

Israel: The orchestrated persecution of Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian

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A vicious campaign by Israeli academia, police, and media to silence the professor shows Palestinians they have no safe place in Zionist institutions.

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On April 18, Israeli police arrested Professor [Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian](#), a renowned Palestinian scholar and my former academic supervisor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. They kept her in detention overnight — in conditions designed to break her spirit, like other Palestinian political prisoners — before a court ordered her release, rejecting the police's demand to extend her time behind bars. The arrest and ensuing interrogations are the latest phase in the Israeli authorities' crusade against the professor, who is a vocal advocate of Palestinian rights and an outspoken critic of Zionism.



Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian during her court proceeding in Jerusalem, April 19, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Shalhoub-Kevorkian's incarceration was clearly intended to be as cruel and dehumanizing as possible. According to her family, police officers raided her house in the Old City of Jerusalem without warning, searching and confiscating her books, papers, notes, and interview transcripts. During her interrogation and detention, the officers subjected the 64-year-old to ill-treatment and practices that amount to forms of torture: she was strip-searched, yelled and cursed at, and thrown in a cold, isolated, and urine-smelling cell infested with cockroaches; the cell was kept illuminated throughout the night with bright, buzzing lights to prevent her from sleeping; and for some of the time her hands and feet were shackled.

Shalhoub-Kevorkian's requests to raise the temperature of the cell or be provided with warm clothes were refused, and she had to use a damp sheet that also smelled of urine to shield from the cold. The authorities even used her health conditions as leverage: suffering from dangerously high blood pressure due to the arrest, and fearful of potentially having a stroke, she had to plead with the prison doctor and medics to provide her with medicine.

The transcript of her court hearings the following day reveals the authorities' fervent determination to depict Shalhoub-Kevorkian's knowledge production as incitement. The hearings show that the arrest warrant and interrogation were instigated directly in response to her interview on the [Makdisi Street podcast](#) last month, particularly regarding her remarks calling to abolish Zionism.

When the defense lawyers pressed the prosecutors on how comments made in an English-speaking podcast could incite violence against Israel, the state argued that there are many people who speak the language, and some citizens could possibly be influenced. The state representative further claimed that while searching her house, the police found evidence linking her to "an anti-Israel institution by the name of Defence for Children International" — a human rights organization whose Palestine branch was [outlawed](#) by Israel in 2021 on the basis of [spurious evidence](#).



Protesters supporting Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian during her court proceeding in Jerusalem, April 19, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

A few hours later, in the court of appeal (after the police's first request to extend the detention was denied), the police prosecutor repeated the claim that the professor posed a danger to the public because she is potentially able to influence others through her scholarship to act against the State of Israel.

The police representative also recited a quote that he claimed to have obtained while interrogating "a Nukhba terrorist," (referring to Hamas' elite commando unit): "Every day in Jerusalem we see the army humiliating women and arresting young people. Young people are beaten and unable to breathe." When the judge asked what this quote had to do with the professor's case, the police claimed that her scholarship and influential status could "brainwash hothead Muslims" into conducting violent acts against Israel — as if Palestinians or anyone else needs to read academic articles in order to be angered by Israel's oppressive practices.

Although both courts approved Shalhoub-Kevorkian's release on bail, the judges still saw the Palestinian professor's knowledge production as potentially inciting. As a result, she was summoned for a series of interrogations.

Whipping up public anger

The case of Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian illustrates the centrality of Zionism as a supremacist ideology in all aspects of civil life in Israel — even within its [supposedly liberal institutions](#). It also exemplifies the policy of racial silencing and the meticulous, concerted effort to frame all Palestinians, even a prominent scholar, as a national threat.

Indeed, Shalhoub-Kevorkian's arrest comes amid a vicious campaign of harassment against her from multiple sectors of Israeli society. In late October, the heads of the Hebrew University [issued a letter](#) demanding that the professor resign from the institution for signing a statement demanding a ceasefire and calling the Gaza war a genocide. In March, the university [suspended her](#) in light of the Makdisi Street podcast in which she called for Zionism to be abolished (the university declared in response to her comments that it is "proud to be an Israeli, public, and Zionist institution"), before

[reinstating her](#) two weeks later. Israeli authorities also detained and questioned her at Ben-Gurion Airport in late March upon her return from an overseas speaking tour.

While the latest storm of harassment currently revolves around Shalhoub-Kevorkian's scholarship on indigeneity and settler colonialism, what ignited it is the false allegation made by the Hebrew University on March 12 that Shalhoub-Kevorkian is a "rape denier." During her Makdisi Street interview, the professor argued that Israel is using allegations of rape along with disproven accusations of beheaded babies on October 7 to fuel its propaganda machine and justify the ongoing genocide in Gaza. This was by no means the focus of her discussion on the podcast, but the Israeli media nonetheless latched on to her remarks and whipped up public anger against the professor.

