



Via Email

October 29, 2019

Dear President Mahoney,

We are a group of local and national civil rights, community, and educational organizations. As you near the end of your first semester as president of San Francisco State University, we write to congratulate you and draw your attention to the importance of empowering and retaining a well-qualified faculty and protecting their academic freedom when it is under threat. In particular, we are writing in support of Professor Rabab Abdulhadi.

For years, Dr. Abdulhadi has been the target of a campaign that seeks to obstruct her scholarship and political work supporting human rights. Groups and individuals participating in this campaign have repeatedly attempted to distract her from her important work, using racist personal attacks and unfounded legal claims to block her research and scholarship because they disagree with her views, scholarship and advocacy for justice in and for Palestine.

As we hope you are aware, Dr. Abdulhadi has faced new attacks under your tenure, including an anonymous letter delivered to her faculty mailbox in August that threatened her with “accidents.” The implications of such a letter are self-evident, but they take on especially dangerous meaning in the context of the campaign against Dr. Abdulhadi. It is vital that you acquaint yourself with the history of attacks against her because observers will view any action or inaction on the part of the university in light of this history.

Failure of the university to demonstrate institutional support for Dr. Abdulhadi serves to encourage these attacks, so we urge you both to speak publicly in her defense and also to work to fully resource the Arab and Muslims Ethnicities and Diasporas (AMED) program in order to send a message to her detractors that the university will not capitulate to their agenda.

Background

As you know, Dr. Abdulhadi is an associate professor in the College of Ethnic Studies and is director and senior scholar in the Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas (AMED) program. She is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, both for her teaching and for her role as a pillar of the diverse communities of which she is a valued member.¹ Dr. Abdulhadi is an internationally renowned scholar of Palestinian, Arab and Muslim communities and their diasporas, transnational feminism, and gender and sexuality studies. She was recruited in 2005 to develop and lead the AMED studies program.

As part of her scholarship, she has hosted educational events open to the general public, expanding and deepening SFSU's connections to the broader San Francisco community. Dr. Abdulhadi has also mentored many students and served as the faculty advisor for several SFSU student groups: the General Union of Palestine Students, the Muslim Students Association, the Muslim Women's Student Association, and the Afghan Student Association. With her academic expertise and as an Arab woman of Palestinian ancestry, Dr. Abdulhadi is also one of the most outspoken advocates for justice in and for Palestine in the United States.

Because of her remarkable impact and her unflinching willingness to speak truth to power, Dr. Abdulhadi has drawn the attention of organizations with an interest in protecting the public image of the Israeli government. She has been sued, threatened, and falsely accused of supporting terrorists and antisemites. The lawsuit against her was dismissed, and investigations have shown that the accusations against her are wholly without merit. Nevertheless, they have taken their toll. Not only has responding to these attacks taken valuable time—often during prime research and writing periods of summer and winter holidays and during her sabbatical—but they have also had an impact on Dr. Abdulhadi's physical wellbeing.

To help you acquaint yourself with the relevant history, we have compiled a summary of some of the major censorship campaigns against Dr. Abdulhadi over the past five years.

Reactionary Group Demands Investigation Into Research Trip

In March 2014, AMCHA Initiative, a group focused on silencing pro-Palestinian voices under the guise of protecting Jewish students,² repeatedly demanded that the university investigate an on-campus “report back”³ where Dr. Abdulhadi, professor Joann Barker, and others spoke about their findings from a recent research trip to Palestine. In a letter to your predecessor, Leslie

¹ Just this month Dr. Abdulhadi was honored with the Alex Odeh Memorial Award from the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Lucius Walker Community Organizing Award from the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizing.

² Palestine Legal, What was behind the suspension of a UC Berkeley course on Palestine?, Sept. 26, 2016, <https://palestinelegal.org/news/2016/9/26/who-was-behind-the-suspension-of-a-uc-berkeley-course-on-palestine-a-look-at-the-amcha-initiative>.

