

Pro-Israel groups spearhead attack on free speech at high school in suburban Detroit

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An escalating attack on free speech is taking place at Bloomfield Hills High School (BHHS), one of Michigan's top public high schools, in a wealthy suburb of Detroit. Pro-Israel parents and Zionist groups have reacted vocally against the school administration for allowing a Palestinian American activist to speak at student-organized diversity assemblies for 9-12 graders on March 14.

There was a heavy turnout of hostile parents at an emergency school board meeting on March 20, and a barrage of letters and anti-Muslim social media posts denouncing the appearance of the Palestinian American activist. On Friday, March 24, Principal Lawrence Stroughter was placed on indefinite leave by Superintendent Pat Watson.

Immediately following the complaints by Jewish parents, both the principal and superintendent sent emails to the parents apologizing for the event and "mischaracterizing the issue as a religious issue," according to one speaker at the board meeting, as though the event had involved a clash between Muslims and Jews. In the ensuing week, he said, "many Palestinian and Muslim students were targeted by Zionists, including some who got death threats."

Actually, the Palestinian American activist, Huwaida Arraf, is a Christian and married to a Jewish man, who spoke about the discrimination she experienced as a Palestinian American, and on the oppression of the Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank. She was one of five speakers on various forms of discrimination based on race, religion, gender, disability or sexual orientation.

The discussion at the school board meeting opened with a letter from the Muslim Unity Center expressing concern for Muslim students who have been bullied and intimidated with threats of violence. The signers expressed dismay at the characterization of the Palestinian American activist's remarks as "antisemitic." The reading of the letter itself was interrupted by hecklers who had to be escorted from the room. The letter continued, "We deem attempts to silence or ignore students from any side of a debate to run counter to the values of free and open inquiry, critical thinking and sound education."

The principal, associate principal and the diversity coordinator advising the student organizers of the assembly came under vicious attack early in the meeting, with demands from some parents that they be fired for allowing a "known Palestinian activist" to address the students.

Four students who organized the diversity assembly spoke

forcefully at the board meeting defending Arraf, a Palestinian rights activist, who was among the five speakers at the event.

Explaining that the diversity assemblies had been established last year to help students understand "how people with differing religions, races, abilities and genders and sexuality face discrimination and how it affects them throughout their lives," Brooklyn Ramey, one of the event organizers, told the packed audience that her team had come to "have our voices heard and to clear up some misinformation about us, the assembly, the prompt and the speaker."

She continued: "The actual prompt given to the speaker was 'what oppression or discrimination have you faced and what could people around you have done to make it better? If applicable, how has racism and ignorance affected you in high school?' While in the planning process, we found it important to have a Palestinian speaker. As a result, a large group of students appreciated her presence and felt seen as a result of her being there."

The next student organizer said, "We want to clear up some misinformation that has been circulating. As the only people in the school who attended every single assembly, we have the most accurate view of actual sentiments that were made. First off, Huwaida spoke for seven minutes at each assembly, no more. In Mr. Watson's email he made the statement that what she talked about was not her own lived experience, which, aside from being incredibly invalidating, is false. And Huwaida never made the statement that Jewish people kill Palestinians. ..."

Refusing to bow under pressure, the students insisted that they had not been consulted when two apologetic emails were sent to parents by the superintendent. They told the audience, "We ... would like everyone to know that their words do not speak for our group. We do not appreciate our names and our assembly being grouped into sentiments that were sent out to the community without consulting us first. We'd also like to note that no one on the board, including the superintendent, was in attendance to the assembly or at any of our planning meetings."

Acknowledging that some Jewish students had been offended by true statements about Israel, but recognizing that those who had been hurt most were those suffering the backlash of anti-Muslim hatred, the student organizers concluded their statement saying, "we will not apologize for having a Palestinian speaker and giving Arab and Muslim students representation. The assembly is something we're proud of and we will continue to be proud of."

They added that they would be available for questions but

warned, “beware that any racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, or antisemitic comments will not be entertained and will be reported.” They ended their remarks specifically thanking two of their advisers who had been singled out for retaliation earlier in the meeting.

