THE DURHAM UNION SOCIETY

FULL STATEMENT ON THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT DEBATE

Why We Chose to Hold the Debate

The purpose of the Union is to encourage discussion and debate of a high standard on important and topical issues within the Durham University community. In pursuit of this aim, we feel it is vital for us to address one of the world's most pressing issues, the Israel-Palestine conflict. We are the first UK student group to plan a debate on the topic since October 7th. We understand that this is a deeply divisive and sensitive topic, and we took this into careful consideration throughout the planning of this event.

The Union fundamentally believes that issues of significant polarisation are best overcome through respectful, considered debate. Refusal to engage in debate leads to greater intolerance of others and the creation of dangerous echo chambers. The Union believes it is vital to have this debate given it is a topic that many students of all backgrounds feel so passionately about.

False Accusation from Durham Students for Palestine that the Planned Debate was Not Fair and Balanced

On their Instagram page, 'Durham Students for Palestine' have repeatedly asserted that our debate would not have been *"balanced, fair or proportionate"* (see Instagram post from 08/06/24). They have used this as justification for their disruptive protests that prevented the debate from going ahead.

This accusation from Durham Students for Palestine is a malicious lie. The Durham Union ensures all of our debates (including the planned debate on Friday) are fair and balanced.

We secured six speakers for Friday's debate. Three speakers (Lance Forman, Natasha Hausdorff, David Collier) were due to speak in support of the motion (the 'pro-Israel' Proposition). Three speakers (Chris Doyle, Dr Peter Shambrook, Mohab Ramadan) were due to speak against the motion (the 'pro-Palestine' Opposition).

Durham Students for Palestine selectively cropped an image of our Termcard (brochure of events) giving the impression the Union was only hosting three pro-Israel speakers and no pro-Palestinian speakers (see Instagram post from 06/06/24). DS4P have purposefully manipulated the facts of the event to stoke tension on campus.

All of our debates offer ample opportunity for the invited speakers and attendees to challenge the arguments made in the debate. During the speeches of invited speakers, attendees can ask 'Points of Information' to challenge their arguments.

Our debates also offer the opportunity for student attendees to deliver 'floor speeches', where those in the audience can deliver a prepared or impromptu speech in favour or against the motion at the despatch boxes. Finally, all attendees have the opportunity to ask questions to one or both sides of the debate.

The Durham Union worked incredibly hard to ensure this debate was as fair, balanced and constructive as possible. It is unfortunate that Durham Students for Palestine have chosen to ignore the facts and mislead the Durham student body to advance their own interests.

Mischaracterisation of the DUS' relationship with The Pinsker Centre & *"Zionist Mouthpiece"* falsehoods

The Durham Union Society engages with a variety of external organisations in order to secure the high-profile speakers our members expect. This includes charities, think tanks, embassies and more.

In the recent past, the Durham Union has hosted high-profile international speakers that have been on speaking tours of UK universities organised by The Pinsker Centre. These include John Baird, former Foreign Minister of Canada, Dan Meridor, former Deputy Prime Minister of Israel, and Shaun Pinner, an ex-British Soldier who was captured and tortured by the Russian Army in Ukraine.

For these events, the Durham Union retained total control. The Union was under no obligation to host these speakers. Attendees to these events were free to challenge the speakers and ask any questions they liked. Furthermore, the Durham Union has never received financial remuneration for hosting speakers associated with The Pinsker Centre.

We also engage with external organisations to support our charitable activities in the North East. The Durham Union has worked with numerous organisations to help support our aim to improve educational opportunities in the North East. This includes The Pinsker Centre.

In an Instagram post on 06/06/24, Durham Students for Palestine highlighted a school essay competition organised by the Durham Union in partnership with The Pinsker Centre for Year 12 students in the North East. The Durham Union received no financial remuneration for organising this essay competition.

In an Instagram post on 07/06/24, Durham Students for Palestine describes the Durham Union as a *"Zionist Mouthpiece"*. This is false. DS4P have purposefully manipulated the truth to paint this inaccurate picture.

As mentioned earlier, in an Instagram post on 06/06/24, Durham Students for Palestine selectively cropped an image our Termcard (brochure of events) giving the impression the Union was hosting three 'pro-Israel' speakers and no 'pro-Palestinian' speakers. In fact, three pro-Palestinian speakers were due to speak to argue the case for the Opposition (Chris Doyle, Dr Peter Shambrook, Mohab Ramadan).

We would also like to note that the Union hosted Ambassador Husam Zomlot, Head of the Palestinian Mission to the UK, just last year (Easter Term 2023). Ambassador Zomlot was invited to speak at Friday's planned debate but could not attend due to his busy schedule. In response to the Union's invitation, the Ambassador's assistant wrote *"We are very much interested in staying engaged with your events. Please feel free to inform us about any future opportunities where both the Mission and the Ambassador can participate"*. The Durham Union has long platformed voices on both sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict, showing DS4P's claim that the Union is a *"Zionist Mouthpiece"* to be a malicious lie.

Sequence of Events of the Debate/Protest

On Thursday night (06/06/24), Durham Students for Palestine issued a call to their supporters in both Durham and Newcastle University to protest and demonstrate outside the Union chamber (which is inside the Pemberton Building). We then learned from the University this would include blocking access to our Chamber's entrance.

We had already been working with University Security and the Police to ensure the event was safe for everyone involved. As a result of the protest, University Security decided to increase the event's security staff from four to six. The Police also decided to dispatch two officers.