³ A flyer for the event is archived online: <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/coes/bundles/221710>. More information about the trip is available in a June 2014 statement professor Abdulhadi. Rabab Abdulhadi, Public Statement, June 18, 2014, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/548748b1e4b083fc03ebf70e/t/55627c5de4b086159c417de2/1432517725249/Public+Statement+-+Abdulhadi+-+June+2014+%281%29.pdf>.

Wong, AMCHA asked President Wong to surveil the event for “possible violation of university policy and the law (if it is permitted to go forward,” to condemn it and to offer “counter-programming.”⁴ In a second letter, AMCHA falsely argued that the talk—where professors and community activists described their experiences traveling to Palestine and what they learned through observation and interviews—caused concern for the physical safety of Jewish students and contributed to a “hostile environment.”⁵ In a third letter, AMCHA frivolously accused Dr. Abdulhadi of misrepresenting the nature and purpose of her trip and abusing taxpayer funds to meet with what the group called “known terrorists.”⁶

The university investigated the allegations and concluded, in 2014, that they had no merit.⁷ The university stated that “Faculty can and do communicate with others relevant to their research, communicating by various methods that can involve travel. Professor Abdulhadi’s academic work in race and resistance studies requires examination of some of the world’s most challenging and controversial issues. San Francisco State University will continue to respect academic freedom, and we will not censor our scholars nor condone censorship by others.”

However, after AMCHA continued its campaign, repeating its unfounded accusations in a June 2014 complaint to the California State Controller’s office,⁸ the university audited Dr. Abdulhadi’s international travel for the previous five years. SFSU notified her that they had expanded the review in order to “show the university’s due diligence.” The questions in the audit did not focus on accounting irregularities but rather only asked about Dr. Abdulhadi’s research in Palestine, collaboration with Palestinian universities and the memorandum of understanding between SFSU and An-Najah National University in Palestine. The audit revealed no wrongdoing.

Dr. Abdulhadi reported the toll this action took on her in a May 2015 letter to the SFSU Academic Senate:

Because the university administration sat on its hands for seven months while AMCHA continued to publicize its false accusations, I spent my 2014 sabbatical responding to those attacks and providing support and reassurance to my students whose learning environment was severely disrupted by the intensity and malevolence of AMCHA’s attempt to destroy our program [AMED] and implicitly

4 AMCHA Initiative, SFSU Faculty Holding Event Exclusively to Promote Antisemitic Boycott of Israel, March 5, 2014, <https://amchainitiative.org/sfsu-faculty-holding-event-exclusively-to-promote-antisemitic-boycott-of-israel/>.

5 AMCHA Initiative, AMCHA and Jewish Organizations Write President Wong about Professor Abdulhadi and SFSU Faculty Event Condoning Terrorism, March 26, 2014, <https://amchainitiative.org/amcha-and-jewish-organizations-write-wong-about-abdulhadi-event-condoning-terrorism/>.

6 AMCHA Initiative, AMCHA and 7 Other Organizations Write SFSU President Leslie Wong Regarding SFSU Professor of Ethnic Studies Rabab Abdulhadi’s Egregious Misuse of University and Taxpayer Funds and Meetings with Terrorists in University-Funded Trip “Labor Delegation to Palestine 2014”, May 27, 2014, <https://amchainitiative.org/amcha-write-sfsu-president-lestie-wong-regarding-sfsu-professor-of-ethnic-studies-rabab-abdulhadi-egregious-misuse-of-university-and-taxpayer-funds/>.

7 Allegations of improper faculty travel investigated; no merit found, SF State News, June 24, 2014, <http://news.sfsu.edu/allegations-improper-faculty-travel-investigated-no-merit-found>.

8 AMCHA Initiative, Letter to California State Controller John Chiang Asking for a State Audit of SFSU, June 24, 2014, <https://amchainitiative.org/letter-to-controller-chiang/>.

brand them, by association with me, as potential “terrorists.” As a result I was unable to work on the book I had planned to write during my sabbatical and am now behind schedule in completing the research and publications necessary to advance to a full professorship.

