

Academic arrested for “statements against Zionism” as Israel intensifies anti-genocide crackdown

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This month, Israeli police arrested and detained for questioning Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a leading Palestinian legal academic, over comments made on a podcast weeks earlier. Shalhoub-Kevorkian holds a chair in law at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and another at Queen Mary University of London.

The police said, “The detainee is suspected of making serious incitement against the State of Israel and for having said statements against Zionism and even claims that Israel is currently committing genocide in the Gaza Strip.” They added that they had found posters and pictures in her home depicting Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers as an occupying army.

Freedom of political expression in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been restricted and there have been widespread detentions of Palestinian citizens of Israel who have publicly criticised the war in Gaza. But this is the first time an academic has been targeted over opposition to Zionism, possession of posters against the occupation and claims of Israeli genocide in Gaza—statements that pose no “security threat,” let alone any “incitement” to violence, terror and racism. Since the attorney general’s office must approve all prosecutions relating to freedom of speech, Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s detention was greenlighted not just by the police but at the very heart of government.

Her detention is part of a broader crackdown on dissent and the targeting of Israel’s critics by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s fascistic regime, aimed at intimidating and silencing Israel’s Palestinian citizens who make up 20 percent of the population. Netanyahu’s strategic goal of annexing Palestinian territory illegally occupied since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and establishing an ethno-religious regime between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea means the “only democracy in the Middle East” eliminating even the tattered, democratic façade of the Israeli state.

The police confiscated books and posters from Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s home and questioned her extensively about her academic work, including articles published years ago, even though academic writing is afforded special legal protections in Israel. In her 60s, she was strip-searched, handcuffed so tightly

it caused pain, denied access to food, water and medication for several hours, and held overnight in a cold cell without adequate clothing or blankets, conditions her lawyers described as “terrible” and designed to humiliate. While she was released on bail the next day, after a magistrate and a district court judge both ruled she posed no threat, days later she was summoned for further questioning.

Her lawyer, the director of the human rights organisation Adalah, Hassan Jabareen, said, “This case is unique. This is not only about one professor; it could be a [precedent] for any academic who goes against the consensus in wartime.” As he explained, “They could have asked her to come to the police station for two or three hours to discuss, investigate. To carry out the arrest like that, as if she was a dangerous person, shows the main purpose was to humiliate her. It was illegal, that’s why the magistrates court accepted my argument that she should be released and the district court confirmed it.”

Her arrest follows months of political attacks orchestrated by the Hebrew University, which likes to present itself as a model of liberalism and inclusion, in the run-up to her detention. The rector had called on her to resign in late 2023 after she signed a letter calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and describing Israel’s campaign as genocide, and she was briefly suspended over a podcast in which she discussed the tragic events of October 7 and the subsequent destruction, death, and starvation in Gaza. He had objected to her calling for Zionism to be abolished and casting doubt about some aspects of the October 7 attack, particularly reports of sexual assaults.

More than 100 academics at the Hebrew University published an open letter backing Shalhoub-Kevorkian, criticising the university for not supporting her. They wrote, “Regardless of the content of Nadera’s words, their interpretation and the opinions she expressed, it is clear to everyone that this is a political arrest, the whole purpose of which is to gag mouths and limit freedom of expression. Today it is Nadera who stands on the bench, and tomorrow it is each and every one of us.”

Queen Mary University of London has not condemned the arrest, but more than 250 academics there published an open letter supporting Shalhoub-Kevorkian, calling on the

university to stand by her and condemning the sustained attack on academic freedom in Israel.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian's arrest follows the arrest and detention of hundreds of Israel's Palestinian citizens because of social media posts or comments condemning Israel's genocidal war. Others have lost their jobs or access to education. More than 160 university students, mostly Palestinian Israelis, have been referred to disciplinary committees, accused of supporting terror, supporting terrorist organizations or incitement to terrorism. Others have been doxed and threatened with violence, facing chants of "Death to Arabs" from extremist Jewish students, some with the cooperation of student unions and university administrations.

In October, Professor Nurit Peled-Elhanan, a lecturer at a college in Jerusalem, was suspended and threatened with the sack over her response in a faculty WhatsApp group raising the context of the October 7 attack. While she was later allowed to keep her job after a severe reprimand, other university lecturers at different institutions have also been summoned to hearings. A Ministry of Education directive has demanded universities immediately suspend any student or employee expressing themselves in a manner that constitutes "support for terrorism" or "support for the enemy," while far-right groups scan social media and serve as informants to the universities.

Netanyahu has given his far-right cabinet ministers free rein to silence what remains of Israel's left, as well as human rights groups, peace organisations and Palestinian citizens, and to introduce measures to eliminate them, including banning calls for a boycott of settlement goods, declaring six of the most prominent Palestinian NGOs "terrorist organisations" and outlawing the commemoration of the Nakba.

Since October, legislator Simcha Rothman, who chairs the Knesset's Constitution Committee, has pushed hard to restrict freedom of expression under the rubric of "combating incitement to terrorism." He has demanded the police and prosecution office loosen restraints and allow more investigations, arrests and the delegitimization of critics of the war and those demanding peace. He summoned the Deputy State Attorney, Alon Altman, to a committee session and reprimanded him for "tampering" with cases and investigations of crimes of incitement to terrorism.

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, a former supporter of the outlawed, racist Kach movement and a convicted racist, has set up a task force to monitor alleged Palestinian incitement to terrorism on the internet. He and his fellow cabinet ministers, public officials, retired generals and journalists regularly make calls for the Israel Defense Forces to "erase Gaza" or carry out a "second Nakba" with impunity.

On Friday, the police raided the offices of the largely Palestinian Hadash Party and the Communist Party of Israel in Nazareth, a day before a scheduled march opposing the war, and arrested two activists preparing displays and flags. It followed a similar police raid on the Hadash branch office in

Nazareth in November aimed at preventing an anti-war rally.

A far-right mob attacked the home of left-wing journalist and activist Israel Frey for expressing his sorrow for the Israeli casualties of October 7 and the thousands of innocent civilians, the women and children killed in Gaza, forcing Frey to flee his home and live in hiding. Frey reported that the police spat at and physically assaulted him, accusing him of "supporting Hamas" as they escorted him away from his home.

The police have taken to disseminating photographs showing Palestinian detainees, suspected or accused of protesting against Israel or the war, with their hands tied and against the background of a huge Israeli flag, in an effort to humiliate them. The authorities have banned demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, violently dispersed rallies in Haifa, Jerusalem, Umm al-Fahm and elsewhere and arrested dozens of demonstrators.

The Israeli media is subject to military censorship and provides little coverage of the 34,000 Palestinian killed, the 10,000 missing presumed buried under the rubble, or the 1.7 million made homeless by the war, focusing almost exclusively on the October 7 attack and fuelling a sense of existential crisis and national trauma. The Israeli military has killed at least 175 journalists reporting and filming the atrocities in Gaza. Earlier this month, the Knesset passed the Al Jazeera Law, which gives the government temporary powers to prevent a foreign news network from operating in Israel if the security agencies deem it "harmful to national security."



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