exercise its obligation to address the harms that arise when speakers misuse their right to free speech in ways that poison the environment and send a message of exclusion and

hate. Allowing such statements by UH students without strong condemnation from the University administration will signal that UH takes a disparaging view of Jewish students and students of Israeli national origin. Such messages are incompatible with federal civil rights law, and UH values.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in programs that receive federal funds. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced that Title VI applies to discrimination on the basis of Jewish ethnicity or ancestry in guidance issued in 2004 (*see attached* Kenneth L. Marcus, Dear Colleague Letter (Sep. 13, 2004)). In 2010, OCR clarified that unlawful harassment need not include intent to harm, be directed at a specific target, or involve repeated incidents (*see attached* Russlynn Ali, Dear Colleague Letter (Oct. 26, 2010)). Speech that invokes anti-Semitic stereotypes and hateful and violent rhetoric against Israelis and Jews, such as the social media messages at issue, can create a hostile environment for Israeli and Jewish students on campus in violation of Title VI.

Furthermore, UH's Policy on "Expectations of Students for a Conducive Learning Environment," lists first: "Be Respectful: Respect the learning/classroom environment and the dignity and rights of all persons. Be tolerant of differing opinions."⁴ These social media postings surely violate this expectation.

We believe that it is important to respect the right of all members of the university community to express their opinions; however, hateful and bigoted speech should be strongly condemned. We hope that you will seize this as a teachable moment to educate your students about the evils of anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of discrimination by doing the following:

- Address the harm done to the community by issuing a strong university statement condemning anti-Semitism – along the lines that we discuss in "Best Practice Guide for Combating Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israelism" (*see attached*) – firmly, promptly, and with specificity. As we describe in our Guide, it is necessary for university leaders to exercise moral leadership by expressing their views of difficult subjects. A good example of a strong leadership statement was seen at UCLA last year, when Vice Chancellor Janina Montero issued a statement to her university community in response to anti-Semitic Facebook postings by a UCLA student, stating in part that the "hurtful and offensive comments displayed ignorance of the history and racial diversity of the Jewish people, insensitivity and a disappointing lack of empathy. Bigotry against the Jewish people or other groups is abhorrent and does not represent the values of UCLA or the beliefs of our community."
- Reach out to targeted student groups, local community leaders, and experts, including UH Hillel, and offer support and resources as needed.
- Provide extracurricular programming to raise community awareness about global and campus anti-Semitism. Create more academic, curricular, and other programming on anti-Semitism.
- Provide training to students and faculty like on the nature of and different manifestations of anti-Semitism, and the appropriate means of addressing it.
- Adopt a uniform definition of anti-Semitism, such as the definition used by the U.S. State Department (*see attached*) or the recently adopted University of California Regents' *Statement of Principles Against Intolerance*, in order to avoid and properly identify anti-Semitism should it arise in the future.

In accordance with the directive of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, we ask you to exercise your “ethical moral obligation to act as leaders, and promote the values of respect, tolerance, and inclusiveness on campus,” and to educate your students and faculty “that with freedom of speech comes responsibility.” We urge you to take these actions to remedy the current situation, and lower the likelihood that anti-Semitic discrimination will recur. We are available to share our expertise on these issues, and further discuss our recommendations with you, and can be reached by e-mail at klmarcus@brandeiscenter.com or by phone at [\(202\) 559-9296](tel:2025599296).

Thank you in advance for your serious consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,