

## Letter to SFSU President Lynn Mahoney Concerning Upcoming Leila Khaled Event and Academic Freedom Abuse

SENT VIA EMAIL

September 17, 2020

### RE: 86 Organizations Ask about Academic Freedom Abuse and SFSU Event

Dear President Mahoney,

We are 86 organizations, many representing university faculty and other academic stakeholders throughout the state and across the country. We are writing to ask you to clarify your interpretation of academic freedom with respect to an upcoming “open classroom” event hosted by SFSU College of Ethnic Studies’ Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas (AMED) program and the Women’s Studies Department [1]. The event features Leila Khaled, a convicted terrorist who has engaged in violent acts against Israeli and Jewish civilians. In an email you sent to numerous individuals who had written to express their deep concern about the likely antisemitic content of this event and its harmful impact on Jewish students, you responded that “San Francisco State University supports academic freedom,” and stated:

“An invitation to a public figure to speak to a class should not be construed as an endorsement of point of view...An important outcome of the college experience is to learn to think critically and come to independent, personal conclusions about events of local and global importance.” [2]

But what if an invitation to speak to a class -- in fact an entire event -- is an endorsement of a point of view and a political cause? And what if the intention of the faculty member who extended such an invitation and organized such an event was not to encourage students “to think critically and come to independent, personal conclusions about events of local and global importance,” but rather to promote the faculty member's own narrow political view and to weaponize students to be foot soldiers in the faculty member’s own political cause?

**Specifically, in your view, does academic freedom protect faculty who intentionally use their classrooms or other academic platforms not to educate their students but to indoctrinate them with propaganda consistent with their own political causes and to encourage their students to engage in political activism consistent with those causes?**

We recognize that it is not always easy to know whether a faculty member intends to educate or politically indoctrinate students. However, sometimes it is crystal clear, as in the case of AMED director Professor Rabab Abdulhadi, who organized this event and specifically invited Leila Khaled, a leader of a US State Department-designated terrorist organization [3], who continues to make public statements in support of armed violence against Israel [4]. It should also be pointed out that, like Khaled, the four other invited event

participants have a history of engaging in politically-motivated violence and/or been associated with organizations that engage in armed violence, and they have each publicly expressed anti-Zionist sentiments including support for the anti-Israel Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Prof. Abdulhadi, a founder of the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel and a leader in the BDS movement, has not only been extraordinarily open about her personal anti-Zionist views in her classroom and other professional spaces – for instance, she proudly exclaimed at an AMED-co-hosted event earlier this year [5], "I am anti-Zionist, I have no problem [saying it], I am a proud advocate!" -- she has also been forthright in expressing her belief that she is fully entitled to promote anti-Zionism and encourage anti-Zionist activism in her classroom, at AMED-sponsored events and on AMED's social media platform. Indeed, Prof. Abdulhadi has argued that such advocacy and activism are "part of my job duties...reasons why SFSU hired me in the first place." And to that end, Prof. Abdulhadi has relentlessly used her professional position and the name and resources of the university in order to purvey virulently anti-Zionist propaganda that vilifies Israel and defames Israel's supporters on and off campus; to call for the destruction of Israel and condone terrorism to achieve that end; and to actively encourage students to engage in BDS efforts and other anti-Zionist activism. For example:

- In 2013, AMED co-sponsored an on-campus event that involved students using stencils to create placards and T-shirts with the image of a keffiyeh-clad Leila Khaled holding an AK-47 rifle accompanied by the message, "Resistance is Not Terrorism," and other stencils with the message, "My Heroes Have Always Killed Colonizers" [6]. In the wake of public outrage over the event's unambiguous lionizing of a convicted terrorist and promotion of terrorism against Israel, Prof. Abdulhadi defended the event as a legitimate use of academic freedom [7].
- Since 2015, at least 43 AMED-sponsored classes and events have contained expression so blatantly anti-Zionist that it meets the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism [8], and more than one-third of the AMED-sponsored classes and events involved the promotion of BDS [9].
- Prof. Abdulhadi has frequently used the "AMED Studies at SFSU" Facebook page, which bears the official AMED logo, to post messages vilifying Israel, promoting BDS [10], and denigrating Israel's supporters, including and especially Jewish and pro-Israel students at SFSU, such as when she posted a message to the AMED Facebook page stating that "welcoming Zionists to campus...[is] a declaration of war against Arabs, Muslims, [and] Palestinians"[11].

We fully acknowledge that faculty members like Prof. Abdulhadi have every right, as private citizens, to express anti-Zionist views and engage in anti-Zionist activism. However, we believe Abdulhadi's *continuous and intentional* use of her SFSU position and the name and resources of the University to indoctrinate students with her own personal animus towards the Jewish state and its supporters and to promote anti-Israel activism, does not constitute a legitimate use of academic freedom, but an abuse of it. In addition, we believe Prof. Abdulhadi's blatant politicization of her classroom, conference hall and other professional spaces violates state laws prohibiting the misuse of SFSU's name and resources for personal or political purposes, including for the promotion of a boycott (e.g. CA Government Code §8314 [12] and CA Education Code §89005.5 [13]); deprives her students of access to vital information about complex topics of global importance, as well as their fundamental right to be educated and not indoctrinated; foments a divisive and toxic atmosphere, both inside and outside the classroom, that incites hatred and harm towards Jewish and pro-Israel students; and seriously erodes the public trust in your university to uphold its academic mission and ensure the safety and well-being of all of its students.