Partnership With An-Najah University

Dr. Abdulhadi has repeatedly been attacked on social media and by right-wing outlets over her work to establish a partnership between SFSU and An-Najah University in Palestine.⁹ The partnership, which Dr. Abdulhadi initiated and the university approved through all appropriate channels,¹⁰ was hailed as “SF State’s first [memorandum of understanding] with an academic institution anywhere in the Arab and Muslim world.”¹¹

In September 2016, the right-wing organization Campus Watch launched a social media campaign to pressure SFSU to end the partnership. Dr. Abdulhadi reported in July 2017 that since the campaign was launched, she had been subject to nasty attacks whenever she looked at Twitter.¹² As described further below, these attacks have been rife with Islamophobic¹³ and otherwise xenophobic¹⁴ language.

David Horowitz Freedom Center’s Inflammatory Posters

In October 2016, the David Horowitz Freedom Center, a group described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as giving anti-Muslim voices and radical ideologies a platform to project hate and misinformation,¹⁵ put up posters around the SFSU campus smearing Dr. Abdulhadi and other members of the SFSU community who support Palestinian rights.¹⁶ Some posters featured a racist caricature of Dr. Abdulhadi, while others contained names of SFSU students, both featuring false allegations of support for terrorism and the caption “#JEWHATRED.”¹⁷ The

9 See, e.g., SF State Criticized Over Partnership With Palestinian University Accused Of Anti-Semitism, CBS SF Bay Area, Sept. 9, 2016, <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2016/09/09/san-francisco-state-university-partnership-with-palestinian-university-comes-under-fire/>.

10 See, e.g., San Francisco State University All-University Committee on International Programs, Annual Report 2 (2015), senate.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/AUCIP%202015%20ANNUAL%20REPORT.pdf.

11 Jay Garcia, SF State expands ethnic studies department, Xpress Magazine, May 14, 2015, <https://xpressmagazine.org/2015/05/14/sf-state-expands-ethnic-studies-department/>.

12 Rabab Abdulhadi, The spirit of ’68 lives on! Palestine advocacy and the indivisibility of justice, Mondoweiss, July 14, 2017, <https://mondoweiss.net/2017/07/palestine-advocacy-indivisibility/>.

13 See, e.g., danaë, <https://twitter.com/dana28262963/status/1131216153899089927>; Izzy David, <https://twitter.com/destination1111/status/1131032594794012672>.

14 See, e.g., Paul A. Szypula, <https://twitter.com/Bubblebathgirl/status/1131173822378455041>.

15 Southern Poverty Law Center, David Horowitz, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-horowitz>.

16 Charlotte Silver, Racist group launches national offensive on US campuses, Electronic Intifada, Oct. 25, 2016, <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/charlotte-silver/racist-group-launches-national-offensive-us-campuses>.

17 Jenna Lyons, SFSU officials condemn posters targeting professor, Oct. 18, 2016, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/SFSU-officials-condemn-posters-targeting-professor-9979326.php>.

posters credited their information to Canary Mission, a shadowy website that doxxes Palestinians and their allies to subject them to online harassment.¹⁸

During this first round of posters, President Wong issued a statement vaguely condemning the posters, calling them “bullying behavior that is unacceptable and will not be tolerated on our campus.”¹⁹ The message did not defend Dr. Abdulhadi against the hateful claims or criticize the Horowitz group by name.

When posters targeting Dr. Abdulhadi were pasted around campus again in September 2017, President Wong sent a more specific email, referring to the posters as “a series of racist, anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic flyers.”²⁰ He called on members of the campus community not to remove the posters, saying that they were needed as evidence. Though the university reportedly “reached out” to the David Horowitz Freedom Center regarding the posters,²¹ nothing in the public record indicates that the university took any action to investigate the posters or otherwise discourage the Horowitz group from vandalizing the campus again. Other institutions targeted by Horowitz have taken more forceful action, such as the University of Texas at San Antonio, which issued a criminal trespass warning should the organization return to its campus.²²

