August 28, 2023

Dear President Magill:

We are writing to follow-up on our letter to you dated August 16, 2023, in which we expressed deep concern regarding the upcoming Palestine Writes Literature Festival scheduled to take place on campus in late September. We have not yet received a response to that correspondence, and eagerly await your reply. In the meantime, we would like to take this opportunity to expand upon the steps that we believe the University of Pennsylvania should take to foster a safe, welcoming and inclusive campus for Jewish students.

As set forth in our previous letter, while we appreciate the Festival’s commendable goals of celebrating Palestinian literature, art, and culture, we are deeply concerned about the likelihood of speakers invoking antisemitic tropes about Israel during the event, given those individuals’ histories of antisemitic rhetoric. By way of example only, Roger Waters, a listed speaker at the event, was recently described by the U.S. State Department as an artist who “has a long track record of using antisemitic tropes to denigrate Jewish people” after he desecrated the memory of Holocaust victim Anne Frank, compared Israel to the Nazis, and paraded around a stage wearing an SS Nazi uniform during a concert in Berlin. Earlier this year, another featured Festival speaker, Susan Abulhawa, wrote on social media after a shooting attack outside a synagogue in Jerusalem, “Every Israeli, whether in a synagogue, a checkpoint, a settlement, or shopping mall is a colonizer who came from foreign lands and kicked out the native inhabitants. They all serve in the racist colonial military. The whole country is one big militarized tumor.”

At a time of rising antisemitism across the country and on college and university campuses, as documented in the The ADL-Hillel Campus Antisemitism Survey 2021, the Anti-Israel Activitism on U.S. Campuses, 2021-2022 report, and the U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, which the White House released earlier this year, it is incumbent upon the University of Pennsylvania to take proactive steps to ensure the wellbeing of Jewish students on campus immediately, in advance of this upcoming Festival, and beyond.

We respectfully urge the University to consider taking the following immediate actions in connection with the Palestine Writes Literature Festival to mitigate against the potential negative impact that the event may have on Jewish students and on campus climate overall.

We ask that you issue a strong statement distancing the University from the Festival’s decision to feature speakers who have a history of antisemitic rhetoric or actions. When speakers are invited to campus who espouse antisemitic views or beliefs, university administrators have a responsibility to use their own expressive rights to challenge and confront this rhetoric vociferously, immediately, and clearly.

We ask the University to take additional steps in preparation for the Festival, including but not limited to creating special “office hours” during which Jewish students or others who may be negatively
impacted can seek support from university administrators; delineating event-specific safety protocols and procedures; supporting students and/or Hillel in hosting a separate event at another location on campus that coincides with any concerning speaking events; and/or planning antisemitism-awareness programming in the wake of the event. A useful guide can be found here.

**We ask the University to be prepared to speak out if antisemitism occurs during the event.** When a campus experiences an antisemitic incident or event, one of the most important steps that campus leadership can take is to call out hateful and biased language or actions swiftly, clearly, and directly. In the event that antisemitic tropes are invoked during the Festival, we urge you to issue unequivocal statements making clear how and why such remarks are harmful and directly contrary to the values of your university.

In addition, we ask that you commit to the following steps, consistent with the U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism (National Strategy) released by the Biden-Harris Administration earlier this year, to create a safe, welcoming, and inclusive campus for Jewish students in the long-term at the University of Pennsylvania. This first-of-its-kind strategy is designed to outline a comprehensive approach to addressing hate and antisemitism on campus, online, and from all sides of the political spectrum – and will require bold and transformative action by leaders in every sector, but especially leaders on college and university campuses where antisemitic incidents and events are escalating.

**Define antisemitism on campus.** As noted in the National Strategy, antisemitism is a complex and nuanced form of oppression that is often not well understood. This is in large part because Jews share more than just religious practices. There is also in the Jewish community a deep sense of Jewish peoplehood that is sometimes grounded in shared ancestry, culture and ethnicity, as well as identification with the Land of Israel. Antisemitism also manifests in ways other than just a form of religious bigotry. It often takes the form of a racialized bigotry (e.g., swastikas, Nazi salutes, Holocaust jokes based on white supremacist ideology), or bigotry grounded in conspiracy theories (e.g., conspiracies featuring myths about Jewish power and control). And it can also manifest in the form of anti-Zionist harassment or discrimination (e.g., excluding Jewish students from campus activities based on their actual or perceived ancestral, religious, and/or ethnic identification with Israel).

While there is no exhaustive definition of antisemitism, as it can take many forms, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition has become an essential definitional tool used to determine manifestations of antisemitism today, and it includes useful examples of discriminatory anti-Israel acts that cross the line into antisemitism. It is also the definition that the U.S. Department of Education is required to consider when investigating complaints of antisemitic discrimination on college and university campuses as part of the Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, and is used by over 1,100 other governments, universities, NGOs, and other key institutions, demonstrating a substantial and clear worldwide consensus.

