

The Palestinian Academic Community in the Shadow of Genocide

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Since the beginning of this apocalyptic war on Gaza, Israel has destroyed every single Palestinian university in the Strip, all 12 of them. Numerous cultural heritage sites, libraries, and museums have also been destroyed and plundered. On April 18, [16 UN Special Rapporteurs and two working groups](#) issued a statement expressing their grave concern over the pattern of attacks on schools, universities, teachers, and students in Gaza, and over the systemic destruction of the Palestinian educational system. According to the statement, more than 5,479 students, 261 teachers and 95 university professors have been killed in Gaza, and the numbers are rising every day.

With more than 80% of schools in Gaza damaged or destroyed, the experts used the term ‘scholasticide’, which was first coined by Professor [Karma Nabulsi](#). It refers, as the [UN experts highlight](#), to the “systemic obliteration of education through the arrest, detention or killing of teachers, students and staff, and the destruction of educational infrastructure”. This systematic destruction of the Palestinian educational system is central to the settler-colonial “[logic of elimination](#)”. This systematic destruction is not new, but began with the Nakba. Back then, thousands of Palestinian books, libraries, archives, photographs, cultural artifacts and items of cultural property were destroyed or looted by the Zionist militias. [Raphael Lemkin](#), the Polish Jewish legal scholar who introduced the term ‘genocide’, believed that genocide aims at “undermin[ing] the fundamental basis of the social order”. Key to this effort is the assault on the cultures of national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups.

The Palestinian educational and academic community is the subject of attacks in all the territories under Israeli control. According to [Law for Palestine](#), between January 1, 2019 and October 17, 2022 Israel arrested 214 Palestinian students in the West Bank. According to the [Right2Education](#) campaign, there are currently at least 140 students from Birzeit University detained in Israeli prisons and detention facilities, half of them in administrative detention. Since October 7, 2023, 70 members of the Birzeit community have been detained, including four staff members. Most academic institutions in the West Bank have shifted to [online, remote teaching](#) in order to avoid campus invasions by the Israeli army, and to prevent the harassment, arrest, or even killing of students and staff by Israeli soldiers and violent settlers.

Moving now to Israel, and before I address the harassment campaign against Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian and what it signifies, I would first like to mention that other faculty members have been harassed for speaking up against the war, including [Jewish faculty members](#). For example, Professor Regev Nathanson was forced to take a period of unpaid leave due to pressure he was subjected to by students for signing a petition asking US President Biden to halt supplies of offensive weaponry to Israel. I also wish to provide some data on the harassment of Palestinian students studying at Israeli universities. According to [Adalah](#), Between October 7 and October 23, 2003, the organization documented over 100 reports from students who faced repression and disciplinary proceedings as a result of their activity on social media platforms. These students faced arrest, suspension and even expulsion. 52 students faced suspension prior to a disciplinary hearing, eight were expelled without a hearing, and three were expelled

from their dormitories without prior notice or a hearing. According to testimonies of students, disciplinary hearings devolved into McCarthyist interrogations that focused on the students' political views and not the content of their published posts. Israel's Minister of Education, Yoav Kisch, publicly endorsed these disciplinary actions. He also issued a [letter](#) asking universities to suspend or expel individuals who, in his view, supported terrorism.

As for Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian, it should be stressed that the harassment campaign against her did not start with the decision to suspend her from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem or the decision to detain her and interrogate her for incitement. The campaign began months ago, after she signed and circulated a petition accusing Israel of committing genocide in Gaza. In response, the Hebrew University leaked an official letter in which it accused her of [incitement and sedition](#). In justifying her suspension, the Hebrew University made it clear that it was proud of being a [Zionist institution](#) and that Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian had been asked repeatedly in the past to find an academic home that better suits her positions.

To frame this case primarily as one of academic freedom is simply misleading. First of all, when the university authorities decided to publicly accuse Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian of incitement and sedition, they laid the ground for her harassment by the authorities. They also put her life in danger, given the rising violence of extreme right-wing activists against Palestinians. Most importantly, when academic institutions join the state's efforts to silence dissent in the face of flagrant violations of international law and basic moral standards, such as those we are witnessing in Gaza, it amounts at least to moral complicity in these atrocities. The commission of international crimes is facilitated by aggressive attempts to silence dissent.

Israeli universities were willing to tolerate scholarship on settler colonialism and other areas of scholarship highly critical of Israel and Zionism so long as the criticism remained confined to marginal academic debates. In fact, they benefited from this scholarship, since it boosted their reputations as bastions of academic freedom, while they were [collaborating with the security forces](#) in various ways. However, when such scholarship started to make waves in international institutions, their responses changed dramatically. It is no longer a small group of Palestinian and anti-Zionist scholars and a few NGOs that are employing the settler-colonial paradigm, the Apartheid framework or the concept of '[slow genocide](#)', which they were doing even before the war started. There are now UN reports charging [Apartheid](#), and a UN Special Rapporteur, [Francesca Albanese](#), using the settler-colonial paradigm to underpin the Apartheid framework. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued multiple [provisional measures](#) in the case brought before it by South Africa, which indicate that the accusations of genocide are plausible. We also have the [Advisory Opinion](#) by the ICJ on the legality of the Israeli Occupation in its entirety. Over 50 states participated in the ICJ hearing, the [vast majority](#) of which argued that the Occupation as a whole was illegal and not just certain associated practices. Many states and organizations took the view that Israel's practices in the territories occupied in 1967 amounted to Apartheid. Others saw the occupation as a continuation of the Nakba.

The Hebrew University's explicit alignment with Zionism is a direct response to these political changes. It reveals that the university is actively engaged in producing narratives that normalize the horrific violence being dispensed in Gaza, with the aim of shielding Israel from accountability, while at the same time attacking those who produce counter narratives, even though they have been endorsed by international institutions. It is no coincidence that they targeted Nadera, a world-renowned scholar: they wanted to send the clear message to all Palestinian academics and students that if we can go after someone like Nadera, we can also go after you.

This campaign amounts to epistemic violence against Palestinian scholars and students, and against those who are committed to justice. For the Palestinians, the Zionist project has brought us ethnic cleansing in 1948, threats of a [new Nakba](#), land dispossession, attacks on our collective identity, attempts to erase our history in our homeland, and rule by a regime grounded in racial supremacy. We will not, however, be stripped of our humanity. We will continue to advocate for justice, liberation, decolonization and freedom for our people. We will continue to do so even as the propagandist Israeli mainstream media accuses us of incitement for defending the dignity and basic human rights of our people.