



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom Response to the Recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Report on Student Encampments and Palestine Solidarity

The Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) welcomes the publication of [HEPI Report 185](#), *“There was nothing to do but take action”: The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them*. We acknowledge its valuable documentation of the 2024 student encampments protesting UK universities’ complicity in Israel’s actions in Gaza. In particular, we strongly support the report’s main recommendations that universities uphold freedom of speech, ensure student and staff wellbeing, and meaningfully engage with students’ legitimate concerns. These are fundamental principles for any institution committed to democratic values and academic freedom.

In May 2024, BRISMES Council and Committee on Academic Freedom affirmed their support for and solidarity with the student encampments referred to in the HEPI report, and [called upon](#) “university and college leaders to respect [students’] freedom of expression and assembly and to constructively engage with their demands ... higher education institutions should be proud of students who refuse to stand idly by as crimes take place and who, in a variety of ways, struggle to build a better world.”

However, despite our shared commitment to freedom of expression, we are deeply concerned that aspects of the HEPI report itself risk undermining that freedom and the rights to peaceful assembly and protest. We are particularly concerned about the following five key areas:

1) Conflation of Anti-Zionism and of Political Criticisms of Israel with Antisemitism

We are concerned that the report:

- **Fails to distinguish clearly** between antisemitism—a form of racial and/or religious discrimination against Jewish people—and anti-Zionism, a political stance against a nationalist ideology. The report treats expressions of anti-Zionism or political critiques of the Israeli state as threatening to campus life, without acknowledging their foundation in anti-colonial, human rights, or international legal critiques. This failure risks delegitimising the political expressions of Palestinian, Jewish, and allied students who oppose Israel’s actions and erodes the space for legitimate political dissent.
- **Relies on the Community Security Trust’s (CST) definition of Zionism** as “the belief that Jews are a people and that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state” (p. 24) without critical engagement. This narrow definition fails to acknowledge that many Palestinians and others view Zionism as an ideology that has legitimised the historical and ongoing displacement, dispossession, and subjugation of Palestinians. In this context, critiques of Zionism are not inherently antisemitic, but a legitimate challenge to state-sanctioned violence and inequality.



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

- **Undermines Jewish voices** that reject the dominant narrative of antisemitism at the encampments. Examples of Jewish students participating in protests, holding Shabbat dinners, or expressing solidarity are consistently counterbalanced by institutional figures warning that the encampments emboldened antisemitic acts. This creates an asymmetry that delegitimises dissenting Jewish perspectives.
- **Fails to examine the instrumentalisation of antisemitism accusations** to silence criticism of Israel. While genuine antisemitic incidents must be condemned, the report does not address how accusations are sometimes used to suppress protest and curtail speech. BRISMES has previously examined this phenomenon in our joint [report](#) with the European Legal Support Center (ELSC), *The Adverse Impact of the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism*.
- **Misuses the concept of safety to delegitimise political expression.** While BRISMES affirms that genuine safety concerns must be addressed, the report reflects a broader trend of framing discomfort with political critiques—especially of Zionism and Israeli policy—as threats to safety. This shift conflates political disagreement with harm, enabling institutions to suppress dissent rather than engage with it. As we noted in our October 2024 [statement](#), health and safety frameworks are increasingly weaponised to curtail academic freedom, freedom of expression, and peaceful protest in universities.

2) Stigmatisation of Expressions Central to Palestinian Identity and Struggle

The report reinforces a climate in which solidarity with Palestine is framed as extremist:

- The report relies on CST's interpretation that the term *intifada* suggests implicit support for violent acts (p. 22), without acknowledging its long-standing usage in Palestinian political discourse or its relevance to nonviolent resistance. This framing contributes to the unjust stigmatisation of a term with broad historical and cultural significance.
- Similarly, the report misrepresents the slogan "*From the River to the Sea*"—a phrase rooted in the Palestinian struggle for freedom and equality—as antisemitic. As has been clarified in the UK context, including by the [Metropolitan Police](#) in October 2023, this slogan is **not inherently antisemitic**, nor is its use a criminal act. Ignoring this context furthers the chilling effect on Palestinian and pro-Palestinian expression.
- Rather than engaging with these expressions as part of a legitimate political lexicon, the report frames them as dangerous or destabilising, thereby marginalising key elements of Palestinian identity and collective memory.

3) Unequal Treatment of Islamophobia and Other Forms of Racism

The report's treatment of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism is notably less thorough:



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

-
- It presents important student testimonies but provides little institutional data or in-depth analysis.
 - Experiences of Muslim and Arab students—many of whom faced harassment, surveillance, and institutional marginalisation—are underexplored and not given equal weight. For instance, a case of physical assault involving Muslim students at Queen Mary University of London is briefly noted (p. 25), but not explored with the depth afforded to incidents affecting Jewish students.

This imbalance contributes to a narrative in which certain forms of racism are acknowledged while others are minimised, undermining a genuinely inclusive approach to campus safety and solidarity.

4) Depoliticisation of the Protests

The report tends to frame student activism in terms of emotion, trauma, and mental health while failing to acknowledge:

- The explicit political nature of students' demands, including divestment from arms companies and Israeli institutions, and support for Palestinian higher education—demands underpinned by rigorous reports such as:
 - [Report into LSE's Complicity in Genocide of the Palestinian People, Arms Trade, and Climate Breakdown](#)
 - [Warwick University Student Staff Solidarity Report](#) (October 2024)
 - [University of Sheffield Genocide and Apartheid Complicity Report](#)
- The **students' invocation of international law**—including claims of genocide, apartheid, and war crimes—is consistently framed by the report as emotional or personal, rather than as principled critique grounded in legal, ethical, and scholarly frameworks. This framing obscures the legitimacy of these concerns and reduces political argument to psychological distress.
- By downplaying the political content of the protests, the report risks erasing the intellectual and moral substance and contributions of a historic student movement. For example, it refers to the encampments primarily as “disruptive” (pp. 21 and 25), without recognising protest as a form of political expression central to academic freedom.

5) Concerns About Disciplinary and Legal Responses

We are alarmed by the report's largely neutral tone regarding institutional actions that included:

- Arrests of students, legal threats, surveillance, and university-police cooperation—including the arrests of the “Oxford 17” and “SOAS 7”—which are mentioned only in passing, without



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

being framed as potential infringements on civil liberties or democratic protest rights. These measures set a dangerous precedent for the criminalisation of dissent and the suppression of student political life. BRISMES addressed this risk in our statement of 5 August 2024: [Universities' Repression of Student Encampments and Protest](#).

- A failure to recognise that the suppression of student protest is not merely “excessive” or “counterproductive,” but constitutes a **violation of rights of freedom of expression and of assembly**. Students' right to protest must be viewed within the broader context of democratic participation, not simply as an administrative challenge. In this regard, it is concerning that the report does not mention the [recommendations](#) for “Safeguarding the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association on campuses in the context of international solidarity with the Palestinian people and victims”, proposed by the **UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association**, Gina Romero, in October 2024.
- An overall paternalistic framing, in which institutions are portrayed as justified in setting “red lines” and students are expected to be grateful for being heard. This fails to acknowledge the **power imbalance** between universities and students, especially when protest is directed at institutional complicity in violence and injustice.

We call on UK universities and sector bodies to:

- **Reject the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism**, which has been enabled by the adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism;
- **Take Islamophobia, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian racism as seriously as all other forms of discrimination**;
- **Engage transparently with questions of institutional complicity** in Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestinian territory and the war on Gaza;
- **Protect and facilitate the right to protest, organise, and criticise**, especially in relation to international justice and decolonisation.

Universities must remain spaces of critical inquiry and democratic participation—not of fear, repression, or the silencing of dissenting views.

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom
4 June 2025

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit: [Committee on Academic Freedom](#)