How a Palestinian academic defeated a campaign to silence her

When Shahd Abusalama told me about her new job as an associate lecturer at a UK university, I was beyond proud. But just two weeks later, she was suspended, after Sheffield Hallam University management capitulated to a racialised smear campaign launched against her by Zionist media. Instead of defending Shahd from libellous and defamatory attacks, the university added fuel to the fire, abdicating its duty of care towards a young woman of colour.

Shahd's dismissal provoked a powerful international anti-racist campaign in her support. The attacks against her were levelled because of her outspoken and entirely legitimate criticism of the state of Israel, and the university eventually dropped its investigation of the unfounded allegations. While Shahd has been reinstated in her teaching post, she continues to face racist and hateful messages from Zionist media and trolls. Her suspension is evidence of the precarious situation many Palestinians in UK higher education find themselves in and the racist environment they face.

It is not easy starting a career in academia in the UK, and more so for a Palestinian woman refugee from Gaza. Shahd's grandparents were forcibly expelled from their home village of Beit Jerja in 1948 – one of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns depopulated and destroyed by Zionist forces in the last days of the British occupation of Palestine. In an act of ethnic cleansing, the newly founded state of Israel deprived hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, like the Abusalama family, of their land and livelihoods and made them refugees. Shahd's grandparents were forced to settle in a refugee camp in Gaza, where she was born.

Shahd was raised in a besieged city where missile attacks are the norm. You never forget the horror of bombs exploding around you, the deafening sounds, the heartless destruction. I experienced it in 2012 while doing research in Gaza as a doctoral candidate at the University of Aberystwyth.

Shahd's family graciously hosted me during my three-month stay in Gaza. One day, a missile struck a car and killed its passengers right outside their home. Indeed, the air strikes launched by Israel began months before it actually declared war on November 14. More than 100 Gaza residents were killed in the indiscriminate Israeli bombardment; entire families were simply wiped out. During this time of incessant air raids, the Abusalama family shared their courage with me in order to pull through.

I met Shahd on the night of her oldest sister, Majd's, wedding. While the event was spectacular, the feeling was bittersweet, as Majd and her husband were planning to leave Gaza within days of getting married. A year later, all but one of the five Abusalama children would depart to pursue higher education away from the unlivable conditions of the besieged Gaza Strip.

This left the youngest, Mohamed, to care for the parents, whose only dream was to see their children safe, happy and successful. During the bombing of Gaza, I remember how Mohamed also cared for me, instructing me to leave my windows open despite the winter cold because the blasts from the explosion could shatter the glass if left closed.

Unlike the Palestinian residents of Gaza, I was able to escape the Israeli bombs on day six of the "official" war because I held a British passport.

In tears, I kissed the Abusalama family goodbye and joined a convoy arranged by the United Nations to take non-Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip. I cried the whole way to the Rafah crossing, succumbing to the guilt of abandoning those who did not enjoy such international protection from Israeli land, sea and air bombardment.

Despite her traumatic past, Shahd thrived as a young student in the UK. She completed a Masters with distinction at the School of Oriental and African Studies and then received a scholarship to complete a doctorate at Sheffield Hallam University. Just this past December, she submitted her doctoral thesis, which investigates historical representations of Palestinian refugees in documentary cinema.

Shahd also rose to cultural fame in the UK, as British artist Marc Quinn immortalised her in a sculpture and she shared platforms with prominent Jewish scholars such as Andrew Feinstein, Paul Kelemen and Ilan Pappé. She brought Palestinian folklore music and dance to diverse audiences around the UK with the Hawiyya Dance Company, which she and a group of international multi-faith antiracist women cofounded in 2017.

When Shahd told me of her plans to pursue an academic career in the UK, I was delighted, thinking that due to her own perseverance she would excel here. I was unaware at the time of the inhospitable climate that would engulf UK higher education.

The academic environment in the country is currently marred by the harmful interference of the sitting government, which continues to display and foster Islamophobic, racist and anti-immigrant sentiments. In October 2020, then Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson demanded that universities adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism, which weaponises the term against those who criticise Israel's colonial project.