Right-Wing Group Sues SFSU

In June 2017, a right-wing group called the Lawfare Project named Dr. Abdulhadi personally in a lawsuit against SFSU, falsely claiming that Dr. Abdulhadi and the university violated the constitutional and civil rights of Jewish students and community members by failing to punish student speech activity on campus, such as the protest of an Israeli politician.²³

Though the university was aware of the lawsuit and the fact that Dr. Abdulhadi was a named defendant, they did not notify her of the lawsuit or plans to respond to it, despite reportedly convening a meeting of other named defendants. She instead learned about it from a tweet from the right-wing organization Campus Watch.²⁴

¹⁸ Josh Nathan-Kazis, Canary Mission’s Threat Grows, From U.S. Campuses To The Israeli Border, Forward, Aug. 3, 2018, <https://forward.com/news/national/407279/canary-missions-threat-grows-from-us-campuses-to-the-israeli-border/>.

¹⁹ Les Wong, Hateful Attack on our SF State Community, SF State News, Oct. 14, 2016, <https://news.sfsu.edu/announcements/hateful-attack-our-sf-state-community>.

²⁰ Les Wong, Message from President Wong: Response to flyers, SF State News, Sept. 22, 2017, <https://news.sfsu.edu/announcements/message-president-wong-response-flyers>.

²¹ Kelly Rodriguez Murillo, Hate speech posters cover SF State, again, Golden Gate Xpress, Sept. 28, 2017, goldengatexpress.org/2017/09/28/hate-speech-posters-cover-sf-state-again/.

²² Press Release, University of Texas-San Antonio Bans David Horowitz Freedom Center from Campus and Threatens it with Criminal Prosecution, April 10, 2018, <https://www.stopuniversitiesupportforterrorists.org/university-texas-san-antonio-bans-david-horowitz-freedom-center-campus-and-threatens-it-criminal>.

²³ Complaint, *Mandel v. Board of Trustees*, No. 17-cv-03511 (N.D. Cal, June 19, 2017), <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/3868786/Mandel-Et-Al-v-SFSU-Et-Al.pdf>.

²⁴ Rabab Abdulhadi, The spirit of ’68 lives on! Palestine advocacy and the indivisibility of justice, Mondoweiss, July 14, 2017, <https://mondoweiss.net/2017/07/palestine-advocacy-indivisibility/>.

After spending pages inaccurately describing her academic research, her political activism, her past role as a faculty advisor to Palestinian student group, and her establishment of an exchange program with a Palestinian university, the lawsuit failed to make a single actionable claim against Dr. Abdulhadi and was ultimately dismissed in October 2018.²⁵

A separate lawsuit in state court ended in a settlement with the university encompassing the claims made in the federal case.²⁶ Though Dr. Abdulhadi was not a party to the state court case and had no control over the settlement, her critics have repeatedly relied on the settlement with the university as proof that their claims were valid.²⁷

Efforts to Censor Dr. Abdulhadi's Facebook Posts

In February 2018, President Wong issued a statement equating Jewishness with Zionism and welcoming Zionists on campus. Dr. Abdulhadi posted a “dear colleague” response to this statement on her personal Facebook page, criticizing Wong for his false conflation of Jewishness with Zionism and his disregard of the many anti-Zionist Jewish voices on campus. The message was reposted to the Friends of AMED Facebook page, AMED Studies at SFSU.²⁸

The posting prompted backlash from anti-Palestinian groups such as the AMCHA Initiative.²⁹ In March 2018, while Dr. Abdulhadi was in Palestine on a university-approved trip, she received an ultimatum from Provost Jennifer Summit, threatening disciplinary action if she did not remove her posting, either assuming that Dr. Abdulhadi had control over the Friends of AMED page or demanding that she censor her personal page in order to get the posting removed. The Friends of AMED page is not affiliated with the university, and Dr. Abdulhadi should not be expected to silence herself to avoid having her statements reposted to other Facebook pages.

