Trip Splits Students

Pro-Palestine group’s tweet brings in death threats as discussion over trip continues

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One year ago, UVM Hillel, a Jewish student group, was offered funds for a trip to Israel and Palestine territories.

The source of that funding came under fire from student activists supportive of Palestine and remains criticized a year later.

The funding for the trip is from a group called Maccabee Task Force, a group that has labeled itself a pro-Israel organization and is against the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement for Justice in Palestine, according to their website.

The founder of MTF, Sheldon Adelson, was one of the largest Republican donors in the 2016 election.

Since May 2019 Adelson has donated at least $54,490,000 to various conservative candidates and groups, according to the Federal Election Commission.

Once again, the trip has come under fire and has divided UVM’s campus.

The Tweet:

A UVM student group’s tweet has brought threats of violence and criticism due to its language and messaging.

The group, Students for Justice in Palestine at UVM, tweeted a message out to its followers that condemned the Zionist movement in international politics.

Zionism is the belief that Israel should further develop its land, often at the cost of Palestinian lives.

“Zionist pussy smells like earring backs, sorry luv that’s science,” the Nov. 14 tweet stated.

In a statement to the Cynic, members of the group stated they regret that the tweet was published.

Almost immediately, the tweet came under a barrage of messages and replies condemning the student group’s tweet as anti-Semitic.

“We at Hillel believe that Israel has a right to exist. You can walk in and out of this trip not believing that and that is totally fine. We present opportunities to engage with Palestine, Israel and different minorities across the region.”

- Sarah Granof
Hillel’s Israel Engagement Coordinator

“You know what doesn’t enhance the value of a UVM education for Jewish students? Being subjected to this kind of hate. When are you going to ban this group from campus?” stated a Nov. 15 tweet from the account called (@MishcaMischiefs)).

Additionally, the group received some threats and threatening responses, members of the group said.

Any career plans for after college @umjsj I hear some new positions just opened up in #PIJ rocket squads... jobs come with high chance of martyrdom and possible 72 virgins, gender unspecified,” a tweet from Jeremiah Rozman.

Twitter users tagged UVM in a number of tweets calling on the University to intervene. Many of those that tweeted at UVM had the words “Zionist” in their biography boxes on their Twitter accounts.

The University responded on Twitter as tweets poured in.

On Nov. 15 the official UVM account tweeted the following:

“UVM officials are gathering more information about this incident, and following up with the student group to discuss our goal to provide a safe, welcoming campus. Any disciplinary action will be taken based on a full review of the facts, in compliance with university policies.”

On Nov. 16 UVM tweeted the following:

“We believe strongly in creating an environment of mutual respect and civility, and condemn the use of offensive language targeting members of our community. It’s antithetical to our values.”

UVM Spokesperson Enrique Coredera stated in a Nov. 20 email that the University had nothing further to say about the tweets.

“These messages are self-explanatory and the University does not have anything additional to share,” the email stated.

SGA also chipped in, in their own social media post on Facebook.

The statement, written in part that the University had nothing further to say about the tweets.

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SGA President Jillian Scannell, a senior, Vice President Owen Doherty, a junior and junior Grace Parker, chair of the club affairs committee, condemned the use of “offensive language,” according to their Nov. 18 Facebook post.

“The Student Government Association condemns the use of offensive language directed at any group, on our campus. The Student Government Association is working with members of the UVM community to address the issue of a vulgar message tweeted by one of our SGA recognized student organizations. SGA strongly believes that students should engage in respectful dialogue with one another and create an environment of mutual respect that support the values stated in our Constitution,” the post stated.

In an interview Nov. 22, Scannell said the club, which is recognized by SGA, did not violate any SGA or UVM rules and would not be facing any sanctions.

“As vulgar and upsetting that the tweet was, no policies were broken,” she said. “No University or SGA policy was broken. We [SGA] absolutely condemn what the tweet said and how it happened, but unfortunately, no specific policy was broken.”

The day after the SJP tweet that set off a firestorm on social media, SGA met with the group to discuss what happened and how to avoid it in the future, Parker said.

In a statement to the Cynic, the group stated it regrets what happened and they have made changes to how they operate on social media.

The statement was submitted anonymously to the Cynic to protect the identities of those in the group. Many have received death threats on social media and fear being targeted by the group called Canary Mission, which publishes information of known Palestinian activists, members of the group stated to the Cynic.

“SJP regrets that the tweet went up and we’ve revised our social media protocols as well as disciplined the individual responsible to make sure it doesn’t happen again. We hope that Chi [Cataamounts Supporting Israel] will hold themselves to the moral standard they expect of us, and join us in condemning the racist responses and threats that we received over the weekend,” according to the statement.