We strongly support the right of others to protest, but wanted to make sure that our event could still go ahead, and the risk to attendees and speakers was minimised. We were under the impression that the Chamber would still be accessible as security would establish a perimeter around the Pemberton Building's front door. This did not happen.

The protest started at 7:15 pm. Immediately, the protesters began blocking the front entrance to the Chamber. Ten of our committee members had arrived at our Chamber early to prepare for the event (6:50 pm onwards). Initially they were unconcerned, however, panic set in around 7:30 as the masked protesters blocked the fire escapes at the rear of the building. This left our committee members with no safe way in or out of the building. By 7:50 pm the protest had almost doubled in size as protesters from Newcastle University arrived. Given there was no safe way for our speakers or attendees to enter the Chamber for the event, we delayed the debate. The protesters began hammering/banging the front and rear doors and windows (see Video 1).

As the protests continued, those trapped inside became increasingly distressed as the protesters' screaming, drumming and chanting continued from all sides. The language of the protesters became more and more aggressive as the protest went on. They used phrases such as *'f**cking bastards… f**cking pieces of s**t who have the blood of Palestinians on their hands.'* (See Video 1). Our members do not deserve to suffer the emotional and reputational damage, be wrongfully shamed and accused of any such serious and violent acts. Those inside heard the protesters shout that they would not leave until the event was cancelled. University Security told those trapped inside the Chamber to not attempt to leave for their own safety.

Despite how afraid they were, all ten trapped committee members were adamant they wanted the debate to continue. This was also the view of the President of the Union, Matthew Brooker, and all of the speakers. The Union would not be bullied or intimidated into cancelling our event.

The University's Duty Security Manager called Matthew to see if in light of the protest the Union wanted to persevere with the event. Matthew told the University that we wanted the event to go on.

The Pemberton Building and the area around it is owned by the University. Therefore, for the Police to be able to remove the protesters from the Chamber's entrances and exits (to allow the debate to go ahead), the University would have to declare the protesters as 'trespassers'. If they did this, the Police would've been able to remove them from blocking access for the debate's attendees and speakers. The University decided not to do this. The Police also advised the University that if the debate took place they could not have guaranteed the safety of the attendees because of the high security risk posed by the

protesters. As a result, at 8:35pm the University informed the Union that the debate could not take place.

Despite the event's cancellation, the protesters did not disperse. They continued to blockade all entrances of the building and intimidate the ten committee members who remained trapped inside. The protesters continued to bang on the doors and windows and chant inflammatory statements (e.g. *"Victory to the Intifada"*, see Video 2 and *"Long live the Intifada"*, see Video 4). It wasn't until 9:20 pm when the Police had secured a safe evacuation route for those trapped inside. Initially, eight of the committee members left the Chamber, with two staying behind out of fear of being photographed by protesters (and subsequently being identified/doxxed online). By 9:40pm, these final two students had left the Chamber. As far as the Union understands, the protesters remained outside the Chamber until past 11 pm.

Intimidation of Individual Members

Mohab Ramadan is an active member of the Durham Union and a vocal pro-Palestinian speaker on campus. He has been involved with the protester's encampment on Palace Green since its foundation. On Thursday (06/06/24) afternoon, Mohab went to the encampment on Palace Green to read his speech and ask for feedback from his fellow campaigners. To his surprise he received threats from members of the encampment. He was called a *"Zionist pig"*, *"a traitor"* and told to *"f**k off and never come back"*. This was because he agreed to engage with our debate. He was subsequently kicked out of the encampment group chat on the messaging service, Signal.

Mohab admirably refused to pull out of the debate. As a result, during the protests, the protesters can be heard directing chants at *"Mohab, the Egyptian Guy"*. They shout *"Shame on you* [Mohab] *for normalising Israel"* (see Video 1). The Union finds it reprehensible that the protesters have treated such an effective advocate of their cause so appallingly. We completely reject the claim that we never engaged with the encampment or sought to not provide a platform for their members. Because when we did, they expelled him.

Furthermore, the protesters had stolen a large number of copies of the Durham Union's Term Card ahead of their protest to use as props. Video 3 (between 0:35 and 0:45) shows many of them ripped apart on the floor covered in red paint to represent blood. As they evacuated from the chamber, two committee members saw painted red crosses over the photo portraits of our student officers in the Termcard.

Both of these incidents represent direct threats to individual students (Mohab and the Officers of the Union). We find this conduct deeply concerning and highly inappropriate. Both incidents have been reported to University officials.

Final Comments

Firstly, we appreciate the very difficult situation the University was put into. We thank the University Security Team and the Police for their hard work. We are looking forward to working with the University in hosting the event at a later date as part of our shared commitment to free speech.

The perspective of the protesters is that there is no debate to be had on the Israel-Palestine conflict. More worryingly, they also believe that no one else at Durham University should be allowed to debate the issue. On Friday, they showed they are more than willing to use intimidation to curtail the freedom of speech of those who do believe there is a debate to be had. The University has, rightfully, provided the encampment with costly 24/7 security to

protect them from hostility and intimidation and protect their freedom of expression. Yet when other students create a forum that includes opinions different to their own, the protesters show they are more than willing to use intimidation to attempt to silence those voices. Just like Mohab, the Union community will not be bullied into silence.

THE STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE DURHAM UNION SOCIETY