Rather than recognizing Dr. Abdulhadi's right to express herself, the university threatened her and broadcast its threats to AMCHA.³⁰ Encouraged by these threats, AMCHA and its affiliates

25 Order Granting Motions to Dismiss, *Mandel v. Board of Trustees*, No. 17-cv-03511 (N.D. Cal. Oct. 29, 2018), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/548748b1e4b083fc03ebf70e/t/5bf47b2aaa4a990606d341b2/1542748975777/Dismissal+Order+10-28-18.pdf>.

26 Settlement Agreement, *Volk v. Board of Trustees*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/548748b1e4b083fc03ebf70e/t/5c9512dd0d9297b7294793cd/1553273581575/Volk+v+CSU+Final+Signed+Settlement.pdf>.

27 See, e.g., StopAntisemitism.org, ANTI-SEMITE OF THE WEEK: SFSU Professor Rabab Abdulhadi spreads anti-Semitism among California students and faculty, <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/ANTI-SEMITE-OF-THE-WEEK--SFSU-Professor-Rabab-Abdulhadi-Promotes-Anti-Semitic-Academic-Agenda.html?soid=1131491229186&aid=khJUvWbn1Ac>.

28 AMED Studies at SFSU, Feb. 23, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/AMEDStudies/posts/573870589632199>.

29 AMCHA Initiative, Director of Academic Program Calls University's Acceptance of Zionists 'Declaration of War' – 60 Groups Demand Investigation, March 22, 2018, <https://amchainitiative.org/bltn-32218-director-calls-acceptance-zionism-declaration-war>.

30 AMCHA Initiative, Good News – CSU Chancellor & SFSU President Respond with Strong Statements Condemning AMED's Hateful Post, March 28, 2018, <https://amchainitiative.org/bltn-32818-csu-chancellor-sfsu-pres-condemn-amed-hateful-post>.

have since repeatedly made public calls for the university to censor Dr. Abdulhadi's social media, notably in July and September 2019, sparking attacks on Dr. Abdulhadi.³¹

Hate mail and threats

Throughout these attacks, Dr. Abdulhadi has been subjected to an onslaught of racist, sexist, and Islamophobic hate mail and threats. These messages have come via email, phone, mail, and in online postings. Many of these messages have been clustered around particular campaigns by anti-Palestinian groups and SFSU's failure to defend Dr. Abdulhadi in the face of these attacks. For example, the AMCHA Initiative's March 2018 censorship campaign resulted in a slew of hateful emails containing the following messages:

- BUT YOU ARE A SHITHOLE PERSON, CHAMPIONING THE SHITHOLE PLACES AGAINST THE JUDEOCHRISTIAN TRADITION, SO THAT IS WHAT YOU ARE A SHITHOLE. THEREFORE INSTEAD OF LIVING IN A SHITHOLE PLACE, YOU WORK TO MAKE WHERE YOU WORK AND LIVE INTO A SHITHOLE PLACE.³²
- first, youi [sic] are very ugly inside and out
second: Zionism is a YEARNING in a Jew's heart for ISRAEL
third: muz have no rights to Israel
fourth: muz came AFTER Jews
fifth: you are just pissed, all you muz, that Jews didn't want anything to do with your moony moon god, Allah the fartman
sixth: palestinians don't exist...they were INVENTED in 1967
SHUT YOUR HALALHOLE. You anti-semite TURD³³
- You are no longer in Islamabad or in Riyadh, you're in the United States of America. You are teaching at a university in a place that is like unto Sodom and Gomorrah. Knowing what I know about the Islamic faith, the idea of homosexuality and moral perversion that exist around you should turn your stomach.³⁴

Similarly, a recent death threat was postmarked just days after AMCHA's July 2019 campaign. This letter, written anonymously but alluding to institutional ties to the New York Police Department, contains a thinly veiled threat against Dr. Abdulhadi's personal safety:

I'm a retired NY City police detective and I can tell you quite happily, that filthy, sneaky, malevolent swine like you ARE under the microscope. From what I can glean from the old-timers still on the job nationally and locally, you dirty sewer-rats ARE the subject of much scrutiny from agencies that care about the safety of OUR nation and the security it needs.