**We urge you to formally endorse the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism and rely on it when investigating reports of antisemitic harassment and discrimination on your campus.**

**Educate students and faculty about antisemitism on campus.** There is no question that antisemitism, despite its persistence across the globe over the course of centuries, is not only commonly misunderstood – including on college and university campuses across the United States today – but also sometimes overlooked in programming focused on equity, inclusion, and non-discrimination protections. This is particularly concerning at a time of rising incidents on campus. According to ADL’s most recent Audit of Antisemitic Incidents, for example, in 2022 there was a 41% increase in reported
incidents on college campuses across the U.S. ADL and Hillel International have accordingly partnered to create a variety of free resources that focus on understanding Judaism, the history of antisemitism, and manifestations of antisemitism today. ADL also has a wealth of resources available on its website focused on the latest trends and best practices for responding to antisemitism and hate on campus.

It is important to remember that antisemitism poses a threat not only to the Jewish community, but also to all marginalized communities. Hatred of Jews is frequently intertwined with other forms of hate, such as racism, anti-Muslim bigotry, anti-LGBTQ+ animus, and misogyny, and it is often fueled by dangerous conspiracy theories that seek to chip away at our most cherished democratic values.

We urge you to formally include antisemitism awareness education in new-student orientation programming, DEI programming, and training on discrimination and harassment, and to conduct annual mandatory trainings for campus leadership and administrators on antisemitism and best practices in response.

Review your obligations under Title VI. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI) protects all students, including Jewish students, from discrimination and harassment based on race, color, or national origin. This includes students who experience discrimination based on their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, or citizenship or residency in a country with a dominant religion or distinct religious identity. Consistent with these obligations, we would encourage you to review the most recent Dear Colleague Letter from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) on schools’ obligations under Title VI to address discrimination against Jewish students. OCR has additional Fact Sheets on Protecting Students from Discrimination Based on Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics and Combating Discrimination Against Jewish Students which provide specific examples of school action or inaction that could potentially violate Title VI, and you may find OCR’s Questions and Answers on Executive Order 13899 (Combating Anti-Semitism) and OCR’s Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to be particularly useful.

We urge you to review your obligations under Title VI (and other similar state laws) to protect Jewish students from antisemitic harassment on campus; to take full advantage of OCR’s technical assistance, resources, and trainings regarding Title VI; and to educate students and administrators regarding the same.

Ensure accommodations for Jewish students on campus. In order to create welcoming and inclusive school environments, and consistent with the National Strategy, campuses should make diligent efforts to “enhance awareness of religious cultures and practices[]” and to “ensur[e] accommodation of religious observances, including Jewish observances” to “help[] Jewish students feel included on campus.” Religious accommodation policies should cover food and dining services as well as housing and residence life needs, and should also encourage professors, athletic directors, and other programmatic heads to avoid scheduling major events (commencement, exams, tryouts, etc.) on the Jewish Sabbath and major holidays including but not limited to the Jewish High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. By way of example only, there have been instances where the first day of college has been scheduled to commence on Rosh Hashanah, one of Judaism’s holiest days. Being mindful of all students’ religious observances is one simple way to promote respect for diversity and create inclusive school environments. ADL’s Calendar of Observances is a helpful tool for avoiding these types of conflicts.

We urge you to review and update your campus’s religious accommodations policy to ensure that all students, regardless of their faith, have equitable access to university programs, services, and activities.
Ensure comprehensive policies & a robust process for responding to antisemitism on campus. On college and university campuses today, it is critical to have clear and transparent non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies; clear and transparent mechanisms for students to report hate incidents and acts of antisemitism to campus administrators; and clear and transparent communication from campus leadership regarding steps taken in response to reported incidents.

We urge you to review and update your campus’s non-discrimination and harassment policies to ensure that discrimination based on shared ancestry and ethnic characteristics is covered; and to take steps to ensure full transparency regarding these policies, as well as the policies and procedures in place for responding to reported incidents on campus.

Create a task force or advisory council on Jewish life on campus. We also encourage you to create a Task Force or Advisory Council to review, address, and improve Jewish life on campus. This Task Force or Advisory Council should be comprised of Jewish student leaders, faculty, staff, and other concerned stakeholders who will provide recommendations to administrators on how to best support Jewish students, faculty, and staff, including how to combat antisemitism on campus.

We urge you to create a task force or advisory council on Jewish life on campus to ensure a positive campus climate in which Jewish students feel comfortable expressing their identity while at school.

We are eager to serve as a partner and resource to you in implementing all of the above recommendations, including those specific to the Palestine Writes Literature Festival, and look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

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Regional Director, Philadelphia
Anti-Defamation League

Jason Holtzman
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of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia

CC:
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