Despite listening to the eloquent presentation by the student organizers, parents identifying themselves as “proud Jewish” Zionists/mothers/parents at the school board meeting slandered Arraf as a terrorist who promotes Hamas and suicide bombings. One mother frenziedly argued that the school had knowingly “included a speaker who incited hate crimes and divisiveness and fear. A grown woman spewed her political bias and harmful rhetoric on impressionable teenagers who have no in-depth knowledge of the complexities of the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict...”

Following several of the parental outbursts, junior Sarah Khalia, who said she wanted to “wear my hijab with pride at school and not feel threatened,” faced the board declaring, “Attending BHHS this past week has been draining to say the least. I’ve been called a terrorist, a Nazi, and even told to go back to my country. The fact that a Christian Palestinian woman married to a Jewish man is being described as an antisemitic Islamic radical, with virtually no consequences, is a disgrace to the message me and other Palestinians are trying to send.”

Thanking the student assembly organizers, a 2020 graduate of BHHS addressed the issue of free speech, saying, “The response [of the district] that this speaker [Arraf] did not fit into providing students with a diverse education ... protected students whose view is already accepted, rather than those who have never seen their experiences discussed. In shutting down such a unique voice, this district has disadvantaged its own students by not allowing them to discuss the realities of others that do not fit in with the reality they already know. ... I urge the district to encourage critical thinking and active discourse.”

Speaking to Local 4 News on Thursday, Huwaida Arraf explained that she had been invited to speak about her experiences as a Palestinian American, and that is what she did: “I am very much a part of the fight against antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination, and I came to speak as part of a diversity panel assembly, talking about the dangers of racism and making people feel excluded...” Responding to a Jewish student’s complaint that he felt “excluded and unsafe,” Arraf said, “I spoke from personal experience and I spoke about documented facts.”

Eaven O’Meara, who had also been on the panel with Arraf, told Local 4 News, “She was very specific to point out that it was not anti-Jewish, antisemitic, anti-Israel. It’s criticizing the policies of the Israeli state.”

How has it happened that students who are willing to stand up against a room full of hostile parents and school board members to oppose racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and antisemitism are now being accused of promoting antisemitism and ethnic hatred? Why do administrators face losing their jobs and careers for allowing free speech and encouraging students to organize events that expose the student body to the painful experiences of those who have been discriminated against?

In response to the mass demonstrations over the brutal police

murder of George Floyd, the Bloomfield Hills Board of Education passed a resolution in June 2020 “to eradicate racism and create more equitable and inclusive schools for all children...”

In November 2022 the district inaugurated a partnership under the banner of “No Place for Hate.” Students were provided with t-shirts, placards and free materials to promote what appeared to them to be a campaign for “inclusivity and respect” and motivated by the buzzwords of “equity and inclusion.”

However, as interpreted by most pro-Israel groups, “inclusion” does not include the Palestinian people and recognizing their oppression in Israel. On the contrary, these organizations relentlessly campaign against anyone who speaks up in defense of the Palestinians, including musician Roger Waters, whose concert in Frankfurt was canceled after he was branded an antisemite for his criticism of Israeli policy. By the same logic, these forces have been mobilized to vilify Huwaida Arraf and punish anyone associated with her appearance at Bloomfield Hills High School.

It must be said that the campaign to label as antisemitic any statements defending Palestinian rights or against Israeli policy has been strengthened by those demanding “safe spaces” for every “identity.” The anti-democratic consequences of identity politics include the funding of racially segregated dorms and buildings on university campuses, the firing of educators for offending a group of students, and the destruction of careers of actors and others.

This banner is now taken up by Zionist groups and the Christian fundamentalist right, banning books in classrooms, and suppressing discussions of oppression and discrimination that are “hurtful” to those who support the policies that oppress and discriminate.

The students who refused to apologize for the assembly clearly had organized the event to enlighten and provide a more in-depth insight into the Arab-Israeli conflict, and they are to be commended for seeking to provide views that disturb and encourage thinking more about the world. Now they must also fight to defend any students from threats or advisers from being fired.



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