

Durham council votes to prohibit international police exchanges

Many police departments around the country participate in an exchange program with Israeli Police. Some consider them to be highly skilled in counter-terrorism, but others find their tactics questionable.

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The Durham City Council voted Monday night to bar the city's police department from engaging in international exchanges where officers receive "military-style training." The Council voted 6-0 to [adopt the statement of policy](#), which explains "such exchanges do not support the kind of policing we want here in the City of Durham."

The statement is the result of a [petition created by the group Demilitarize! Durham2Palestine](#), which called on the City Council to "immediately halt any partnerships that the Durham Police Department has or might enter into with the Israeli Defense Forces and/or the Israel Police."

Proponents of the petition claim that Israeli tactics promote racial bias and militarization of police. Its opponents, including the group Voice for Israel, call those claims false, politically-motivated, and antisemitic.

Petition started last fall

In the fall of 2017, Demilitarize! Durham2Palestine, a coalition of groups that includes Jewish Voice for Peace, created the online petition, which currently has more than 1,300 signatures.

"The petition started out of the realization that the police, throughout the US, have been creating exchanges between here and other military forces, namely Israel," Duke University senior Jazmyne Williams explained. "We've witnessed a lot of police brutality in both locations. I feel like these exchanges only do so much to trade the worst practices of both the U.S. and Israeli military forces."

In coming weeks, emails flooded the inboxes of the Durham City Council on both sides of the issue. Ultimately, the Anti-Defamation League, the Durham County Fraternal Order of Police and multiple rabbis were among those who expressed opposition to it. Fifty people signed up to speak about the statement at Monday night's meeting and were given two minutes each to state their opinions and arguments to council members.

Proponents: "I hope this spreads"

Police exchanges with Israel are a common practice among many American departments. Jewish Voice for Peace organizers say that Durham is now the first city in the country to ban the exchanges, and they hope to encourage other city councils to adopt similar statements.

"I hope this spreads," Hillsborough resident Debra Rosenstein told the council during her turn at the podium. "Because all of us who care about fighting racism, and all of us who care about trying to have democracy maintained or exist in this country — we need to not have militarized police forces."

Opposition: 'Much ado about nothing'

Durham Police Department spokesman Wil Glenn said since Chief C.J. Davis took over in 2016, officers have not engaged in any exchanges with Israel. He added that Chief Davis did not intend to initiate any. Therefore, some opponents of the petition and the subsequent City Council statement question their intention and necessity.

"This entire discussion is much ado about nothing," one speaker remarked to the council. "We wonder why the City Council feels the need to take up a position on this. There are real problems facing this city."

Others saw the petition as a display of antisemitic feelings.

"It very clearly is anti-Israel," said Dr. Bob Gutman, a co-chair of Voice for Israel. "It's very personally offensive. I have a large family in Israel, and I visit frequently ... They are using this false flag as a way of getting Durham to pass a petition that defames Israel, so they can show it around the United States and get other cities to do the same."

Prior to Davis, then-Police Chief Jose Lopez spent a week in Israel undergoing training. "None of the training had anything to do with militarization," Lopez said. "It was about leadership, it was learning about terrorism and then learning about how to interact with people who are involved in mass casualty situations and how to manage mass casualty situations."

During his time as chief, he said two of his commanders went to Washington, D.C., to receive training from Israeli police, and he felt the experiences were valuable.

"It would be a shame that we would not be allowed to interact with police departments solely because someone believes we will be tainted," he said.

Why Israel?

The statement of policy prohibits police exchanges with any foreign nation that provides officers "military-style training." It includes a quote from Davis in the first paragraph that specifically mentions Israel. Gutman explained that reference is the source of much of his concern.

"If they just simply said 'We don't want the police learning anything from any other country,' that's fine," Gutman said, referring to the council's statement. "But they deliberately put the word Israel into the statement."

A man who identified himself as Israeli-American during his speech to council members said he opposes the statement solely because it mentions Israel by name.

"Israel in my respect, is the most moral, esteemed country in this world," he said. "What this statement does is it ostracizes us."

Supporters of the statement said Israel is the only nation they are aware of that offers police exchanges.

"If any other oppressive government came forward to you all and tried to say, 'We want to train your police force,' then we would stand up here," Rosenstein said. "I would stand up here again. But no one else is doing that."

"I have no ill will toward Israel at all," said Councilwoman DeDreana Freeman. "This is not, for me, a religious battle. This is a human rights issue."

'How did we get here?'

After the City Council heard from the 50 residents of Durham and nearby cities and towns, Schewel invited members to speak in response to what he called a "highly-charged and controversial atmosphere."

Councilman Mark Anthony Middleton addressed the crowd with a simple question: "How did we get here?"

"I just went through a campaign, and I spoke to literally thousands of people. And I got to tell you, most of the people I talked to were not talking about exchanges between our police and Israel."

Regardless, Middleton opted to support the statement because he felt it expressed a positive outlook of the vision for policing in Durham.

"I'm supporting this statement not because I think it's perfect. Not because I'm an anti-Semite. I'm supporting this statement because it's a positive statement of what we want in policing. Whether this statement passes or not," he said, "Durham is not going to have militarized training with Israel or any other country."

'The truth matters'

One by one, each council member expressed his or her support for the petition. Councilwoman Vernetta Alston was absent for the meeting, due to what Schewel cited as a flight delay.

In his concluding comments prior to Council's official vote on the statement, Schewel noted the past few weeks have been an "emotional rollercoaster" as the Jewish mayor tried to grapple with the complex issue. He criticized those on both sides of the issue for promoting falsehoods in their rhetoric.

He criticized those with Voice for Israel, saying they tried to "delegitimize the process that has brought us here tonight."

He also accused Jewish Voice for Peace of disseminating "false information" that Durham officers had a consistent relationship with Israeli police, though the last exchange was years ago.

"It is so damaging to police-community relations and everything we're trying to accomplish," Schewel said. "The truth matters."