

Palestinian professor hits back at Israel lobby attacks

written by David Spero

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Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi and SFSU Students.

Aiming to expose and loosen the influence of the Israel lobby on U.S. campuses,

Palestinian-born professor Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi has sued San Francisco State University (SFSU) in federal court for illegal retaliation for her political speech, and in state court for breach of contract and employment discrimination. Her supporters have issued a call for donations to a fund to cover necessary expenses of the litigation.

Speaking to supporters on a conference call, Behnam (Ben) Gharagozli, one of Abdulhadi's lawyers, said the case "will send a positive message to everyone engaged in campus activism and in researching, teaching and speaking up for justice in/for Palestine. It will change the dynamics at universities across America where people will no longer have to be afraid of criticizing Israel."

Gharagozli's co-counsel Mark Kleiman explained, "We will expose how the Israel lobby operates. Controlling campus debate is important to them. That is why the lobby pays for university presidents to take trips to Israel. This case will reveal their excess influence, which is part of the general trend of powerful interests taking over U.S. academia."

SFSU hired Abdulhadi, an outspoken advocate for Palestine and a distinguished professor at University of Michigan-Dearborn, in 2007 to establish a program called Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas (AMED) studies. According to Gharagozli, her hiring memorandum of understanding (MOU) specified that AMED would be given two additional full professorships and adequate support staff. These people were never hired, and the funding lines have disappeared from SFSU budgets, though a recent [audit revealed](#) that the Cal State system has hidden \$1.5 billion in surplus funds.

The program rapidly became popular among students and with the Arab community but came under intense fire from pro-Israel groups on and off campus. Attacks have ranged from [hate posters](#) pasted on campus by the David Horowitz Freedom Center, online vilification of Abdulhadi and AMED students by Canary Mission and Campus

Watch, and charges [of antisemitism](#) from Hillel, the AMCHA Initiative, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), among others. In 2017 three individual students, encouraged and represented by the Lawfare Project, the self-described “legal arm of the pro-Israel community,” sued SFSU and Abdulhadi for allegedly “maintaining a threatening environment for Jewish students.”

Lawfare brought the case three times, but Kleiman and Gharagozli argued that the claims were baseless, and in October 2018, Judge William Orrick of the U.S. District Court agreed, dismissing Lawfare’s case. Lawfare also filed a similar case against SFSU in state court without naming Abdulhadi as a defendant. Without her team on the case, the University rapidly reached a settlement, trumpeted by Israel supporters as admitting to an [antisemitic environment](#).

Since the settlement, Administration has made life progressively more difficult for Abdulhadi, challenging routine expenses, refusing to build the AMED program as contractually agreed, canceling a summer program in Palestine that was already fully subscribed, and denying her needed disability accommodations and preferred class schedules.

At every step, AMED and SFSU’s administration have been under pressure from Israel-aligned organizations. The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) took then newly installed President Leslie Wong on a tour of Israel in 2013. J Weekly, Northern California’s largest Jewish newspaper ran [a long series](#) of articles alleging that antisemitism was rampant on campus. JCRC, ADL and others are often invited to meet with SFSU administration, while Arab and Muslim groups and Palestinian rights supporters such as Jewish Voice for Peace say they have been unable to get meetings.

Israel’s Academic Army

Suppression of Palestinian voices is the norm on American campuses; the SFSU case

stands out only because of Abdulhadi's effectiveness in holding on to her job and expanding the AMED program. A dozen Israel-aligned groups monitor pro-Palestinian academics and have gotten many fired, including Normal Finkelstein at De Paul University, Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois and many less well-known cases. According to Palestine Legal attorney Liz Jackson, her agency responded to [289 incidents of suppression](#) of U.S.-based Palestine advocacy in 2018, on top of 308 incidents in 2017.

Most of these pro-Israel groups are small but well-connected and well-funded. In 2016, Israel's then-Education Minister Naftali Bennet launched a \$66 million campaign called Mosaic United to "combat critical discourse around Israel on American campuses." Hillel International has [collaborated](#) closely with and taken millions of dollars from Mosaic.

The Lobby groups' tactics include media smears on Israel's critics, labeling them as antisemites, efforts to rewrite university policies or [state laws](#) to penalize criticism of Israel, and pressure on donors and administrators. If Abdulhadi's team can bring this information to light, it will strengthen Palestinian academics against the Israel lobby and empower all academics against bullying by corporate power and special interest groups. "This case is ideal," says Kleiman, "because it deals with what's happening in the U.S.: discrimination against minorities, women and immigrants. We will use this case to demonstrate how white nationalism, not just the Israel Lobby is moving things to the right. This is a rare opportunity to bring these issues out."

Pursuing justice is expensive

"We are confident in the strength of the two lawsuits," Gharagozli says, "but we cannot win them without presenting the necessary evidence. We must demand that SFSU produce documents and answer written questions. We will subpoena administrators and their outside allies such as JCRC and Hillel and compel them to testify under oath on video in front of a court reporter. Without this discovery, we

stand little chance of actually winning the lawsuit.”

The discovery process is expensive — depositions alone cost \$1,500 to \$2,500 a day without attorney fees — and Abdulhadi’s team is seeking help to fund them.

“I did not intend to take on the whole Israel Lobby,” said Abdulhadi. “I wanted to get back to my scholarship and teaching. But even though we keep winning, they never stop attacking, tying up our time, energy and resources. So now we have gone on the offensive.”

To find out more or support Dr. Abdulhadi, visit launchgood.com/supportRabab and sign a petition in her support [here](#).

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