



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

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Colin Bailey, Principal, Queen Mary University of London

Martin Coward, Head of School of Environment and Society, Queen Mary University of London

Kathryn Richardson, Head of School of the Arts, Queen Mary University of London

Sent by Email

07 January 2026

Dear Principal Colin Bailey, Professor Coward and Professor Richardson,

We are writing on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) Committee on Academic Freedom after several members of staff at QMUL contacted us with serious concerns about recent instructions to remove materials described as “pro-Palestine,” “anti-Israel,” or otherwise ‘personal political opinions’ from office doors and campus spaces. These instructions appear to have been communicated and implemented unevenly across different Schools, with varying justifications and scopes. We are troubled by the content of the instructions, the reasoning offered for them and their implementation, which appear to conflict with the protections for free speech and academic freedom set out in the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and the [OfS Regulatory Advice 24](#).

As the UK’s leading academic association devoted to the study of the Middle East and North Africa, BRISMES has a strong interest in ensuring that scholars and students can speak, teach, and research openly on issues relating to the region—including difficult and contested ones. The ability to express political and scholarly views freely is not an optional extra for our field; it is essential to its very existence.

A number of aspects of QMUL’s current approach gives us particular concern:

- 1. Conflation of political expression with antisemitism**

Senior communications within the university have explicitly grouped together ‘pro-Palestine’, ‘anti-Israel’, and ‘in places antisemitic’ materials when describing the issue at hand. Treating these categories as contiguous or overlapping risks conflating lawful political expression and academic critique of a state with racism against Jewish people. This not only undermines efforts to address genuine antisemitism, but also risks stigmatising staff and students engaging in legitimate scholarly and political expression.

On the basis of what has been reported to us, none of the materials removed appear to

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have targeted Jewish people, nor referenced any proscribed organisations, but instead articulated humanitarian or political concerns about the treatment of Palestinians. This raises serious questions about the criteria being used to assess risk or harm, and reinforces our concern that lawful expression relating to Palestinian rights is being disproportionately curtailed.

2. **Selective and uneven application of “institutional neutrality”**

We understand that in some parts of the university staff were instructed to remove *all* materials deemed to express personal political viewpoints, while in others only pro-Palestinian materials were identified, removed, or treated as potentially disciplinary matters. Even where broadly framed, such restrictions raise serious concerns under the 2023 Act, particularly given the political context in which they arose.

More troubling still is the evidence of selective enforcement: in practice, pro-Palestinian materials appear to have been removed comprehensively, including in some cases where they were linked to research or teaching, while other political or campaigning materials remained in place. This uneven application risks amounting to viewpoint discrimination, regardless of how the policy was framed in particular Schools.

3. **Unproven claims about a “chilling effect”**

It is unclear how posters on office doors inhibit others’ freedom of expression. By contrast, instructing staff to remove lawful materials, warning that managers will remove them if they do not, and in some cases indicating that re-displaying them could lead to disciplinary action creates a clear and immediate chilling effect. The involvement of Estates staff in removing materials—apparently focused on pro-Palestinian content—has further intensified this effect and contributed to confusion and anxiety among staff.

4. **Unease is not grounds for restricting lawful speech**

We recognise that political speech can provoke strong feelings. However, discomfort or disagreement, on its own, is not a lawful basis for curtailing expression in a university. Academic spaces depend on the freedom to test ideas, even when they are unsettling.

In light of these concerns, we urge QMUL to:

- **Immediately suspend all current instructions and practices relating to the removal of political materials**, pending a transparent review of their compatibility with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 and OfS Regulatory Advice 24, including how these measures have been implemented across different Schools.



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- Clarify to staff and students that criticism of Israeli state policy and support for Palestinian rights are not in themselves antisemitic.
 - Invite open discussion with staff and students to restore confidence in QMUL's commitment to academic freedom.

We appreciate the challenges universities face at a time of heightened political sensitivity. But it is precisely in such moments that universities must hold firm to their core principles. Academic freedom is not in tension with inclusivity; it is one of the conditions that makes inclusive intellectual life possible.

We would welcome further conversations with you to ensure that freedom of expression and academic freedom related to Israel-Palestine are being promoted at QMUL.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

Cc: Prof Arif Ahmed

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

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)