

Statement from the Will Miller Lecture Series

October 23, 2023

With the support of two academic departments and many other sponsoring organizations, Palestinian poet Mohammed El-Kurd was scheduled, over three months ago, to speak on campus October 26, 2023 as part of the Will Miller Social Justice Lecture Series, which has a long history of holding events on campus.

In early October the university started to get messages protesting the event on the grounds of the poet's *alleged* antisemitism. The sponsors investigated the complaints and found that while Mohammed El-Kurd is an outspoken critic of Zionism and Israel's policies, they saw no evidence of antisemitism or hate speech and no grounds to cancel the event. The lecture series, particularly its Jewish members, are concerned to maintain this distinction, which has been ratified by the American Association of University Professors: "The conflation of criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism is false and is used to attack academic freedom."¹

A week before the lecture, the dean of the college of arts and sciences gave assurances that the university's policy on academic freedom would be respected, and the event would not be canceled. While some complaints continued to come in, we also received messages from students and the community in support of bringing the speaker to the UVM campus.

On the weekend before the event, the lecture series received an unsigned message from the Division of Safety and Compliance saying that "the event will not be held on UVM's campus" on the grounds of safety. The lecture series was dismayed and mystified as we had heard of no threats of violence or disturbance.

This is part of a pattern on campuses and other institutions across the globe, of cancellations of Palestinian cultural and political events. This is deeply disturbing. One group expresses opposition to an event and creates a climate of controversy, and even though others support the event, the university cancels due to non-specific "safety concerns." The public messaging implies that the event itself is a threat to safety, even though this is groundless.

The upshot is that Palestinian voices are selectively silenced just at the moment when we most need space for debate and dialogue in an attempt to understand the current conflict.

The lecture series is determined that the voice of Mohammed El-Kurd will not be silenced. The event will now be held online.

Students are also sharing their concerns with the university:

<https://actionnetwork.org/letters/let-mohammed-el-kurd-speak-at-uvm>

¹ <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/09/jvp-academic-advisory-council-stands-with-palestine-writes/>
https://www.aaup.org/file/Legislative_Threats_to_Academic_Freedom-Redefinitions_of_Antisemitism_and_Racism.pdf