SJP at UVM has since deleted their Twitter account.

ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER TRIP:

UVM Hillel plans to accept funding from a Zionist organization for the second year in a row despite mounting criticism from the UVM community.

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Matt Vogel
ey donated by the Force will fund a trip to Palestine called UVM Hillel, said his job is to find sources of money to create ways for more student impact and programming, and that includes accepting the money from MTF.

"My goal as a nonprofit director is to have a positive impact from a philanthropist and the people who have the means to give support to a cause they believe in, and channel that into a positive impact," he said.

The application to the trip includes information about the funding source and a link to the Maccabee Task Force’s website.

Skye Lockwood, a UVM graduate student who went on the Perspectives trip last year, said it’s important to look past the funding because of the work put in by Hillel to create an unbiased trip for students.

"It concerns me when people focus solely on the source funding and that includes accepting the money from MTF,

"I was skeptical and waiting for something to be obvious pro-Israel, but there wasn’t one.

"Fourteen clubs signed the open letter, including UVM Qunig, Planned Parenthood, the women’s political group, the socialist group Left and Roots Collective.

Senior Alexander Smith, a leader of Bread and Roses Collective, said it’s false to advertise the trip as being unbiased because it is funded and led by pro-Israel groups.

"A critical question you have to ask yourself is this, why would someone who supports Israel fund this trip, if they spend the rest of their time bringing Palestinian activists and providing outreach support for the Israeli government’s actions?" Smith said.

"The trip was planned by UVM Hillel, a group that is, ‘inspired to make an enduring commitment to Jewish life, learning and Israel,’ according to their website.

UVM Hillel had complete freedom in organizing the trip and creating its itinerary, Vogel stated in a Nov. 21 email.

Despite the fact that UVM Hillel’s pro-Israel stance, leaders of the trip, including Vogel and Hillel’s Israel Engagement Coordinator Sarah Granof, said the trip did not try to influence student opinions.

"We at Hillel believe that Israel has a right to exist," Granof said. "You can walk in and out of this trip not believing that and that is totally fine. We present opportunities to engage with Palestine, Israel and different minority groups across the region."

Some students that went on the trip last year said they felt the trip lived up to these standards, while others did not.

Senior Z. McCarron, who went on the trip last May, said they were originally a large opponent of the trip because of its funding source.

After eventually deciding to apply and go, they said the leaders of the trip did a good job of incorporating many perspectives and not trying to push any view on students.

"The trip was supposed to be a trip that gave students the opportunity to gain their own perspective on the conflict, and I think they were successful in that and that really well," McCarron said.

Junior Anastasia Light, who went on the trip last May, said the trip had some bias towards Israel and that it lacked a strong student pro-Palestinian voice.

"I definitely heard more Israeli perspectives than not on the trip," Light said. "I think a lot of that was about having difficulty finding other people to talk to about it, so there was a slight bias in that sense, but I don’t think that was intentional."

The group spent two of the eight days of the trip in Palestinian territories.

Daniel Rubenstein, the group’s tour guide on the trip, was a former member of the Israeli Defense Forces, the Israeli military.

He was also previously a spokesperson for the IDF, according to his website.

Some students have raised concerns about American students touring Palestine territories and Israel when people that live in the area are not able to return to the place they consider home because of the conflict.

"We think it’s wrong that random American students who don’t have ties to Israel or Palestine should be allowed to enter when there are so many people living in refugee camps and have no right to return," Smith said.

Senior Amanda Duffy who went on the trip last year acknowledged that her ability to travel freely in Israel and Palestine territories was privileged.

"There wasn’t a day on that trip that I didn’t acknowledge that I was learning about this from a coach bus driving around this area," Duffy said.

Light said certain parts of the trip were disrespectful to the people that lived there.

"There was one part of the trip that I didn’t acknowledge that I was learning about this from a coach bus driving around this area," Light said.

"People were clearly looking at us like, ‘why are you here,’ and in that moment I was like ‘this is messed up,’” she said.

Conflict Timeline

1967 (JUNE) Israel withdraws from most of Gaza and the West Bank of Jericho

2002 (MARCH-MAY) Israeli army launches Operation Defensive Shield on West Bank

2009 (MAY-JULY) Israel begins building barrier in and around the West Bank

2015 (MARCH) Maccabee Task Force is founded

2016 (SEPTEMBER) U.S. agrees to any cut aid package worth $18 billion over 10 years for Israel

2017 (DECEMBER) President Donald Trump recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel

2018 (MARCH) Maccabee Task Force offers to fund UVM Hillel for Perspectives Trip

2019 (SEPTEMBER) Twenty UVM students embark on trip Perspectives Trip

Illustrations by KATE VANN