



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

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Professor Hester Bijl
Rector Magnificus
Leiden University
Rapenburg 70
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Netherlands

Sent By Email: h.bijl@cvb.leidenuniv.nl

6 July 2023

Dear Professor Hester Bijl,

We write on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our serious and urgent concern regarding the cancellation of the event ‘Apartheid in Palestine, Namibia, and South Africa - Ending Apartheid: Learning from the past and present’, organised by Students for Palestine (SfP), African Students Association (ASA) and the BASIS Africa Committee and scheduled to take place on June 12 at Leiden University.

Founded in 1973, 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 in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

This event, which was the product of a collaboration between three student groups, aimed to bring together an expert panel of Dr Sai Englert; international lawyer Ahmed Abofoul; journalist and researcher Suraya Dadoo; and President of the Namibia National Student Organisation Lucia Ndishishi to discuss pertinent topics in a stimulating environment. Despite the organisers going through the university’s usual procedure for arranging such an event, it appears that unnecessary and unfounded barriers were imposed, resulting in the cancellation of the event. We understand that the university demanded the event be relocated away from the main campus, as well as requiring additional security measures, citing ‘sensitivity’ and ‘potential tensions’ while offering no clarification or explanation as to the nature of their concerns. As the organisers were not willing to relocate without transparency from the university as to their justification for adding these additional barriers, the event was cancelled.

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As this event appears to have been organised in accordance with university protocol, involved the participation of four respected expert speakers, and was planned to further academic inquiry, it is unclear why the university took these steps. Leiden University claims to be committed to academic freedom, and has allowed numerous other events on similarly contested topics (such as Ukraine and NATO) to take place without applying the same standards, and has hosted pro-Israeli activist Yoseph Haddad.

Taken alongside the cancellation of the “Apartheid, Racism and Intersectionality” event in March 2022, the recent steps detailed in this letter raise concerns that Leiden University has a pattern of limiting free speech on Palestine specifically. It appears that the actions of the university on this and previous occasions undermine academic freedom and freedom of expression on the question of Palestine and Israel, inhibiting the learning and academic enquiry of Leiden University staff and students, and sending a chilling message to all other scholars who work on these issues and students who seek to further their understanding of them. It also has the potential to deter Palestinian and non-Palestinian students alike from engaging with this topic due to fears of institutional ramifications.

We call upon the university to inform the event organisers in writing of their justification for the additional requirements, including an explanation for why this specific event was deemed to be of a ‘sensitive nature’.

We call upon the university to offer an apology to the organisers and the speakers for the inconvenience caused, and for the university to facilitate the hosting of this important discussion, under the same processes and conditions as any other event that would take place at Leiden University.

Further, we call upon the university to affirm their commitment to academic freedom, including a guarantee that students will be supported in organising events such as this in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

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CC:

Students for Palestine

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