

University Professors Are Losing Their Jobs Over “New Mccarthyism” on Gaza

As brutal police repression sweeps campus encampments, schools have been cutting ties with pro-Palestine faculty members without tenure.

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Many scholars committed to Palestinian liberation can no longer do their jobs. That’s because many of the professors most supportive of Palestine don’t have jobs anymore.

This is nowhere truer than in the Gaza Strip — where [all 12 universities have been reduced to rubble](#), and more than 90 professors have been reported killed during Israel’s assault on the territory. The gravity of what United Nations experts warn could amount to U.S.-backed “[scholasticide](#)” has no equivalent on American soil.

Yet Israel’s attempted eradication of intellectual life in Gaza echoes far beyond the territory, with U.S. universities ensuring that some professors vocal in their support of Palestine can no longer do their jobs either.

Since the beginning of Israel’s war on Gaza, academics in fields including politics, sociology, Japanese literature, public health, Latin American and Caribbean studies, Middle East and African studies, mathematics, education, and more have been fired, suspended, or removed from the classroom for pro-Palestine, anti-Israel speech.

These educators have little in common. They live in different cities and states and hail from different countries. Some have been teaching in their institutions for decades, some were newly hired. Some taught at private universities, others public. They have varying degrees of job security, from a tenured professor to the most precarious adjunct contracts. And they are racially, ethnically, religiously, age, and gender diverse.

What they share is that, in recent months, they have all staked out positions in favor of Palestinian freedom — positions that lead them to be targeted by pro-Israel groups.

From campus to campus, professors [have defended students' right to protest](#), but when scholars themselves espouse support for Palestine and opposition to the Israeli state, professional consequences have frequently been grave.

There's no official tally of the number of academic workers who have lost jobs or faced suspension over support for Palestine, not least because higher education in this country is disarticulated, often privatized, and reliant on short-term contract labor. By and large, professors facing job loss and suspensions over Palestine have brought these allegations into public view by speaking out themselves. Scores of academics across the country are likely under investigation, and many stand to have their contracts quietly expire without renewals.

The Intercept spoke with more than a dozen professors, both adjuncts and those with tenure, whose employment has been imperiled by their pro-Palestine speech. Of the professors I talked to, all were at one point under investigation since October 7; some of the probes closed without findings of wrongdoing. Several faced varying degrees of suspensions, and four of the professors lost their jobs or expect to lose them next week when the semester ends without the renewal of their contracts.

The interviews, including those with campus labor activists and academic associations, revealed a pattern of politically motivated repression where campaigns by pro-Israel advocates can mar the careers of academics because of comments that express outrage at Israel's ongoing occupation and its war in Gaza.

"The bulk of our inquiries, even our cases, have to do with violations of due process related to non-reappointment, to dismissal, to tenure award, et cetera," said Anita Levy, senior program officer with the American Association of University Professors. Levy told me that the nonprofit organization, which advocates for faculty rights and academic freedom, currently has opened five cases in recent months related to pro-Palestinian speech.

"When we get five or six of these cases in a two-month period, where there are suspensions related to social media posts over a current event, shall we say, the war in Gaza, that is unusual," she said. "Of the cases that we've opened, none of them have been related to pro-Israel speech. All of them have been in support of the Palestinian cause."

We are at the dawn of a "new McCarthyism," Levy said. "This may be the tip of the iceberg."

Institutions are well positioned to eliminate political dissenters from their payrolls under the misleading banner of protecting Jewish people, primed by heightened Republican [attacks](#) on higher education.

"This is beyond the new McCarthyism. This has to deal fundamentally with Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, anti-Arab racism, anti-Palestinian racism," said Mohamed Abdou, who is a visiting professor in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African studies at Columbia University — that is, [until this semester ends](#).

Columbia President Minouche Shafik announced that the university was cutting ties with Abdou during a congressional [hearing](#) last month about antisemitism on campus. Abdou was one of five professors named by the school administrator but the only one without the

relative protection of tenure. His one-year contract ends this month.

“What she effectively did was blacklist me globally,” Abdou told me of Shafik’s testimony. (Columbia did not respond to a request for comment.)

Abdou said he was smeared for words in a [Facebook post](#) on October 11 that were taken dramatically out of context. The activist-scholar was framed in Congress and in the right-wing media as an antisemite and Hamas supporter. His lengthy post asks readers to think about a future for Palestine, and support for resistance, beyond the binary of a secularized, Eurocentric state formation, or “Hamas and Islamic Jihad’s neoconservative idea of Sharia.”



