



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom Statement on Universities' Repression of Student Encampments and Protests in Opposition to Israel's War on Gaza

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom, as a body committed to protecting and furthering freedom of expression on UK campuses in relation to the study and teaching of the Middle East, condemns the recent wave of repression by university administrations directed at students involved in encampments and other protests opposing Israel's war on Gaza. This follows a failure by many university administrations to uphold freedom of expression and academic freedom and even to actively violate it since 7 October 2023.

According to [information](#) gathered by University and College Workers for Palestine, recent repression against student protesters includes:

- disciplinary actions against individual students for participating in protests;
- costly litigation directed at student organisers by university management in order to remove student encampments;
- university management calling police on to campus to forcibly remove student protesters, leading to arrests and, in some cases, injuries to students;
- university security staff reportedly assaulting and harassing student protesters.

In addition, since October 2023, BRISMES has received numerous reports of university managers seeking to suppress, censor and surveil lawful expression and peaceful events on university campuses. This includes cancelling [events](#), creating unreasonable bureaucratic hurdles for event organisers, as well as subjecting staff and students to investigations, and even referring students and staff to Prevent based on their social media posts and other instances of lawful expression. According to a recent investigation by [Liberty](#), at least 20 university administrations have shared intelligence with the police, including reporting students to the police for social media posts. Alarming, Queen Mary University management authorised a break-in to the UCU trade union office on campus to remove pro-Palestine posters.

The above actions occur in the context of more than 9 months of a brutal war, in which over 39,000 Palestinians have been killed, of which some 15,000 are children, leading to an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. Every university in Gaza has had its buildings and infrastructure partially damaged or entirely destroyed; and at least 100 Palestinian educators and researchers have been killed. The International Court of Justice ruled in January 2024 that Israel's actions in Gaza may plausibly amount to genocide, a view supported by a large number of experts in international humanitarian law.

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When universities repress peaceful protest and lawful expression of opposition to war crimes, crimes against humanity and plausible genocide, they create a chilling atmosphere that leads to self-censorship amongst staff and students, especially students and staff on visas as well as staff who are precariously employed. We are also concerned that students and staff of colour appear to be disproportionately targeted by these measures. As public bodies, universities in the UK have a legal obligation to uphold the human rights delineated in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Freedom of expression is furthermore particularly vital in education settings, where both staff and students should feel free to express their views and question government and institutional policies.

We call on universities to:

- immediately halt all disciplinary actions and litigation against staff and students for exercising their democratic rights to protest and freedom of speech;
- end surveillance of student protesters and the use of campus security or police to forcibly break up peaceful student protests; and
- engage in dialogue with student protesters over legitimate concerns about the possible complicity of their respective institutions in war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, whether through research partnerships, investments, mobility partnerships, or other inter-institutional relations.

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

5 August 2024