



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

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Prof Asher Cohen
President, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Sent By Email: hupres@savion.huji.ac.il

Prof Tamir Sheafer
Rector, Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Sent By Email: rector@savion.huji.ac.il

30 October 2023

Dear Professors Asher Cohen and Tamir Sheafer,

Even as we grieve the heinous killings of Israeli and Palestinian civilians, I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Committee of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) in order to express our profound concern over the content of your letter of 29 October to Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, its widespread dissemination by you and/or your staff, and, given the current atmosphere in Israel, its capacity to incite both verbal and physical violence against Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

In your letter, you note that you were “astonished, disgusted and deeply disappointed” that Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian published and signed [the petition](#) of “Childhood researchers and students call for immediate ceasefire in Gaza”. In your letter, you then claimed that by doing so Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian had committed an act that is “not very far from crimes of incitement and sedition.” You also maintain that Israel’s actions in Gaza “do not come close to the definition of genocide” while Hamas’ massacre 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 sending the letter to Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian either you and/or members of your staff shared it with members of the Hebrew University community and the letter was quickly posted and disseminated on social media. Since then, Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian has been receiving hate

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messages and threats of violence, creating a risk to her physical well-being. As two eminent scholars who are rooted in Israeli society you will be well-aware of the current atmosphere within Israel. The atmosphere to which we refer includes video clips made and circulated by Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian's colleague Professor Gad Yair, in which he calls for a 'Nakba 2' (recently taken offline), articles from Tel-Aviv University Professor Eviatar Matania calling in an op-ed for the complete destruction of Gaza City and the establishment of a park in its stead (Makor Rishon 27 Oct.), as well as attacks on student dorms in Netanya, where a mob surrounding the dorms is seen yelling "death to Arabs, death to Arabs." The threats to Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian arriving in the wake of your letter could easily have been anticipated by those who chose to publish and/or disseminate it.

We understand why some people might find the text of the petition of childhood researchers offensive, for example because the text does not refer to the Israeli children killed by Hamas. We further note that there is currently a disagreement among genocide and legal scholars about whether Israel's attacks on Gaza are genocidal. However, with close to 900 scholars releasing a statement to that effect on 15 [October](#), Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian was simply echoing a widely held scholarly opinion. It is precisely during times of war that academic freedom and freedom of expression are tested and must be assiduously and robustly protected. Yet, your letter of 29 October appears to do exactly the opposite. It not only breaches Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian's academic freedom, but it also produces a chilling effect among the University's staff and students, particularly Palestinian staff and students, many of whom will feel unable to voice their lawful opinions on a wide range of urgent questions. Moreover, and as mentioned above, the letter's widespread circulation by you and/or members of your staff has potentially endangered Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian's mental and physical wellbeing and contravenes your duty of care towards her.

We therefore ask that you rescind your letter to Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian and issue an apology alongside a commitment to academic freedom that will be circulated to all Hebrew University staff. We further ask that you urgently inquire about her safety and offer her your support, including by assessing whether she needs the University to provide a security detail in the coming weeks.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

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