Muhammad Abdou

October 11, 2023 · 🌐

Decolonization, Islam, Palestine & Turtle Island:

...Decolonization is an inherently violent, yes, but it's also a spiritual act in restoring neocolonialism's disfiguring impact on the native's racialized, sexualized, gendered, material, historical, symbolic, political, and spiritual relationship to our mother earth, non-humxn life and land (that are also spiritual subjects not objects). While i understand the many impulses in secularizing Palestine and claiming that it isn't a religious struggle (myself having been involved in diasporic Palestinian organizing for over 22 years in Turtle Island) i never agreed with this approach. Then, was a time in which Hamas under the command of Sheikh Yassin was engaged in bombings and alot of diasporic Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims already contending with their settlerhood & 9/11's impact on Turtle Island had and continue to have mixed feelings about Islam (given that we've been predominantly been exposed to authoritarian-sexist-queerphobic interpretations of it). Hence most abstain(ed) from the necessary spiritual conversations needed and, instead, prefer(red) adopting a neoliberal humxn rights industrial approach to struggles which are problematic within themselves given how they instantiate white 'Enlightened' supremacy.

However, now, especially with all the effort spent over decades by many of us the case is different and continuing to secularize the conversation becomes highly problematic: It simultaneously allows room for a conflation between Judaism and Zionism, while also preserving pinkwashing/Zionist/settlercolonial attacks on Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians in light of Hamas' sexism-queerphobia/authoritarianism, and at the same time blunts more nuanced Fanonian conversations on the psycho-affective violence that neocolonialism/neoimperialism instill in those colonized as well as the right to bear arms not just from a secular perspective but also a Muslim perspective that addresses jihad (struggle) and qital (the actual Quranic term for fighting or to go to war). The roots of the struggle for Palestine didn't begin in 1948, they go back to 1492. If one is genuinely keen on addressing the confluence of white supremacist crusading Euro-American politics that evicted, murdered and persecuted Muslims and Jews who were referred to as savages and heathens prior to Indigenous peoples across Abya Yala and Turtle Island with Columbus' conquistador invasion, we must look to 1492's global religious and spiritual dimension. If one wants to address anti-

blackness in Zionist Israel and within predominantly Arab, South Asian and Muslim societies, one has to look to 1492 given, how a 1/3 to a 1/5 of the transatlantic middle passage slaves were Muslims from the Iberian peninsula and the West coast of Africa. If one wants to address diasporic Arab, Muslim, Palestinian settlerhood and complicity in Turtle Island one has to look to 1492, not 1948 that presents its own problems given state-nationalism. If one is keen on not repeating a recurring Tahrir moment in which a secular-leftist vs religious battle unfolds on a movement level, 1492 needs to be addressed. As i always ask: What happens when Palestine is freed tomorrow? Will it be a one-state (a Eurocentric form of governance) as opposed to decolonial conceptualizations of governance and sovereignty from a Muslim and broadly spiritual perspective? Will this state be governed through Hamas and Islamic Jihad's neoconservative idea of Sharia (a non-monolithic discourse) or a PA's secularized constitution founded on protestant ethic-based racial capitalist conceptualizations of individualist common law property and Victorian gender/sexual mores? Where would that leave, leftist Palestinians, queer Muslims, and feminists etc who will be stuck in between? These questions need to be asked now, and yesterday before today and tomorrow.

There's an opportunity here to address all this even in the heat of battle or to at least provoke them. I know i did in my book "Islam and anarchism" and why i wrote it in the first place from a movement and political theological perspective and aimed to develop an egalitarian anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist queer-feminist abolitionist and decolonial etc Quranic interpretation of Islam. We're circling in conversations which we should be transcending and it's deeply frustrating and disingenuous to all our struggles let alone to the discourse playing out in Palestine, amongst Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, Iran and Islamists more generally; Hamas refers to their warriors (which they are) as mujahideen - does that not teach us anything? Christians and Muslims who carried assassinated Palestinian Christian journalist Shereen Abu Akhlah chanted "Allah Akbar". The last 24hrs have been ripe with false reports accusing Arabs and Muslims of decapitating the heads of children and being rapists - what do these centuries old tropes projected unto Muslims since before 1492 and later unto Indigenous and Black folx signal to you all? Yes, I'm with the muqawamah (the resistance) be it Hamas and Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad but up to a point - given ultimate differences over our ethical political commitments; that's the difference between a strategy and tactic too. How do we stand in solidarity with womxn in Iran refusing the hijabs, while being critical of a