Students at Hebrew University in Jerusalem rally in support of the IDF and protest against Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, March 17, 2024. (Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

Yet her comments were willfully misinterpreted: Shalhoub-Kevorkian has stated on multiple platforms — before, [during](#), and after the podcast in question — that she does not deny the possibility that rape and sexual violence occurred during the October 7 attack. What she emphasizes, however, is the need to dismantle the structures of power that use Israeli women's bodies as rhetorical cover in order to tear apart the bodies of Palestinian women, invoking the Arabic term *ashlaa* ("body parts") to build an academic argument around the fragmentation of Palestinian bodies and their society.

In a meeting with the university heads, Shalhoub-Kevorkian clarified her remarks, leading them to revoke the suspension. However, the university has not deleted its posts on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) announcing her suspension, and is clearly not working to stop or even reduce the incitement they instigated against her.

Although Shalhoub-Kevorkian has been released, the ghosts of her detention and the threat of future harassment remain ever present. On April 20, Israel's Channel 12 released a news segment inciting against the professor, featuring commentaries that sought to debunk her scholarship and demanded that she be prosecuted for her research and her anti-Zionist opinions. It was a reflection of Israeli society's isolated sense of reality — a parallel universe in which they are the real victims.

In the segment, Israeli journalist Omri Maniv — who displayed a total lack of understanding of concepts such as affect theory and indigenous feminist discourse — attempted to ridicule Shalhoub-Kevorkian's innovative research on the concept of "unchildling." Maniv sarcastically stated that the Palestinian scholar bases her scholarship solely on the words of children on the streets, as if the testimonies and experiences of victims of Israeli abuses were not valid research sources.

The same chauvinism was exhibited in the news segment when Professor Simon Perry, a colleague of Shalhoub-Kevorkian in Hebrew University's Criminology Department, questioned the quality of her research methods to argue that she ought to be discredited and suspended from her work; another colleague, Professor Asher Ben-Arieh, similarly argued that she is unsuited for teaching the next generation.

Adding to all this, rather than defending their employee and her work, the Hebrew University responded to the Channel 12 report by saying that her research is "disconnected from the institute where she is employed," and that peer reviews in academic publications are "not without errors." In doing so, the university essentially distanced itself from all of her scholarly work, and delegitimized numerous international academic institutions — with whom Shalhoub-Kevorkian publishes much of her work — for not centering the Israeli narrative. It also belied the fact that the university has long approved and praised the work that she publishes in collaboration with her postgraduate students,

and granted them their postgraduate degrees on this very basis.

The symbol of Hebrew University of Jerusalem seen on the doorways of the buildings of Hadassah Ein Kerem medical center campus, June 16, 2013. (Flash90)

An integral recruit

The role of Shalhoub-Kevorkian's colleagues at the Hebrew University in the Channel 12 report, especially in the wake of her arrest and ill-treatment, shows how Israeli academic institutions can only tolerate the production of Zionist knowledge. When these academics felt that their ideological beliefs were under threat, they immediately became predators: they incited against her and whipped up public opinion to carry out a character assassination. In doing so, they sent a clear message to other Palestinians that there is no space for them in Israeli academia beyond serving as a fig leaf for diversity.

The fact that the university refused to recognize the genuine danger that the incitement poses to their employee, her family, and her students shows that they cannot see beyond their loyalty to Zionism and Israel. As the university wrote in its first rebuke of Shalhoub-Kevorkian's signing of the ceasefire letter in October, "What is happening in Gaza is not a genocide, [but] what happened on October 7 [in Israel] is genocide."

Haaretz journalist Gideon Levy put it aptly when he [described](#) Israelis' narrative: "No one can tell us what to do because we are the only victims." And as the only victims, the logic goes, we can surveil our faculty and students, expel them, report them to the police, and still claim to be an institution that proudly cherishes diversity and free speech. In this, much like the Israeli state, the university pushes democracy and academic freedom to the sidelines, putting Jewish supremacy above all else.

The Hebrew University, like other academic institutions in Israel, is an integral recruit to the Zionist system. It produces knowledge to serve Israel's [military-industrial](#) and [surveillance complex](#). Since October 7, academic institutions have made it a priority to serve the country's war effort: they have suspended classes, promoted the [recruitment of medical students](#) to serve in hospitals (offering to credit their work as participation in military or civil service), and encouraged [fashion schools](#) to utilize their students to design and produce clothes with special pockets to carry weapons.

Some faculties also published posts on social media to recruit students for the country's hasbara (propaganda) mission, and to spy on and report any "problematic" statements or behaviors by their fellow Palestinian students. All the while, Israeli students have been roaming campuses armed with guns, and harassing students for [expressing](#) any kind of dissent against the war or simply presenting their Palestinian identity.