...

please be careful re: your personal safety. Careful when crossing intersection, careful when walking alone at night, careful about seemingly trivial arguments with anyone... accidents will happen and if (when?) one should strike you....

³¹ See, e.g., AMCHA Initiative, 80 Groups To CSU RE: Unlawful Conduct Involving Anti-Zionist Propaganda, July 11, 2019, <https://amchainitiative.org/csu-letter-7-11-19/>; Press Release: 80 Org Letter to CSU Chancellor 9.3.19, AMCHA Initiative, Sept. 3, 2019, <https://amchainitiative.org/80-orgs-to-csu-white-9-3-19/>.

³² Email from [redacted] to ria55@sfsu.edu, March 23, 2018 (on file with Palestine Legal).

³³ Email from [redacted] to amedstaf@sfsu.edu, April 8, 2018 (on file with Palestine Legal).

³⁴ Email from [redacted] to amed@sfsu.edu, March 27, 2018 (on file with Palestine Legal).

This threat has caused Dr. Abdulhadi concern not only for her own safety, but also that of the students who attend her courses or visit the AMED offices.³⁵ Without the proper response, these threats may discourage enrollment in AMED courses. In such a charged environment, it is important to craft the appropriate response in dialogue with the community, including Dr. Abdulhadi, in order to avoid further chilling faculty and students.

Conclusion

Though the attacks on Dr. Abdulhadi are egregious, they are not unique. They are instead part of a systemic campaign to silence and intimidate advocates for Palestinian rights. A 2015 report by Palestine Legal and the Center for Constitutional Rights called *The Palestine Exception to Free Speech* details tactics used to intimidate, punish, and silence U.S.-based advocacy for freedom and equality for Palestinians.³⁶ From January 2014 to December 2018, Palestine Legal responded to over 1,200 reported incidents of suppression of Palestine-related advocacy in the United States.³⁷ Over three-quarters of these incidents targeted students and scholars. These numbers understate the phenomenon, as many activists are unaware of their rights or do not report incidents of suppression for fear of retaliation and isolation or to avoid attracting additional scrutiny and disruption of their busy lives.

We urge you to be mindful of this history and these tactics in your dealings related to Dr. Abdulhadi and other faculty members and students who are targeted for their identities or the political implications of their scholarship. These attacks take a toll not only on Dr. Abdulhadi and the AMED Studies program, but also on the university and its broader community. We urge you to be bold in your defense of Dr. Abdulhadi and in publicly supporting her in carrying out the duties she was hired to perform. Principles of academic freedom must be upheld regardless of whether the university agrees with Dr. Abdulhadi's stance on justice in and for Palestine.

Sincerely,



Zoha Khalili
Staff Attorney, Palestine Legal

On behalf of:

³⁵ Sahar Swaleh, Professor Receives Hate Mail, Golden Gate Xpress, Aug. 28, 2019, goldengatexpress.org/2019/08/28/hate-mail-abdulhadi/.

³⁶ See PALESTINE LEGAL & CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS, *THE PALESTINE EXCEPTION TO FREE SPEECH* (2015),

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/548748b1e4b083fc03ebf70e/t/560c2e0ae4b083d9c363801d/1443638794172/Palestine+Exception+Report+Final.pdf>.

³⁷ Palestine Legal, 2018 Year-In-Review: Censorship of Palestine Advocacy in the U.S. Intensifies (2018), <https://palestinelegal.org/2018-report>.

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
American Friends Service Committee
ANSWER Coalition - Act Now to Stop War and End Racism
Arab Resource & Organizing Center
Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus
Center for Constitutional Rights
Council on American-Islamic Relations-San Francisco Bay Area
Friends of Sabeel North America
Jewish Voice for Peace
Jewish Voice for Peace-Bay Area
Jews for Palestinian Right of Return
Labor for Palestine
LAGAI – Queer Insurrection
Middle East Children’s Alliance
National Lawyers Guild
NorCal Sabeel
Palestine Legal
Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism
Tree of Life Educational Fund
US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel