



**Middle
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31 January 2023

President Mark S. Wrighton
Office of the President
The George Washington University
1918 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20052
via email: bfreyre@gwu.edu

Dear President Wrighton:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern about George Washington University's recent announcement that it has initiated an external investigation, to be conducted by an unnamed third party, concerning student complaints directed at Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology Lara Sheehi. It is our understanding that your university has already thoroughly investigated the allegations against Professor Sheehi and concluded that she did nothing wrong. The launching of a new investigation with no clear guidelines or standards undermines your university's avowed commitment to academic freedom and is likely to exert a chilling effect on free speech on your campus.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2400 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

On 30 September 2022 the "Psychoanalysis and the Arab World Lab," which Professor Sheehi founded and leads, hosted a brown bag talk by Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian on "Global Mental Health 'Expertise,' 'Therapeutic' Military Occupation and its Deadly Exchange." A citizen of Israel, Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian is the Lawrence D. Biele Chair in Law at the Institute of Criminology in the Faculty of Law and the School of Social Work and Public Welfare at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Global Chair in Law at Queen Mary University of London. The talk was publicized on the general listserv of the Professional Psychology Program and hosted at the Elliot School of International Affairs. Attendance at the talk was completely voluntary.

During the fall 2022 semester Professor Sheehi was teaching a required but zero-credit (i.e. non-GPA weighted) course, "Diversity I," for doctoral candidates in the Professional Psychology Program, which is



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intended to prepare students for professional practice. At the first class session following Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian's talk, several students complained that they felt unsafe as Jews because the talk had characterized certain practices of the Israeli state as racist. In response, Professor Sheehi used that day's class session to discuss how to foster an environment in which differing viewpoints could be expressed while attending to the responsibilities of clinicians. There is no evidence that either Professor Sheehi or Professor Kevorkian-Shalhoub engaged in speech that can reasonably be characterized as antisemitic.

Several groups of students subsequently met with the director of the Clinical Psychology program. The students who had objected to aspects of Professor Shalhoub-Kevorkian's talk requested that the department create a separate section of the course that would not be led by Professor Sheehi; other students who met with the director said that they deemed some of the comments that members of the first group had expressed in the class discussion to be racist. The program's director consulted with Professor Sheehi and contacted the Vice Dean for Faculty Affairs, the Vice Dean for Programs and Operations, and the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences. The deans initiated a process of investigation that included interviews with Professor Sheehi and a wide range of students. They concluded that Professor Sheehi had done nothing wrong and informed the complainants that they would not receive special accommodation. The university also hired an outside consultant to lead a restorative justice process for students in the class following the conclusion of the investigation.

On 12 January 2023 the right-wing advocacy organization StandWithUs, which has worked closely with agencies of the Israeli government, filed a [complaint](#) under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act alleging "anti-Semitic discrimination and retaliation experienced by first-year Jewish and Israeli students in the Professional Psychology Program...." The complaint blatantly and tendentiously conflates criticism of the state of Israel and of Zionism with antisemitism and alleges that exposing Jewish students to perspectives with which some of them may disagree is discriminatory. These positions are entirely in keeping with this organization's long history of seeking to weaponize allegations of antisemitism, which it defines very broadly and loosely, in order to silence criticism of Israel. Your university's announcement of a new investigation of Professor Sheehi seems to have come in response to the complaint filed by StandWithUs, thereby lending support to a non-academic organization with a political agenda clearly inimical to academic freedom.



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We believe that institutions of higher learning must resolutely uphold and defend academic freedom, and they must also be sanctuaries for the free expression of ideas and opinions. The announcement that Professor Sheehi is to be investigated by an unnamed third party makes a mockery of your university's avowed commitment to these rights and principles. We therefore call on you to reverse the decision to launch a new inquiry into Professor Sheehi's actions. We further call on you to issue a clear and forceful public statement assuring faculty and students that George Washington University will not countenance threats or attempts to limit their right to free speech and academic freedom, including exposure to ideas in the classroom that might challenge those held by other community members.

We look forward to your response

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Eve M. Troutt Powell'.

Eve Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Laurie A. Brand'.

Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California