Israeli police officers arrest a Palestinian student ahead of a Nakba Day event at Tel Aviv University, May 15, 2022. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)

As a result of this collective effort, in the first three months of the war, [hundreds](#) of Palestinian students at Israeli universities were arrested, disciplined, or [suspended from their studies](#). Many of these targeted students were denounced for posts as mundane as a Qur'anic phrase or a jest like "[Victory Shakshuka](#)." Yet even as they foment this stifling environment, Israeli universities are still featuring Palestinian students and staff members in their promotional materials, advertising themselves as a [welcoming place](#) for all.

Meanwhile, many Israeli academics have been hosted on Israeli news channels and other media platforms since the start of the war, often espousing violent, racist, and genocidal rhetoric against

Palestinians; others took a more “moderate” approach to their commentary, but essentially endorsed Israel’s war effort.

One example of this was on a panel discussion on Channel 14 last month, during which [Moshe Cohen-Eliya](#), president of the College of Law and Business, addressed the singer Kobi Peretz regarding his racist song “May your village burn.” Performing such a song among soldiers, the professor cautioned, was not helpful to Israel’s “international efforts” due to its ongoing case at the International Court of Justice. Another panelist replied, “I don’t know if you are following the news, but we are burning down their village, and it’s good that we are burning their village.” This remark was followed by cheers from the audience, more genocidal statements by the host and guests, and a smile on Cohen-Eliya’s face.

Disrupting academia’s status quo

Cohen-Eliya’s smile on national television threw me back to my experience as a student in Israeli academia, including the Hebrew University, where I completed my master’s under the supervision of Shalhoub-Kevorkian. Like other Palestinian students, I frequently encountered racist and threatening statements from my Jewish-Israelis classmates, to which lecturers either turned a deaf ear or echoed with their own degrading and threatening language.

Microaggressions were ever present. Professors would claim to be disturbed by the call to prayer coming from the mosques of Issawiya — the Palestinian neighborhood adjacent to the Mount Scopus campus, and on whose lands the university has expanded over the years — but hardly minded the sound of police operations in the same area.

Palestinian students had to [attend courses](#) such as “Israel as a Jewish and democratic state,” forcing us to sit and listen to lecturers like the late [Ruth Gavison](#) talk about how Zionism is a good and just ideology, with no mention of the ethnic cleansing campaign by Zionist militias during the Nakba of 1948, or what Zionism has entailed for the native Palestinians for over a century. We also had little say when the Reznick dorms complex, which hosts the majority of Palestinian students living on campus, was used as a [police training facility](#) in 2013.

Palestinian and left-wing Jewish students during a protest marking the upcoming Nakba anniversary at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, May 14, 2014. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Other times, the violence took a more blatantly aggressive form. One friend of mine had his dorm room raided and was arrested on the university premises for his political activism on campus. In the 2013-14 academic year, the Student Union’s utilities and office supply shop provided Israeli security personnel with plastic zip ties to use as cuffs while arresting Palestinian students during a protest on campus.

As Palestinians, we have been forced to normalize many of these overt and covert forms of violence in Israeli academia to the extent that we can sometimes barely remember why they feel wrong. Universities may have improved their services for Palestinian students over the past decade, but the violent racial structures are still in place. To this day, many Palestinian students and staff can never truly feel that their university or college is their academic and activist home.

Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian taught me to question these modalities of violence, not to take things as they are, and to situate the Palestinian experience in a broader and global scope of settler colonialism. She taught me to stick to the evidence and be prudent, but not to compromise on what I believe is right.

Amid a hostile environment on campus and in the city, Nadera was a home to me and other Palestinian students whom she took under her wing. She cooked with us, discussed our papers, walked with us in the Old City, taught us how to listen to the stories of people on the streets, and how to juxtapose them with data. She invited us to networking events and elevated our papers on various platforms. She pushed and still pushes us to be the best versions of ourselves.

The voice of Shalhoub-Kevorkian echoes today on [American campuses](#). The attempts by elite universities to silence and villainize calls to stop the genocide in Gaza and demands for a free Palestine only prove that these modalities of violence are copied and transferred across borders. And like the repression on U.S. colleges, the relentless attack on Shalhoub-Kevorkian has disrupted the status quo enjoyed by Israeli academia, which for too long has pretended to allow freedom of expression while simultaneously taking an active part in the Israeli war machine and its hegemonic narrative.

By targeting people like Shalhoub-Kevorkian, the Hebrew University is teaching Palestinian scholars and students alike that there is no place for them there. The academy, after all, remains “Israeli, public, and Zionist.”

Shahrazad Odeh

P.S.

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<https://www.972mag.com/nadera-shalhoub-kevorkian-israeli-academia/>

• Shahrazad Odeh is a lawyer, researcher, and PhD student whose work focuses on gender ramifications in legal systems, demilitarization, and the eradication of gun violence.

• Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas’ murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel’s retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society’s growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and

analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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