**In light of the above considerations, we ask whether you still believe the upcoming event is a legitimate expression of academic freedom, and if not, what you intend to do about it.**

Thank you for your leadership in these challenging times,

Academic Council for Israel  
Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity (AEPi)  
Alums for Campus Fairness - National  
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Davis  
Alums for Campus Fairness - UC Riverside  
Alums for Campus Fairness - UCLA  
AMCHA Initiative  
America Israel Cooperative Enterprise  
American Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists  
American Institute for Jewish Research  
American Jewish International Relations Institute  
American Truth Project  
Americans Fighting Antisemitism  
Americans for a Safe Israel  
Americans for Peace and Tolerance  
B'nai B'rith International  
BEAR: Bias Education, Advocacy & Resources  
Black Americans for Inclusive Ethnic Studies  
Bobcats for Israel at Ohio University  
Boston Israel Action Committee  
Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law  
Bulldogs for Israel (Brooklyn College)  
California Association of Scholars  
CAMERA on Campus  
Campus Anti-Semitism Task Force of the North Shore  
Chovevei Zion  
Christians and Jews United for Israel  
Club Z  
Coalition for Jewish Values  
Combat Anti-Semitism Movement  
Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA)  
CUFI on Campus  
Davis Faculty for Israel  
Eagles Wings  
Education Without Indoctrination  
Endowment for Middle East Truth (EMET)  
Facts and Logic About the Middle East (FLAME)  
Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors  
Hasbara Fellowships  
Herut North America, U.S. Division  
Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel  
Iranian American Jewish Federation  
Iranian Jewish Women's Organization  
Israel in NYC  
Israel Matters

Israel Peace Initiative (IPI)  
JAM  
Jewish American Affairs Committee of Indiana  
Jewish Student Union at San Jose State University  
Jewish War Veterans of the USA  
Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA)  
Latinx for Quality Education  
Magshimey Herut  
Michigan Jewish Action Council  
Middle East Forum  
Middle East Political and Information Network (MEPIN)  
National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel  
National Council of Young Israel  
NCSY  
NH4Israel  
North Carolina Coalition for Israel  
Proclaiming Justice to the Nations  
Rabbinical Alliance of America  
Rhode Island Coalition for Israel  
Ruach Fund (Real Estate Against Crimes of Hate)  
Russian Jewish Community Foundation  
Scholars for Peace in the Middle East  
Simon Wiesenthal Center  
StandWithUs  
StandWithUs Center for Combating Antisemitism  
StandWithUs Saidoff Legal Department  
Stop Anti-Semitism Now  
Stop BDS on Campus  
Students and Parents Against Campus Anti-Semitism  
Students Supporting Israel at Columbia University  
Students Supporting Israel at Drake University  
Students Supporting Israel at Foothill College  
Students Supporting Israel at UCLA  
Students Supporting Israel National  
Swarthmore Alumni Against Antisemitism on Campus  
The Israel Christian Nexus  
The Israel Group  
Tufts Friends of Israel  
World Jewish Congress North America  
Zachor Legal Institute  
Zionist Organization of America

Cc: California State University Chancellor Timothy White  
California State University Trustees  
California State University Exec. Vice Chancellor and General Counsel Andrew Jones  
California State University Associate Vice Chancellor and Dep. Gen. Counsel Leora Freedman  
Senator Connie M. Leyva, Chair California Standing Committee on Education  
Assembly Member Jose Medina, Chair California Assembly Higher Education Committee  
Senator Ben Allen, Chair Jewish Legislative Caucus

- [1] <https://www.facebook.com/events/754000115385200/>
- [2] <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Mahoney-Sample-Email-Response-September-2020.pdf>
- [3] Leila Khaled is a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which has been designated by the U.S. State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. See: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>
- [4] In 2013, at a conference at the University of British Columbia, Khaled argued that “armed struggle [against Israel] is the only and the shortest way towards liberation” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSfvBKGWDLk>); in a 2014 interview she said, “I would advise violence” (<https://www.972mag.com/interview-with-leila-khaled-bds-is-effective-but-it-doesnt-liberate-land/>); and in a 2016 interview she stated, “I choose arms and I believe that taking up arms is one of the main tools to solve this [conflict]” (<https://www.euronews.com/2016/06/30/interview-meet-the-first-woman-to-hijack-a-plane>).
- [5] <https://www.facebook.com/events/1314074192135881>
- [6] <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Stencils-11.7.13.pdf>
- [7] <https://www.change.org/p/president-lelie-wong-condemn-baseless-attack-against-gups-and-amed/c/28169782>
- [8] <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AMED-Events-Anti-Zionism-Examples-9.15.20.pdf>
- [9] <https://amchainitiative.org/search-by-incident#incident/search/display-by-date/search/>
- [10] For example, see: <https://www.facebook.com/AMEDStudies/posts/907963842889537>
- [11] <https://www.facebook.com/AMEDStudies/posts/573870589632199>
- [12] <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/government-code/gov-sect-8314.html>
- [13] <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/education-code/edc-sect-89005-5.html>