

חנינה

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From: Nadera KevorkianTo: law-t@mscc.huji.ac.il

Sent: Monday, November 27, 2006 8:13 PM

Subject: My ordeal in the Ben Gurion airport

:Dear Fellow and Sister Scholars and Higher Education Administrators

I am writing to inform you about a personal experience that has systemic implications for academic freedom and higher education in Israel, and to solicit your assistance in challenging certain policies and practices that offend anyone committed to education.

On Thursday, November 16th, the Israeli security forces in the Ben Gurion airport prevented me from participating as an invited speaker in the conference on "Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights: Freedom and Resistances" held in Tunis.

The process of denying my right to travel and equal treatment was accompanied by a process of humiliation that began immediately upon our arrival at the entrance gate. The moment the security authorities learned that I and my local taxi driver live in East Jerusalem, they asked us to park the car on the side, take all the luggage and follow them inside for a body search. A young soldier in a small room searched me, asked me to take off my shoes, took my and the driver's mobile phones and asked us to wait for almost 40 minutes until they finished checking the car's body and engine. All the while, cars driven by non-Arabs passed the security gates easily and entered the airport without even a question much less a search.

After finally entering the airport my humiliation continued. I was the only person who waited for a long time. I knew that they were doing a security check on my name, address, and other information. A young female soldier tried to convince her superior to allow me to pass. Finally they asked me to put my luggage in the x-ray machine and pass. But while others went directly to the check-in counter, I was told by another security agent to bring all my belongings and follow him up for an additional search.

There were 3-4 security personnel checking my one small bag, my computer bag and my carry-on purse. They took the clothes from the luggage, my shoes, underwear, make up, medicine, and placed them a messy manner on a long counter. I did not know what to look at or follow up. My reading material was all over the counter, mixed with my clothes and shoes. While young men were emptying my make up kit and spreading out my medication, one of them took out a photograph of my daughters and laid it down. Then the other security guy pulled out my shoes and put them on top of the picture.

My visit cards, my papers, everything was scattered in such a disrespectful manner. I stood there not knowing what to do, I was about to cry when I saw my reading material falling on the floor, and the pages being mixed. I asked the female security guard who was checking my printed material not to mix up the various articles. She replied (with so much power) that I could find the pages and organize them later. While I was trying to explain to her that my

reading and printed material should be kept intact, I saw another security guard fetch my wallet. He pulled out all the credit cards and put them on the counter, emptying my purse in such a humiliating manner. His friend on the other side was picking up my underwear one by one while joking with his friends in Hebrew – thinking that I don't speak the language. They were ridiculing me while they dropped my toothbrush on the floor, scattered my money on the counter, and much more. They also took my cell phones and I was unable to call anyone for help. At one point, the phone was ringing and I asked one of them to hand it to me. He did, but I missed the call and he took it back.

The whole scene was so hurtful: People mixing my stuff together, while I am standing mesmerized, captivated by their inhumanity, not even able to follow up who is doing what, where and how. It was so painful and horrifying. I could not hold my tears, wondering how much humiliation, dishonor and degradation one could accept in the name of "security reasoning. I went to get myself a tissue to wipe my tears when another security guy screamed at me that I can't touch the purse.

While I was in this state, and while my belongings were so dispersed and scattered all over the long counter, the security guy in charge came and told me that I couldn't take my reading material on the plane. I started explaining, with tears and so much anger, that I need to read on my way, and it is a 5-hour flight, and my reading material is crucial to me. It took me a while of arguing with him and another security officer until I managed to get their approval for me to take all the pages that they scattered and messed up on to the plane.

The time was flying and I was about to miss my flight, when a very polite young security officer told me that she would get me a seat on the flight so I would be ready. I stayed with the security guards and she took my ticket and actually did book me a window seat. In a short time, the supervisor of the security officers came and told me that I can't take my laptop with me on the plane. I started explaining to them that I can't leave without the laptop. I asked the head of the security to call his superior. His superior, who I found out was named Tal Vardi (# 14544) came. He was so disrespectful, rude and abrasive. I was explaining to him how important my laptop is to me, I told him that I needed to prepare the lecture I was giving. He kept on telling me that I could not take the laptop with me. Then I told him that if there is a rule that laptops are not allowed on planes, they should inform people in advance. Tal Vardi—in such a humiliating and sarcastic manner—replied surrounded by his staff, "So next time I need to call you and talk to you before you fly? Do you think that we have time for you?" Three security people were re-packing my stuff in such a mess, pulling out the computer's battery, wrapping the laptop to send it on a different plane supposedly to reach me later in Tunis—without even getting my approval. Then Tal Vardi totally refused to talk to me and left me alone.

At that moment I decided that I should call for additional help. I called the secretary at the Institute of Criminology at Hebrew University. She gave me the phone number of the dean's office. I called the dean's secretary. She gave me his home number. I called and his wife put him on the line. He said that he couldn't do anything and that I should call his deputy, that she would be the one that could help me out. By that time it was 20 minutes before my flight. I called the dean's deputy, but there was no one in the office. My computer

had been wrapped and was about to be sent to Tunis as they had planned.

I then started yelling. I was trying to explain – but this time with so much anger – and told them that their way of treating people is not human, that I allowed them to check everything in my luggage, and that I cooperated fully, but they treated me in such a rude and inhumane manner. Their refusal to even talk to me or calm me down; they left me sitting on that long counter, trying to find a way out. Their talking among themselves, their methods of making fun of me, and their disrespect made me tell them “I am not flying.” I pulled my luggage, unwrapped the laptop, and left the place.

This whole process of humiliation lasted between 1:40 pm- 4:30 pm. I ended up with bad chest pain and dizziness, which led to vomiting and exhaustion. I called some friends to help me out, but no one was able to change the situation. I left the airport, unable to breath, walk or function. The whole process of turning me as a Palestinian woman into a naked entity, with no value, no voice, no respect and no power to fight back, made me refuse to fly. How could I fly as a human, when all they wanted to do is to strip me from my humanity, using all the power they have, while stealing from me even my ability to protect my daughters’ photograph, my writings, my reading material, my laptop and my other personal belongings?

I know from speaking with many other Palestinian academics that my treatment is not unique, in fact, not only Palestinian academics (with or without Israeli citizenship) but all Arabs are profiled as security risks. We experience humiliation and restricted freedom of movement on a daily basis.

For those readers who say that the security forces did not, in fact, prevent my participation but only required that I fly without my laptop, I ask you to think further. Obviously there was absolutely no risk that my laptop was a bomb. First of all, they had checked it thoroughly. Second, if there was a risk that my laptop was a bomb, they would not have allowed me (the supposed terrorist) to leave on the plane as planned. Nor was their confiscation of my laptop merely a matter of inconveniencing or humiliating me. On the contrary, the security forces were trying to use my vulnerability as a pretense to explore the contents of my laptop. Certainly they were not only interested in my own writings, but all those with whom I interact and correspond by email. This invasion and violation poses a dire threat to scholars—especially those of us who work in fields that are controversial—and to the intellectual community at large.

Is it not time for Israeli scholars—Jewish and Palestinian—to stand together to demand respect for education and learning? If learning compromises security as defined by the Israeli government, then it should be redefined. Is it not right that I expect from my academic colleagues public outrage? Am I not correct in expecting that my own employer actively intervene when I call in the midst of an emergency? In fact, its silence and complicity on these issues that has caused the international boycott of Israeli academia, which is predicated the belief that Israeli academia enables and collaborates with human rights violations like that experienced by me and others. Shall we continue to remain silent or shall we act with conscience?

I respectfully ask for your active support in this matter.

Sincerely,