

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3485>



Palestine solidarity

Resisting the New McCarthyism

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV474 - July 2014 -

Publication date: Tuesday 29 July 2014

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

After leading a January 2014 academic and labor delegation to Palestine and Jordan, Dr. Rabab Abdulhadi has come under sustained attack from the rightwing McCarthyist AMCHA Initiative, which describes itself as “a non-profit organization dedicated to investigating, documenting, educating about, and combating anti-Semitism at institutions of higher education in America.”

Rabab Abdulhadi: AMCHA accused Abdulhadi of securing university funding on a false pretext of attending a conference of the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University of Beirut. In fact, as she explained in detail in a response to AMCHA’s charges: “To my dismay, I was unable to attend the conference in Beirut because of university delays in approving my travel authorization request. Because SFSU and CSU (California State University) delayed funding approval for my travel to areas that the State Department defines as ‘high-risk,’ I was not able to confirm my attendance to conference organizers by their deadline.”

Ken Monteiro, the Dean of the SFSU College of Ethnic Studies confirmed, after additional review, that “Dr. Abdulhadi’s travel claim is correct and appropriate,” that “her travel involved meetings and discussions with people who are related to her research,” that “her past, current, and in preparation publications evidence publicly that her travel is the basis for her scholarship, scholarship that is internationally regarded,” and that “the College of Ethnic Studies does not censor any of our scholars, nor does the college condone such censorship.” “We hired Dr. Abdulhadi explicitly for her work in Palestine and with Palestinians in the Diaspora including, but not limited to, the USA,” Monteiro added.

The latter clause is a response to AMCHA’s allegation that the delegation met with “terrorists,” including Leila Khaled. Further pursuing its vendetta against Dr. Abdulhadi and San Francisco State, AMCHA on June 25 issued a letter which demands “that California State Controller John Chiang conduct a state audit of SFSU.” The letter’s co-signers include StandWithUs, a heavily funded campus-oriented Zionist advocacy group, and the extreme rightwing Zionist Organization of America.

In response to AMCHA’s attack on Dr. Abdulhadi’s work and reputation, a wide assortment of groups and individuals have rallied to her defense (a partial list appears at the conclusion of the interview below). David Finkel and Dianne Feeley interviewed Dr. Abdulhadi by phone for *Against the Current*.

Against the Current: How serious is AMCHA’s attack on you and their new demand for a state audit of the university?

Rabab Abdulhadi: It’s serious on the one hand, not because of their size—AMCHA is two or three people, and most of the other groups they list are tiny—but they are very well-financed, including by Sheldon Adelson [the casino mogul who claimed to be spending \$100 million in 2012 supporting Mitt Romney and who forced New Jersey Governor Christie to apologize for calling the West Bank occupied territories – ed.]. And they’re part of the network around the Reut Institute in Israel, which came out with a big report in 2010 describing how to target pro-Palestinian activities and stop what we’re doing.

They’re not a little grassroots organization, so it’s serious when they ask the State Controller to investigate. They, AMCHA and company, requested and received all the documentation from the university regarding my travel authorization request and reimbursements, both of which, I might add, have been fully reviewed several times by SFSU and CSU before it was authorized. AMCHA copied also the California attorney general, trying to get me

implicated in criminal charges and “terrorism.”

In addition to Dean Monteiro’s report on May 28th immediately following AMCHA’s latest attack, SFSU Counsel reported to me and my lawyers on June 4th that the University had thoroughly reviewed my documents and found no wrong doing. On June 24th, SFSU President Wong cleared me and further said that AMCHA’s false allegations had no merit and reported on the university website.

Although I knew all along that I did not violate any SFSU or CSU guidelines, nor did I do anything wrong from a legal standpoint, what’s disturbing is that AMCHA has targeted so many other scholars. Needless to say that they haven’t succeeded in a single case. However, they continue to try to raise the cost of speaking up on Palestine. I believe that AMCHA’s strategy is to try to get me fired, investigated on criminal charges and charges of aiding and abetting terrorism, and to ultimately destroy AMED as an academic program whose mission is to produce knowledge for social justice, including intimidating SFSU from signing any collaborative agreements with Palestinian universities. A California colleague reported that she too was attacked during her sabbatical. Using McCarthyist era tactics, they really want to make me an example to other people and scare everyone so they won’t dare get involved in the struggle for justice in/for Palestine.

They started by saying I was teaching children to kill Jews. That did not work because folks know me and know that I live by the principle of the indivisibility of justice, i.e. opposition to hatred and racism against any people. As a result we received overwhelming support from our broader communities. Their next line of attack was to target the (North American Academic and Labor) delegation by selectively drawing from the blog of my colleague, Joanne Barker, who wrote about our activities. For example, although we met with 189 individuals, in its smear campaign, AMCHA chose to focus only on two, Leila Khaled and Sheikh Raed Salah, using the anti-Palestinian pro-Zionist standpoint of U.S. dominant circles, on one hand, and widespread Islamophobia on the other. Then they (AMCHA) attacked our report back event by asking the university to cancel it.