neoconservative cis-hetero Islam, the Mullahs, and at the same time adopting an anti-imperialist interventionist stance that counters attempt to divide Iran (as Iraq before it) along sectarian and ethnic lines? How do we avoid another Syria still being led by the butcher of Damascus while not giving into an ISIS and an imperialist Euro-American project? How else do we address Russian Islamophobia against Chechens, Chinese Islamophobia against the Uyghur, Buddhist Myanmar Islamophobia against Rohingyas, Indian Hindutava Islamophobia against Dalits and Kashmiris, Zionist Israeli Islamophobia against Palestinians, Euro-American Islamophobia against Muslims etc? Modernity is just an ongoing white supremacist crusade adopting the mask of a secularized-Euro-American Christian Enlightenment; "In God We Trust on the \$ Bill" - Capitalism and Nation-States possess to spirituality orientations even when 'secularized': Materialism and Authoritarianism that are not mutually exclusive. Shouldn't we take a queue when Indigenous Land defenders at NoDapl are being referred to as "Jihadi terrorists" by US paramilitaries as TigerSwan or when BLM are referred to by the FBI as "Black Extremist Groups"? It's not that Islam is exceptional, it's that it was made to be so because of 3 crusades, prior to 1492, and how Muslims failed as a frontline of defense since, because we lost sight of our original teachings not too long gradually after the Prophet's death.

Most are focusing on the branches and forgetting the forest.

Wake up.

Stop disingenuously "secularizing" & white-washing our movements and struggles.

Screenshot from Abdou's Facebook

"I'm against any form of authoritarianism," Abdou — whose work focuses on Islam,

anarchism, and settler colonialism since 1492 — told me.

One extramural social media post has been weaponized to undo Abdou's career, after 20 years of teaching in Canada, Egypt, and the U.S. in fields including queer studies and Indigenous studies, leaving the scholar with scant recourse and limited options. He is hardly alone.

"Fired After 18 Years"

Anti-Palestinian repression on U.S. campuses since October 7 has not been subtle. Students and faculty face far-reaching discriminatory censure and defamatory allegations for pro-Palestinian advocacy, as [administrators jump to appease pro-Israel donors](#) and conservative political interests.

In the last months, school administrators called in riot cops to clear student encampments and arrest thousands at Columbia University, City College of New York, Emerson College, Emory University, New York University, the University of Austin at Texas, and more. It was [brutal state violence against students](#) not seen since the campus movement against the Vietnam War — justified this time by flimsy claims about [student safety](#), undergirded by a conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

There have been scenes of faculty solidarity. Last week, faculty members at the New School in New York, where I teach, launched the first faculty-led solidarity encampment, following the shuttering of the student encampment with mass arrests. In late April, [dozens](#) of professors and others from New York University formed a line around their protesting students as police were called in to raid their encampment; faculty and students were all arrested together. [Footage capturing the arrests](#) of Emory Philosophy Department Chair Noëlle McAfee and economics professor Caroline Fohlin, the latter who was slammed brutally to the ground by cops, was shared widely online.

Yet once media attention moves away from encampment sweeps and violent arrests, many professors who have lost work will still be without their livelihoods or left facing precarious futures with their reputations unfairly besmirched.

"I was fired after 18 years as a professor of Latin American and Caribbean studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice," Danny Shaw said. He was told last month by administrators at the college, which is part of the public City University of New York system, that he would not be reappointed to his longtime adjunct position. Shaw's colleagues had moved to reappoint him but were overruled by John Jay President Karol Mason, according to an [open letter](#) from the economics department.

<https://x.com/JJayEcon/status/1775622502972084645>

"The non-reappointment of Danny Shaw is an unacceptable action," Shaw's colleagues in the economics department wrote in their open letter. "Danny Shaw is a valuable member of his department who has been teaching at John Jay since 2007. Professor Shaw is an excellent teacher who has received a Distinguished Teaching Award."

The dismissal followed right-wing, pro-Israel online harassment, Shaw said, in response to his showing vocal support for Palestine and opposition to Israel following October 7 and the start of Israel's bombardments.

"I saw a genocide in motion, so I began to organize demonstrations and teach-ins and conferences," Shaw told me.

On his X account in mid-October, in the wake of stridently bellicose remarks from Israeli officials, Shaw wrote in a now-deleted post that Zionism "is beyond a mental illness; it's a genocidal disease." The target was unambiguously Zionist ideology and its adherents, not Jews for being Jewish. The speech is also clearly within the bounds of First Amendment protections. It was, of course, decried as antisemitic.