Subsequently, a letter from 122 Palestinian and Arab intellectuals detailed the ways in which the IHRA definition and its attendant examples have been instrumentalised in several contexts to silence defenders of Palestinian rights. A University College of London working group also concluded that the definition is not "fit for purpose", and even Professor Kenneth Stern, the main drafter of the definition, said it should not be used in a university setting.

Nonetheless, the Jewish News outlet invoked the definition to brand Shahd anti-Semitic, and Sheffield Hallam University, without an explanation or even a conversation with Shahd, initially cancelled the class she was scheduled to teach. The attack against Shahd was based on a Twitter thread in which she defended a first-year university student for writing on a placard, "Stop the Palestinian Holocaust".

The defence for Shahd in response to this slander was extensive. It included UK-based artists, such as Lowkey, Palestinian scholar and activist Rabab Ibrahim Abdulhadi, Al Jazeera anchor Marc Lamont Hill and international social media chefs, Abu Julia and Rubio.

These voices joined the chorus of community support Shahd received from her adopted hometown, Sheffield, and from student groups from universities across the UK. This overwhelming support is not only a testament to the extensive community that Shahd has cultivated around herself as an activist, friend, teacher and student in Palestine and the UK, but it also reveals the growing anger at the targeting of Palestinians in this country and globally.

The campaign, assisted by the European Legal Support Center and university and trade unions, was successful in lifting Shahd's suspension at Sheffield Hallam University and now endeavours to prevent such an attack from reoccurring.

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Attracting students and faculty crucial for Arab education's growing success

Is the Arab world heading into a new renaissance, driven by talent, innovation, and new knowledge creation?

This was a question asked at the recent Times Higher Education (THE) Emerging Economies Summit in Dubai late last year. The answer for many delegates was a confident "yes" if we can judge by the growing strength of the region's universities.

As the United Arab Emirates celebrated its 50th anniversary, the latest edition of THE's Emerging Economies Rankings was released at the summit – and it confirmed the growing maturity of the Emirates' higher education system.

While the giants of the so-called "BRIC" nations of Brazil, Russia, India, and China dominated the list in terms of representation, the UAE boasted an impressive concentration of five universities in the top 200. Khalifa University led the country in 21st place. At the same time, the United Arab Emirates University made the top 50 of a ranking that includes leading universities across more than 50 countries classified as emerging economies.

His Excellency Zaki Anwar Nusseibeh, chancellor of the United Arab Emirates University and adviser for cultural affairs at the UAE Ministry of Presidential Affairs, told the summit: "We will create our future by connecting minds… our future rests on our ability to learn and invent."

The data suggests that much of the Arab world has a bright future. In North Africa, Egypt was the stand-out performer in the rankings. It has 23 universities on the scale of over 500 institutions, making it the seventh best-represented nation on the list.

But perhaps it is Saudi Arabia that saw the most eye-catching performance. Saudi's flagship university, King Abdulaziz University, broke into the world's top 200 in the 2022 World University Rankings. This landmark achievement has powered the university into the top 15 of all emerging economy universities.

Overall, Saudi had 15 universities ranked in the Emerging Economies ranking, but many had leaped up the table: King Saud University has jumped from 34th to 29th in one year; King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals has risen from 61st to 40th, and the University of Hail made its debut, arriving straight into the 68th position.

With both Egypt and Saudi, it is the upward trajectory of its universities and the momentum which gives rise to such optimism.

The World University Rankings, and the Emerging Economies Rankings that derive from the global list, are based on a considerable amount of data.

Over 100 million citations to around 14 million research publications are analyzed, combined with survey responses from over 20,000 scholars worldwide and hundreds of thousands of data points collected from universities all across the globe.

The data is combined into 13 carefully collaborated performance indicators grouped into five core pillars covering all aspects of a university's essential activities: teaching, research excellence, research impact, knowledge transfer between universities and industry, and international outlook.

Of the Times Higher Education's performance indicators, Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest-rising nations in the world in a single year in three of the five pillars: teaching, research excellence, and research impact. Egypt has been the fastest-improving nation in the world for research influence in the last year.

