



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom: Statement in Response to the Rebecca Tuck KC Report on Antisemitism

The BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom expresses its grave concerns about the findings of the investigation into alleged antisemitism in the National Union of Students (NUS) issued by Rebecca Tuck KC. The report has a number of methodological errors that make it inaccurate, a threat to academic freedom on the question of Palestine and a missed opportunity to advance anti-racism amongst students. BRISMES met with Tuck during the course of her investigation, but were surprised to find our representations misunderstood or absent from her report.

The Report **omits the experiences of Palestinians**, even though we understand that Rebecca Tuck met with a number of them on more than one occasion. This omission is particularly glaring given that the report focuses heavily on Palestine and repeatedly conflates Palestine advocacy and criticism of Israel with antisemitism. The only direct quotation in the 124-page report is from a 2022 article by a Palestinian student, not from any of the discussions Rebecca Tuck undertook. Palestinian students are only mentioned in passing, referred to as ‘pro-Palestine’ advocates, and incidents of repression faced by them are largely ignored. BRISMES is aware, for instance, of as many as 20 cases in the UK during 2017-2021 where Palestine-related events were either cancelled, shut down, or subjected to the imposition of external chairs, or limited in regards to speakers and organisation. These cases are dismissed in the report with a single, passing mention. This unjustifiable omission calls into question the Report’s integrity and impartiality.

The Report also makes **scant reference to the legal framework under which student rights are protected**, which is particularly worrying given it was authored by a KC. For example, the Equality Act 2010 receives only three brief mentions and the European Convention of Human Rights a single reference. There is little discussion of the application of these areas of law, or lack of, in the context of debates around freedom of expression as it relates to the question of Palestine. A key part of any discussion on the topic must include the legal rights framework that define students’ freedom of expression, and this must be defended to ensure the free exchange of ideas and to avoid a continuation of the colonial silencing that Palestinian, Israeli, and scores of other leading academic experts have done so much to highlight.

Finally, to the best of our knowledge, Rebecca Tuck KC has no expertise in Middle Eastern politics or history, and no sense of what constitutes appropriate teaching material or approaches to the topic. The glib insistence that the NUS produce material that gives parity to the views of ‘both sides’ prioritises the notion of ‘balance’ over historical accuracy, and limits teaching on Palestine to a predetermined framework of ‘parallel narratives’, ‘individual perspectives’ and ‘dialogue’, **whilst disregarding historical evidence based on archival materials, oral histories, human rights reports**, as well as concerted theoretical analysis of settler-colonialism and Apartheid that now

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form the mainstream of the historical and legal academic literature on Palestine. Indeed, Tuck admits, without further methodological clarification, that the accounts of ‘complainants’ and other sources on which her report largely relies ‘carry an inherent risk of being partisan and incomplete’ (p. 1). We agree.

As educators with expertise on the Middle East, it is **our duty to ensure that our teaching reflects the most cutting-edge scholarship, and to disseminate accurate information**, not to cater our teaching to the opinions of different communities irrespective of their academic merit and methodological rigour. For example, Rebecca Tuck repeatedly refers to Israeli Apartheid Week and the description of Israel as practicing the international crime of Apartheid, approvingly quoting a Home Affairs Select Committee Report (HASC) describing how this leads some students to adopt a ‘simplistic formulation of the conflict’. Yet the Apartheid framework is not simplistic, reductive or necessarily ‘one-sided’, but a legal analysis regarding the nature of Israel’s rule over Palestinians that sections of the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Al Haq and B’tselem have all applied to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. It is not only legitimate to discuss these reports in classes and university events, but as academics with expertise on the region it is our responsibility to do so.

Lacking expertise in Israel/Palestine as well as a scholarly understanding of antisemitism and the existing debates over its definition, this report prioritises the views and feelings of one section of the student body over another. For example, referring to an NUS statement decrying the intense use of military violence in Palestine, issued at the same time as increased antisemitism, she concludes that, ‘there are times when politics must be put to one side and the welfare and safety of students must be the overwhelming message’. Rebecca Tuck is thus effectively calling for the silencing of a group of students who are protesting the egregious violation of basic human rights – including daily oppressions which threaten their safety, their lives and the lives of their families and friends in Palestine – by belittling these concerns as ‘politics’. **Her statement only makes sense in a world in which Palestinian students - their opinions and their welfare - are considered inferior and insignificant.**

There is much that needs to be done among students to tackle racism and antisemitism and to ensure that our universities are inclusive spaces in which students can freely learn about, debate and campaign for the causes they believe in. As academics our role is to provide our students with the education to do so, based on truth, academic rigour and best practice. Rebecca Tuck’s report does not meet these same standards, and therefore fails both students and staff alike.

For inquiries, please contact the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom at office@brismes.org cc’ing neve.gordon@qmul.ac.uk.

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