The pattern is now familiar. Zionist groups like [Canary Mission](#) and Antisemitism.org, which have made a [business of going after faculty and students online](#), single out those on campus with pro-Palestine views. Universities then face political and donor pressure to censure the targeted professors.

Many academics now facing termination, suspension, or having their contracts not renewed told me their open support for Palestinian freedom was nothing new and had never been a significant issue before. "I've been doing Palestinian solidarity work since the 1990s when I was a teenager," Shaw said.

At the time John Jay cut ties with Shaw, CUNY was facing increasing pressure from the city and state, with the threat of funding loss tied to trumped-up claims of spiking antisemitism on campus. In late October, [New York Gov. Kathy Hochul](#) ordered an independent investigation into antisemitism at CUNY. (A spokesperson for John Jay College said the school can't comment on personnel matters.)

CUNY has ended its relationship with at least one other professor because of speech related to Israel's war on Gaza. One, Lisa Hofmann-Kuroda, a scholar of Japanese literature formerly at CUNY's Hunter College, told me in a statement that a student reported several of her pro-Palestine social media posts to the head of her department in November. Nothing in the posts, she noted, was antisemitic. "The only thing I have done," she said, "is to criticize the state of Israel for its 75-year brutal occupation of Palestine and criticize Americans for their complicity or silence in this genocide."

Pro-Israel speech incurs consequences much less frequently, but it does happen. In one case, Arizona State University put postdoctoral research fellow Jonathan Yudelman on leave after a video of a pro-Israel rally [went viral](#). In the video, shot near campus in May, Yudelman gets in the face of a woman in a hijab, who says her religious boundaries are being violated. Yudelman replies, "You disrespect my sense of humanity, bitch." A [statement](#) released by the school last week said that Yudelman "is on leave from Arizona State University pending the outcome of an investigation" into the incident. The statement said that, prior to the event, "Yudelman had already resigned his position at ASU, effective June 30, and he was not scheduled to teach any additional courses."

Yudelman's case is a rare exception to the rule that treats support for Palestine as a professional liability.

Tenure in the Age of Unsafety

What the late, legendary civil rights attorney Michael Ratner coined as "the Palestine exception to free speech" is not new, though its escalation in the months since October has been ferocious.

“Repression of anti-Zionism has a long and ugly history in academe. It really started to pick up after 1967,” Palestinian American scholar and author Steven Salaita told me by email, referring to the period of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, a time when support for Israel was growing in the U.S. “Too many people to remember have been negatively affected. But it’s worse now than I’ve ever seen it.”

Salaita was [fired for pro-Palestinian speech](#) in 2014, a forerunner for the current repressive moment. After Salaita was let go from a tenured position in American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois over tweets criticizing Israel, a public records request on Salaita’s behalf revealed communications between the university and [several wealthy donors threatening to withdraw financial support](#) unless Salaita was fired. The university eventually settled a lawsuit by Salaita for \$875,000.

“I’d say that on the one hand my situation with the University of Illinois a decade ago is exactly like what so many of my colleagues and comrades currently suffer,” Salaita told me. “On the other hand, my situation was different insofar as I was fired from a tenured professorship, which is highly uncommon.”

In recent years, right-wing culture warriors and administrators with their eyes on the bottom line have been [trying to find ways to fire tenured professors](#). As political [theorist](#) Joshua Clover, a tenured professor at the University of California, Davis, pointed out, universities for the most part have only been able to achieve this by closing down whole departments on purported economic grounds. The attack of pro-Palestinian speech, though, offers a whole new avenue, under the guise of protecting Jewish students.

Broad and vague charges of “making students feel unsafe” allow universities to scrutinize everything a professor does, inside or outside of the classroom. Clover, who has himself been targeted by Canary Mission for anti-Zionist speech, told me this enables “extramural speech to be treated as something relevant to people’s work situation.”

“There’s nothing extramural anymore,” he said. “We’re all at work 24 hours a day, wherever we are.”

It was extramural speech — an [essay](#) for a leftist publisher — that earned a suspension from teaching for Jodi Dean, a tenured political [theorist](#) at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York, where she has taught for 30 years. (She remains employed at the university.) Her essay was condemned for describing seeing images of the breach of the Gaza wall on October 7 as “exhilarating,” and the college president said in a letter that there “may be students on our campus who may feel threatened in or outside of the classroom.”

“I have been here for 20 years and I haven’t seen anything like this,” Paul Passavant, a professor of politics at Hobart and William Smith, [told](#) Middle East Eye of Dean’s suspension. “It is a total violation of academic freedom. And it violates the integrity of the institution as an academic institution.”