After we held a very successful and a standing room event, AMCHA and its ilk made false allegations anew but in addition to attacking me this time around, they also spelled out their goals of undermining our plans to formalize collaboration between SFSU and Palestinian universities, calling them “terrorist.” They also claimed that our event harassed Jewish students. In fact, and as our videos of the event show, we had a beautiful discussion, with everything transparent and where all members of the audience allowed to raise questions and debate the issues with no coercion. The campaign’s escalated to accusing me of “anti-semitism.” However the Jacobin article by Selma James and Sara Kershner, as well as the letters sent to President Wong, including that by Sherry Gorelick published on Mondoweiss, have been beautiful responses to such false claims. More recently, there is also the letter signed by over 500 Jews from the US, Israel and around the world.

AMCHA’s attack did not stop after President Wong exonerated me of all wrong doing. Rather, they have now started a new campaign directed at the California Controller claiming again that I misused public funds and demanding another investigation. The bottom line is that they are arguing that that public dollars shouldn’t be used to advocate for social justice. I’m saying the opposite: that we need to produce knowledge for social justice. That’s the mission of AMED, and it is supported by the College of Ethnic Studies and SFSU. This was the reason why I accepted the position at San Francisco State: to teach, research, and write about social justice issues and not only for Palestine, but all over the world, including the United States.

This is not unreasonable; for every U.S. resident person who pays taxes—that includes undocumented workers, who pay taxes too—a portion goes to subsidize Israeli colonization of Palestine and violation of Palestinian rights.

ATC: When we talk about BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions), it seems important to find particular campaigns that have resonance with people’s concerns. The G4S company that builds prisons in Israel is

also involved in private prisons here, for example, so there's a powerful connection with denying Palestinian rights.

RA: We make the connection all the time, not in an opportunistic fashion but within the framework of what I define as the "indivisibility of justice." That's how we conceptualize everything we do.

In the case of G4S, through our campaign, "from Pelican Bay and Guantanamo to Palestine," we highlighted the struggle of prisoners on hunger strike in Pelican Bay, California; Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; and Israeli jails. It is instructive to know that G4S and the security industry operates prisons in all these locations.

If we understand global political economy, we can see the connections everywhere, and note how much is being spent on bombs and drones and prisons instead of the necessary investment in human needs in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, including in Palestine.

ATC: Do you think the rightwing attacks are growing now because there's growing support on campuses for Palestinian rights, BDS, and criticism of Israel?

RA: Yes. The racist and rightwing forces are freaking out over what's going on. The Presbyterian General Assembly has just voted to divest Church funds from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions over their involvement in the brutal practices of the Israeli occupation. United Methodist Church divested its pension funds and the United Church of Christ is discussing divestment. The Association for Asian American Studies, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, and the American Studies Association have all responded positively and decided to join to the call by the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). The Gates Foundation has withdrawn its investments in G4S.

What's happening today with regards to Palestine brings to mind the "South African moment" of the mid-1980s. Israel has always sought to present itself as exceptional, humane, and wonderful. The lie, however, is being exposed in the broader public and communities. As Israel's apologists feel the pressure they have started spending millions of dollars to counter our advocacy for justice in/for Palestine as part and parcel of justice for all.

We can observe the Israeli and Zionist arrogance of power in their shock that someone has dared to challenge their monopoly of public space especially in the U.S. It is as if they are saying, "How dare you build a movement against us? This space belongs only to us!" This reminds me of the climate in the United States immediately after the 9/11 attacks. The attacks were of course were horrible but the American mindset at that time obliterated any possibilities of critical thought and public discussion.

ATC: The "South African moment" came at a time when the tide of the liberation movement there was clearly rising. The upsurge today in support of Palestine comes at a very difficult moment for the Palestinian struggle, and certainly at a point when its leadership is weak and divided.

RA: There are definitely severe problems with the official Palestinian leadership. This places an ultimatum to the PLO to either reform itself and act like a true leadership of an anti-colonial resistance movement or becoming totally irrelevant and face the possibility of the emergence of a new leadership that will replace it. Unfortunately and as we know, growing solid leadership takes much longer time than a single uprising—especially when we take into consideration the fact that Israel has, since the 1960s, assassinated one leader after another, not excluding PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat in 2004.

At the same time, there are encouraging signs in Palestine today, from squatter movements of young people refusing to move from Palestinian lands confiscated by the Israeli military for the use of Jewish colonial settlements, to struggles of Palestinians inside Israel, including Druze and Christian Palestinians who refuse to serve in the Israeli army that oppresses their people. Palestinians are really resisting and mobilizing, even though there is indeed a huge vacuum of official leadership.

