



ZIONIST ORGANIZATION OF AMERICA

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December 18, 2024

VIA EMAIL

Ms. Debra P. Wilson
President, National Association of Independent Schools
2001 K Street NW, Suite 1150
Washington, DC 20006

Dear Ms. Wilson:

We write on behalf of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), the oldest pro-Israel organization in the U.S. and a leader in the fight against antisemitism in schools and on college campuses. We know that four of our fellow Jewish communal organizations wrote to you on December 11, 2024, to communicate their concern about the antisemitism that was expressed and applauded at the NAIS People of Color Conference, which took place on December 4-7, 2024. We also know that you immediately responded, expressing remorse for the “divisive and hurtful rhetoric” of NAIS’s speakers, and indicating that changes to NAIS’s speaker selection and content review processes were underway.

While we appreciate your immediate and positive response, what occurred at the conference was horrifying and the impact was serious, far-reaching, and even dangerous. As you know, the NAIS conference felt hostile, unwelcoming and even unsafe for many Jewish participants, compelling some of them to leave early and some to hide their Stars of David out of sheer fear. We strongly believe that NAIS must take additional steps to send an unequivocal and more powerful message to its members and to the public: that NAIS will not tolerate antisemitism in any form – including when it is masked as criticism of Zionism or Israel – and that NAIS is truly committed to “[the rights of every individual to belong and flourish](#),” including Jews.

As our colleagues’ letter to you described, the keynote speaker at the conference, Dr. Suzanne Barakat, abused the platform that NAIS gave her to demonize Israel. In her remarks to the approximately 8,000 educators and students who attended the NAIS conference, Dr. Barakat falsely and offensively accused Israel of “genocide” when in fact it is the terrorist group Hamas that is openly committed – as reflected in its [charter](#) – to the destruction of Israel and the murder of every Jew. Rather than condemn Hamas and its massacre of over 1,200 men, women and children in Israel on October 7, 2023, Dr. Barakat not only downplayed the slaughters, the rapes and the mutilation of bodies by Hamas terrorists, but also [reportedly](#) rationalized Hamas’s atrocities. In addition, Dr. Barakat outrageously denied the right of the Jewish people to self-determination and omitted from her remarks the incontrovertible fact that Jews are indigenous to the Land of Israel. Indeed, she deliberately misinformed the thousands of educators and students at the NAIS conference that Jews were “[colonists](#),” and that Israel, the religious and ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, was “[founded on ethnocentric superiority and an inherently systemically racist framework](#).”

What is almost more troubling than Dr. Barakat’s appalling antisemitic speech was the response to it: Thousands of educators, who teach at some of our country’s most prestigious schools, stood up and cheered her. No one from NAIS intervened to stop Dr. Barakat’s false and hateful speech, as someone

surely would have if a speaker were wrongly and maliciously targeting and demonizing Blacks, Asians, Muslims or any other racial or ethnic group. No one from NAIS immediately publicly condemned Dr. Barakat for misusing the platform that NAIS gave her and fueling already soaring antisemitism in the U.S. and around the world.

Even after Dr. Barakat's antisemitic keynote speech, when many educators had reportedly reached out to NAIS to express their outrage, NAIS took no action and permitted the antisemitism to continue. The closing speaker, Dr. Ruha Benjamin, repeated the vicious lie accusing Israel of "genocide" and denied Israel's right to defend itself, again to the applause of the crowd.

Respectfully, it is not enough for you to express remorse in a letter to our colleagues, four Jewish communal organizations. It is not enough for NAIS to post a "[an important note](#)" on the NAIS website "regarding divisive and hurtful comments expressed" at the conference. The note does not even acknowledge the comments as antisemitic, let alone condemn the Jew-hatred that NAIS speakers expressed at the conference and educators shamefully applauded.

A truly meaningful response requires NAIS to issue a public statement that it also disseminates to all its more than 2,000 member schools and associations of schools. The statement should:

(1) Condemn the speakers by name who misused the platform that NAIS gave them to spout and promote antisemitic lies about Jews and Israel;

(2) Condemn their speech as antisemitic and explain why it is antisemitic;

(3) Make it clear that NAIS will not tolerate antisemitism in any form, including when the hatred of Jews is camouflaged as criticism of Zionism or Israel; and

(4) Encourage all of NAIS's member schools and associations of schools to adopt the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\) working definition of antisemitism](#), a critical, internationally accepted resource for understanding how antisemitism is expressed today, including related to Israel. NAIS should make it clear in its statement that schools cannot effectively address antisemitism if they do not understand what antisemitism is and how it can manifest.

We urge you to take all these steps to truly demonstrate NAIS's commitment to inclusivity and its zero tolerance for antisemitism in all of its ugly forms. We look forward to your response and, like our colleagues, are here as a resource for you and NAIS.

Very truly yours,



Morton A. Klein
National President



Susan B. Tuchman, Esq.
Director, Center for Law and Justice