In response to requests for comment, a Hobart and William Smith spokesperson forwarded three [letters](#) from university leadership that had been sent out to the college community in mid-April.

“Professor Dean has the right to express her views,” the school’s provost and dean of faculty Sarah Kirk wrote in an April 15 [letter](#). “It is also true that Hobart and William Smith

has the obligation under federal anti-discrimination laws, including Title VI, to investigate and take prompt action where the possibility exists that there is a hostile environment based on national origin, shared ancestry, or other protected classes that may interfere with a student's ability to learn and enjoy the benefits of an education." The letters all say that Dean has been "relieved" of classroom duties while she is under investigation by the school.

Activist and scholar Amin Husain [likewise](#) was punished for extramural speech. He had called for Palestinian liberation for many years, but he was only suspended from his adjunct position at New York University in January of this year.

Husain told me that the university's human resources department questioned him not only about his anti-Zionist statements, but also about social media content posted by an abolitionist art collective, Decolonize This Place, that he is affiliated with. None of the collective's posts were attributed to Husain specifically.

"I've been teaching for seven or eight years. Never one complaint," Husain told me. He added that his suspension was not the result of a student complaint but evidence taken from "doxing outlets." While he is technically suspended, Husain is an adjunct with a contract ending this month. (NYU did not respond to a request for comment.)

"I'm never going to be hired by NYU," he told me. Of the university, he said, "You destroyed my reputation, and you never even did the due diligence."

A [letter](#) of support for Husain, signed by over 2,000 artists, writers, academics, and students, said, "These attacks on speech (and speakers) reflect the ideology behind the logic of destruction inflicted on the cultural infrastructure of Palestine itself."

"Now Is the Time"

The issue of academic freedom on Palestine is inseparable from the labor struggles that have been rocking universities over the past decade.

"Until recently, labor unions in this country have been incredibly weak, the impact of which is emboldened university leaders who are enacting increasingly repressive policies on their campuses," Molly Ragan, a union organizer with UAW Local 7902, who teaches at the Parsons School of Design, part of the New School university. "What I've learned in my two years as a UAW staff organizer working with faculty and student workers in NYC is that the labor movement and pro-Palestine movement go hand in hand."

Alongside the New School's Students for Justice in Palestine chapter, two student worker unions, both unionized with the UAW, organized the student-led encampment on campus. Two weeks ago, that protest camp was cleared out in a surprise police raid involving over 40 arrests.

Ragan noted that labor involvement aimed to provide "a legal shield for the encampment because any retaliation is a violation of our basic Section 7 right to concerted activity under the NLRA" — a reference to the National Labor Relations Act's [protection](#) of workplace collective action. On [Monday](#), ACT-UAW Local 7902 filed an unfair labor practice charge against the school over the arrests on campus and treatment of the encampment participants.

The importance of supporting scholars who speak out for Palestine, however, goes far

beyond [free speech](#) and worker protections. Israel's occupation and its ongoing brutal war are constant reminders of the more salient issues at work.

Despite continuous police raids, the protest camps are spreading. Nearly 200 campuses nationwide established encampments in the last month to demand divestment from Israel, its military apparatus, and the corporations that benefit from it.

"I don't think the repression will work, not if its ultimate goal is to keep people quiet. If the goal is punishment in and of itself, then the tactic is effective," Salaita, the scholar, told me. "But if silence is the desired outcome, then Zionist organizations are failing miserably, and will continue to fail miserably. Nobody's going to stop talking about Palestine at this point."

Clover, the Davis professor, echoed the sentiment. "If you're going to be fired for standing up for Palestine, now is the time to do it anyway," Clover said. "Now is the time to do it in the most serious and principled ways."

Nowhere is this principled defiance better exemplified than among the Palestinian scholars who have lost the most.

"We will never tire, be frightened, or threatened to stop advocating for justice and peace and to stop the ongoing slaughter and genocide in Palestine," Ahmed Alhussaina, the vice president of [Israa University](#), one of Gaza's most celebrated institutions of higher education and research, told me by email.

"It's really a shame to witness such a disgrace in the American political system," said Alhussaina. "There is a McCarthyite campaign to silence the Palestinian voice in all American universities, large and small, but there is broad determination and support for Gaza and Palestine in all universities, and it will be difficult to contain this youth tide."

Alhussaina, who has lost 102 relatives to Israel's onslaught, fled Gaza in November. At the start of the war, the Israeli military seized his university and turned it into a barracks and a detention center, before destroying it in a massive, controlled explosion.

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