Right now, the disappearance of the three settlers has been a pretext for a huge Israeli effort to further harass the Palestinian population under occupation, deepen the blockade and starvation of Gaza, and destroy the Palestinian unity government. The United States and Israel have definitely participated in undermining the Palestinian leadership. Yes, things would be so much different if we had an effective leadership. But the Palestinian people are in struggle and seeking their self-determination, and receiving grassroots support around the world.

As we learned from revolutionary history and the history of social movements, people have always risen against injustices. This is what's happening in Palestine today and in due time we will see real leadership emerging and navigating people's mobilization toward a qualitative change.

ATC: Part of your purpose, as described in your report on the delegation, was trying to build connections between SFSU and Birzeit University in the West Bank. Can you describe the progress of that work?

RA: We are working to establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between SFSU and An-Najah University first and then with Birzeit. These are my strongest connections—I have been collaborating with both universities for a very long time. I was a student at Birzeit as well as a visiting professor in 1998. My collaboration with An-Najah University goes back to 2005 and more recently An-Najah coordinated the full program for the Indigenous and Feminist of Color Delegation to Palestine. But it's not going to be exclusive to two Palestinian universities; we plan to connect with other universities in Palestine and elsewhere in the Arab world as well as in Muslim majority countries.

AMCHA calls these Palestinian universities “terrorist.” Birzeit, Jenin, and other Palestinian universities have just been raided which reminds us of the closure of institution of education and higher education during the first Intifada. We believe that SFSU students can learn from students and professors in Palestine, and Palestinian students could also learn from students and faculty from SFSU, given the leading role of SFSU students, staff, and faculty who led in 1968-69 the longest strike for social justice when they insisted and succeeded in realizing the College of Ethnic Studies. We also hope to conduct joint research and student and faculty exchanges. The planning has been delayed because of AMCHA's attack, but we are serious about developing these MOUs. Also this is not exclusive to the Palestinian, Arab, or Muslim communities in San Francisco Bay Area, but the fruits of our collaboration will be enjoyed by what we call AMED's broader community that supports us.

ATC: Was there much of a program in place when you arrived at SFSU?

RA: No. I was actually recruited from the University of Michigan - Dearborn to create it. This was a practical step to implement the recommendations of the taskforce past SFSU President Corrigan formed in order to address the campus tensions in 2002 when the Palestinian students were unjustly sanctioned even though they were attacked by on and off campus pro-Israeli groups. When I arrived in 2007, there were five courses in Arab American and Muslim American studies. Now we have 24 new courses, 15 of which are already certified and 8 are in the queue for approval as part of General Education curriculum that every student at SFSU can take, including in American Ethnic and Racial Minorities, Social Justice, and Global Perspectives.

Our proposal for a Minor in AMED has been approved in the Race and Resistance Studies Program as well as by the College of Ethnic Studies. There is a real need for an AMED program that would cater to all students interested in

learning about Arab and Muslim communities from a justice centered perspective, not only to Arab and Muslim students. Students who will be the future leaders in the US need to learn about the genocide and resistance of Native Americans, the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans, as well as the exclusion of Asian Americans and the colonization of Latin@ lands and people. AMED organically fits within this conceptual framework.

This is also why AMCHA has targeted me: they would kill the program if they can wear me out or get me fired. They have also been attacking the College of Ethnic Studies for the same reasons. For example, AMCHA's leader, Tammi Rossman Benjamin has attacked Black Student Union and other activists who led the 1968-69 strike. She has targeted Dean Monteiro and has made several racist comments, some of which have been caught on YouTube.

ATC: Can you tell us about some of the support you're receiving?

RA: It's fantastic. A national coalition against McCarthyism and for academic freedom is building around my case as well as providing support for the American Studies Association, various chapters of SJP (Students for Justice in Palestine) including Northeastern, NYU, and UCLA, and other faculty and students who are being targeted by pro-Israeli right-wing group that employ McCarthyist tactics. As I said earlier, the Jewish letter has garnered over 500 signatures. An international academic and public intellectuals' letter that will be released in a couple of days has already more than 350 names. There is a letter of support from the Palestinian Youth Movement and another initiated by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and signed by many scholars and activists in the African American community. The Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim communities have initiated a letter and so did veteran strikers of 1968-69 SFSU student strike. While I am gratified that I am receiving support from so many individuals, organizations, and communities, I am thrilled that we are coming together to fight these false allegations and insist on our right to speak up for justice in/for Palestine as an integral part of justice for all.

My colleagues who accompanied me on various delegations to Palestine have been amazing, particularly Joanne Barker who has been blogging and has also initiated a letter signed by members of delegations I either led or co-organized. The National Lawyers Guild, Asian Law Caucus, Center for Constitutional Rights, and the Council on American Islamic Relations have been incredible and so has the Palestine Solidarity Legal Support who stood by me at every step of the way. My academic colleagues have been great, especially the Dean and Chairs' Council in the College of Ethnic Studies. There's been a strong statement from the SFSU president Leslie Wong.

July 21, 2014