

## DOCUMENT

# Letter to Hebrew University in defense of Prof. Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian

### **Editor's Note**

In this letter, the Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom defends Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian against the Hebrew University administration's call for her resignation after signing a petition in favor of a ceasefire in Gaza. *JQ* is reprinting this letter, with MESA's permission, as it represents the voice of the preeminent organization in the field of Middle East Studies. The original is available online at [mesana.org/pdf/Palestine20231109.pdf](https://mesana.org/pdf/Palestine20231109.pdf).

Additional letters and statements in support of Prof. Shalhoub-Kevorkian have been published by, among others: the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies' Committee on Academic Freedom; the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the California State University, Northridge; the USA-Palestine Mental Health Network; Friends of Sabeel North America; and Judith Butler, Distinguished Professor in the Graduate School at University of California – Berkeley.



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9 November 2023

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Tamir Sheafer  
Rector, Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
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Dear President Cohen and Rector Sheafer,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our deep shock at your letter of 29 October 2023 to Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian in which you called upon her to resign for signing a petition entitled “Childhood researchers and students call for immediate ceasefire in Gaza,” which was then followed by the dissemination of your letter in both English and Hebrew. The demand in your letter is a grievous violation of Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s academic freedom and the release of the letter in the current atmosphere in Israel has served as an incitement to violence against Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

In your letter, you note that you were “astonished, disgusted and deeply disappointed” that Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian had signed the petition of “Childhood researchers and students call for immediate ceasefire in Gaza.” You claim that by so doing, Shalhoub-Kevorkian had committed an act that is “not very far from crimes of incitement and sedition.” You further maintain that Israel’s actions in Gaza “do not come close to the definition of genocide” while Hamas’ attack of 7 October “falls completely under this definition.” You then conclude the letter to Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian by stating, “We are sorry and ashamed that the Hebrew University includes a faculty member like you. In light of your feelings, we believe that it is appropriate for you to consider leaving your position at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.” After you sent Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian the letter, and before she had even read it, it was quickly posted and disseminated on social media, suggesting that someone from your office shared it with members of the Hebrew University community. Since then, Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian has been subject to hate messages and threats of violence.



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We note that there is currently a disagreement among genocide scholars and legal scholars as to whether Israel's attacks on Gaza constitute genocide. However, with close to 2100 scholars releasing a [statement to that effect](#) on 15 October, Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian was echoing a widely held scholarly opinion concerning the ongoing Israeli military assaults. It is precisely during times of war that academic freedom and freedom of expression are tested and must be vigorously defended. Your letter of 29 October does exactly the opposite. It seeks to punish Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian for speaking out, thereby not only violating her academic freedom and her professional opinion as a critical criminologist, but also creating a threatening atmosphere for the University's other faculty, staff and students, particularly those who may share Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian's views.

Your attack on Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian is an attempt to silence her, to undermine her contributions, and, by extension, to silence Palestinian and non-Palestinian scholars raising their voices against state violence and violations of Palestinian human rights. Asking her to step down for bringing her expertise to bear on public debate violates democratic principles and goes against the values of academic freedom. Further, such a now-public assault on Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian endangers her life at a time when Israel is waging war on Gaza, and in a context in which Israeli public officials are calling Palestinians "[human animals](#)," seeking to establish "[Palestinian-free zones](#)" and [inciting](#) Israeli settlers to commit acts of violence.

We call upon you to rescind your letter, to condemn any and all threats against Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian and to commit to upholding the academic freedom of all your faculty, staff, and students during this terrible period of war.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Aslı Ü. Bâli  
MESA President  
Professor, Yale Law School

Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California



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cc:

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Josep Borrell-Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine

Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer - Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), European Parliament

Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Dunja Mijatovic, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories

Michael Lynk, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories

James Heenan, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ramallah

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, MENA section

Noha Bawazir, Head of Office and UNESCO Representative, UNESCO Liaison Office, Ramallah, Palestinian delegation to UNESCO

The Honorable Veronica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Honorable Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders



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Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection  
of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression