



# 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](mailto:office@brismes.org)

Website: [www.brismes.ac.uk](http://www.brismes.ac.uk)

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TU Darmstadt Institute of Political Science

cc. Professor Nathalie Behnke, Head of Department of Public Administration and Public Policy, Technical University of Darmstadt.

cc. Professor Dirk Jörke, Institute of Political Science, Technical University of Darmstadt.

**Sent via Email:** [politik-gd@pg.tu-darmstadt.de](mailto:politik-gd@pg.tu-darmstadt.de), [nathalie.behnke@tu-darmstadt.de](mailto:nathalie.behnke@tu-darmstadt.de), [joerke@pg.tu-darmstadt.de](mailto:joerke@pg.tu-darmstadt.de)

4th December 2024

Dear Colleagues of the TU Darmstadt Institute of Political Science,

We write regarding your cancellation of the annual Eugen Kogon Lecture by Dr Camila Vergara, “Corrupt Republics: Oligarchy, War and the Destruction of Nature.” We are gravely concerned that the Institute has failed to uphold the academic freedom and freedoms of thought and speech to which universities specifically, and democratic life generally, must be devoted, and that these actions have caused reputational harm to Dr Vergara.

Founded in 1973, the British Society for Middle East Studies (BRISMES) is the largest academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. BRISMES is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and as part of its remit to advance the knowledge and study of the region both in the United Kingdom and worldwide.

Dr Vergara is a recognised scholar on democracy and human rights, and is well-known for her advocacy on these issues. In addition to her academic research in the history of political thought, political theory, and legal studies, she has given expert opinions to the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, as well as to Chile’s recent Constitutional Convention (2021-2022). Dr Vergara also has a strong public track record of advocacy on indigenous rights and fostering religious toleration. She is co-founder of the [Transnational Research Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge](#) dedicated to intercultural dialogue, and is co-author of the [2022 Declaration on Shared Humanity](#), which advocates for human rights, equality, and religious toleration. She has also called for the end of apartheid in Israel and for the end of the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, in accordance with international law.

Based on this academic and public profile, on July 31st of this year, Dr Vergara was invited by your Institute to deliver the Eugen Kogon Lecture and was accepted to speak on the topic “Corrupt Republics: Oligarchy, War and the Destruction of Nature,” scheduled and publicised for November 20<sup>th</sup>. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, the Institute sent Dr Vergara a cancellation email signed by ‘The professors of the Institute of Political Science’ stating that “the nature of [her] public statements on the Israel-Palestine conflict” on her X social media [account](#) was incompatible with Eugen Kogon’s “deep commitment to fostering democratic values ... and respectful



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discourse among nations and people.” A justification for the decision was made public on November 6<sup>th</sup> on the Institute’s website, which claimed Dr Vergara’s social media posts contained “anti-Israeli and antisemitic content” and that the cancellation was part of “preventive measures against antisemitism.” On November 11<sup>th</sup>, this statement was updated to claim that two of Dr Vergara’s posts on X contained “Holocaust analogies, conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic stereotypes.” BRISMES is a leading scholarly society concerned with the study of the Middle East and North Africa, and in our expert opinion the posts linked in that statement contained no antisemitic stereotypes, made no references to conspiracy theories, nor did they express discrimination against Judaism or Jewish people as such.

These statements appear to have subsequently been quietly removed from the Institute’s website. However, the Institute has not retracted these statements, it has made no formal or public apology for the allegations, nor has it reinstated the invitation to deliver the Kogon Lecture. Thus, the Institute’s ongoing public position seems to stand by earlier unsubstantiated public statements damaging to Dr Vergara’s personal and professional reputation.

As a professional association representing *inter alia* scholars of the histories, politics, and cultures of the Middle East generally, as well as scholars of Palestine, of Israel and of racism specifically, we are deeply concerned at the Institute’s conflation of antisemitism with criticism of the policies and practices of the Israeli government. Not only is this conflation logically, ethically and legally unsustainable, but it also blurs the boundaries between governments, states, peoples and religions, thereby undermining efforts to combat racism generally and antisemitism in particular.

At the bedrock of academic freedom specifically and of democracy generally are the recognition and protection of the rights to free thought and speech, including the freedom to analyse and criticise the rhetoric, policies and practices of a government or any other social, economic or political actor. These freedoms are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and in German law.

We urge your Institute to publicly and effectively commit to and defend these rights. This is particularly important at a time when these rights come under sustained and systematic attack, such that the Institute’s failures to defend academic freedom might contribute to a chilling effect discouraging others from open debate. During such times, it is all the more important that scholars be free to engage in critical academic and public debate without fear of censorship or defamation.

We therefore urge the Institute to:

- Publicly and explicitly retract allegations of antisemitism against Dr Vergara.
- Publicly reaffirm that the Institute has a responsibility to uphold peaceful public and academic debate regarding the wisdom of any and every law and/or government practice, and that this is an integral part of academic freedom.
- Publicly reaffirm that the Institute has duties of care and representation which extend equally to *all* its members, whether they disagree with the policies and conduct of the current Israeli government or not.

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This we believe to be in the best interests of the Institute, of TU Darmstadt as a University, and of its student and scholarly community.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Nicola Pratt**  
BRISMES President

**Dr Lewis Turner**  
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom  
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:  
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