Taking a more extended period, over the last five editions of the THE World University Rankings, Saudi Arabia is the single most improved nation in the world for research influence. Egypt is among the most improved for its industry links (knowledge transfer).

But what is required to keep up this excellent momentum to ensure the innovation and knowledge-driven renaissance comes?

The data is clear on this issue. While the position varies across Arab world countries, there is little doubt that Arab nations under-fund their institutions. This means that faculty in Arab universities tend to be less productive in publishing research than the world average.

Under-funding also hampers capacity building: Arab world universities are producing fewer PhD candidates than the world average, too, limiting the flow of future research talent and hampering the birth of new ideas.

While the Arab world tends to have more internationally collaborative research than the world average, which is very positive, the data shows that the region needs to draw in more international talent. This includes attracting students and faculty, allowing them to stay competitive and drive further success.

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Putin's Ukraine strategy: A combination of threats and diplomacy

With Russia carrying out a massive military buildup near Ukraine and the West roundly rejecting Moscow's security demands, a window for diplomacy in the crisis appears to be closing.

But even as Moscow continues to bolster its forces and holds sweeping war games, President Vladimir Putin is keeping the window open for more negotiations in a calculated game of brinkmanship intended to persuade Washington and its allies to accept Russia's demands.

The West fears that a Russian invasion of Ukraine may be imminent, while Russia maintains it has no plans to do so but wants its security concerns addressed.

Here is a look at the Kremlin's strategy in the standoff:

Russia wants the US and its allies to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet nations from joining NATO, refrain from putting any weapons near Russia, and roll back alliance forces from Eastern Europe. Washington and NATO reject those demands as "non-starters," but they also are offering to discuss possible limits on missile deployments, a greater transparency of military drills and other confidence-building measures. Putin has yet to deliver Moscow's formal response to the Western proposals, but he has already described them as secondary and warned that he wouldn't take "no" for an answer on his main demands. He countered the Western argument about NATO having an open-door policy by arguing that it threatens Russia and violates the principle of the "indivisibility of security" enshrined in international agreements.

With the West rejecting its key demands, the Kremlin has raised the stakes by massing over 100,000 troops near Ukraine and carrying out a series of military maneuvers from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea. As part of the show of force, Moscow has moved trainloads of troops, tanks and weapons from the Far East and Siberia to Belarus for joint war games, drawing Western concerns that Russia could use them as a cover for an invasion.

Washington and its allies are raising the prospect of unprecedented sanctions in the event of an invasion, including a possible ban on dollar transactions, draconian restrictions on key technology imports like microchips, and the shutdown of a newly built Russian gas pipeline to Germany.

President Joe Biden's administration also has deployed additional US troops to Poland, Romania and Germany in a show of Washington's commitment to protect NATO's eastern flank. The US and its allies have delivered planeloads of weapons and munitions to Ukraine.

By concentrating troops that could attack Ukraine from many directions, Putin has demonstrated a readiness to escalate the crisis to achieve his goals.

"Putin appears overconfident and is exhibiting a high level of risk-tolerance," said Ben Hodges, who served as commanding general of the US Army Europe and now works at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

"He seems intent on applying maximum pressure on the West in this self-manufactured crisis, in hopes that Ukraine or NATO will eventually make concessions."

Some observers expect Putin to further ratchet up tensions by expanding the scope and area of the military drills.

Russia's main demands would trigger a new round of escalation.

"Logically, Russia will need to raise the level of tensions," Lukyanov said. "If the goals set are not being achieved, then you need to increase pressure -- first of all through a demonstration of force." Lukyanov said that while invading Ukraine is not what Putin wants, he may challenge the West by other means. "The whole idea as envisaged by Putin ... was not to solve the Ukrainian crisis by means of war, but to bring the West to the negotiations table about principles of European security arrangements," Lukyanov noted. "The moment Russia starts a war against Ukraine, the whole previous game will be over and the new game will happen at an absolutely different level of risk. And all we know about Mr. Putin is that he is not a gambler. He is a calculated player."

While Putin and his officials have insisted they expect the US and NATO to bow to Russia's demands — a prospect that looks all but impossible — some Kremlin-watchers expect Moscow to eventually accept a compromise that would help avoid hostilities and allow all sides to save face.

Even though Western allies won't renounce NATO's open-door policy, they have no intention to embrace Ukraine or any other ex-Soviet nation anytime soon. Some analysts floated an idea of a potential moratorium on expanding the alliance.

Gwendolyn Sasse, a Carnegie Europe fellow who heads the Centre for East European and International Studies in Berlin, voiced skepticism, saying that "the worst would be to signal that there are divisions in NATO" noting that Putin might not be satisfied with it either. Another possibility is the "Finlandization" of Ukraine, meaning that the country would acquire a neutral status, the way Finland did after World War II. The policy helped it maintain friendly ties with the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. Such a move would represent a sharp revision of Kyiv's course toward NATO membership and likely fuel strong domestic criticism, but the Ukrainian public could eventually welcome the policy twist as a lesser evil, compared with a Russian invasion. Asked about the "Finlandization" idea, French President Emmanuel Macron told reporters Monday that "this is one of the models on the table," but he backtracked the next day when he visited Kyiv. Another potential compromise would likely include steps to defuse tensions in eastern Ukraine, which has been controlled by Russia-backed separatists since a rebellion flared up there in 2014 shortly after Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. **alarabiya**

Saudi Arabia foils Captagon smuggling attempts, 2.4 million pills seized

Saudi Arabia has thwarted two separate attempts to smuggle more that 2.4 million captagon pills, the official Saudi Press Agency reported on Friday.

Captagon is a type of amphetamine-style stimulant fenethylline that continues to be manufactured, mostly in Lebanon and Syria, for illegal recreational use.

The Zakat, Tax and Customs Authority (ZATCA) caught the drugs hidden in consignments sent to the Kingdom to the Jeddah Islamic Port and Duba Port.

The first batch of drugs was discovered hidden inside glove boxes, according to the SPA report, amounting to 2,483,926 pills.

The second attempt occurred as part of a shipment of oranges, where 423,926 number of pills were found hidden in the spare tire of the truck carrying the fruit. The shipment was reportedly routed through the Red Sea port.

Three people have been arrested in connection with the crime, SPA reported.

The authority reportedly said that they are continuing to "tighten customs control" over imports into the country.

On Tuesday, officials arrested an individual in the Asir region for being in possession of 20 kilograms of hashish, a drug derived from cannabis.

Authorities in the region have been cracking down on narcotics. In a strong stance against drug use, the Kingdom placed a ban on the import of fruit and vegetables from Lebanon in 2021 after Saudi Arabia's Customs foiled an attempt to smuggle over five million pills of Captagon.

According to an AFP count, more than 25 million pills of Captagon have been seized across the region since the start of the year alone. According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the severest punishment dealt to an individual involved in smuggling illicit narcotics is death.

Meanwhile, individuals who deal the substance face imprisonment, lashing, and/or a financial fine. Repeat offenders may receive a death sentence, according to the MOI. **alarabiya**

IEA working to have constructive...

From P3

It is worth mentioning that a ten-member delegation from Afghanistan led by Mawlavi Lutfullah Hakimi attended the Geneva Call Summit held from 7 – 11 Feb. The meetings in Geneva were aimed at enhancing unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance to the civilian population.

On the otherside, there are reports that Turkey and Norway have said that they will hold more dialogs with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Earlier, acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi travelled to Norway for talks with officials of various countries. According to reports, Norway and Turkey will hold talks with the Islamic Emirate in the near future to normalize relations enter construction engagement with Kabul.

The meeting will be held in Istanbul, Turkey or Norway. It's worth mentioning that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) seeks constructive interaction and engagement with the world. During the past six months, since the conquest of the Islamic Emirate, diplomatic missions from many countries have visited Kabul.

Also, diplomatic representatives from Kabul have visited various countries to pay the way for resumption of constructive engagement between Kabul and the world.

Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi believes that the Islamic Emirate has succeeded in engaging with the outside world. Earlier, Britain's former chief of staff had called for the emirate to be recognized officially by the world. According to the officials of foreign affairs ministry of Afghanistan , a number of countries of the world and region will soon recognize the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in the near future. **Zarrabi**