



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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Prof. Dr Robert Schlögl
President
The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation
Sent By Email: robert.schloegl@cec.mpg.de
info@avh.de

9 May 2024

Dear Prof. Dr Robert Schlögl,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concern about the process The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has adopted for choosing the winners of its Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award and, more specifically, the treatment of Dr Huda Fakhreddine, who was among those nominated for this award.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in the UK and Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting 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. Your foundation, which recently hosted a conference entitled "[Academic Freedom Concerns Us All](#)," claims to share this commitment. We were therefore shocked to learn that as part of the process to determine who will receive the Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award, The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and members of its award committee mined the social media accounts of the nominees and evaluated nominees not only based on academic merit, but also according to posts the nominees shared or liked.

Dr Fakhreddine, an Associate Professor of Arabic Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, an internationally-recognised scholar and translator of Arabic literature, was nominated for a Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Award in October 2022. The decision on her nomination was originally scheduled to be finalised in October 2023, but then postponed to March 2024. While we acknowledge that the foundation is at liberty to grant this award to those candidates it deems most suitable, this must be done on the basis of fair, equitable and transparent criteria and in line with basic principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression.

We understand that in early March 2024, after the academic peer reviews of her work had been completed, Dr Fakhreddine's nominator was asked to contact her prior to the committee's final meeting on 15th March 2024. In this conversation, Dr Fakhreddine's nominator asked her a series of



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questions on behalf of the award committee. These questions included Dr Fakhreddine's position on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, her views on Hamas, and two posts that she retweeted on Twitter/X, both of which condemned the ongoing Israeli campaign in Gaza, which the International Court of Justice in a provisional ruling on 26 January has deemed plausibly genocidal. She was furthermore asked by her nominator what she would do if she were in an academic setting and Israeli students and scholars were present.

These questions are entirely unrelated to the assessment of her work as a scholar of Arabic literature and do not appear to be in line with the publicized criteria for the Award. Rather, it would indicate that the Award committee's decisions were being informed by political considerations. Dr Fakhreddine was, in other words, subjected to additional evaluations on the basis of her extramural social media posts, shares and likes and above all on her political opinions, and not solely on the basis of her scholarly work or the application materials that were requested and submitted according to the information announced on the Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Research Prize Award website. It is an affront to academic freedom and freedom of expression that Dr Fakhreddine's views were interrogated in this way and used by a scholarly foundation to make a decision about a research award, and it is an affront to due process that the award committee did not base its decision solely on the submitted materials as one would have expected. Furthermore, in questioning how she would behave in an academic setting with Israeli students and scholars present – which Dr Fakhreddine does on a regular basis at the University of Pennsylvania – the award committee appears to be making a presumption that Dr Fakhreddine may harbour prejudice towards Jewish people and/or Israelis, which in and of itself is a form of discrimination against her.

In sum, we have profound concerns about the procedure through which the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation reached its decisions to bestow 'research awards'. This kind of surveillance and policing not only undermines academic freedom and freedom of expression but has also caused considerable distress to Dr Fakhreddine.

It appears that the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has acted in a manner that is potentially discriminatory, unfair to all those nominated for this Award, and in blatant contradiction to the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression. Academic freedom, as your recent conference claims, does concern us all. It is with this crucial principle in mind that we ask you to:

- 1) explain how a process in which a nominator is asked to interrogate the political views of a nominee is compatible with the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression;
 - 2) guarantee that future iterations of the Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel Award - and all other awards and fellowships granted by your foundation - will make their decision solely on academic merit, and not on the nominees' political positions or statements;
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- 3) apologise to Dr Fakhreddine for the foundation's treatment of her;
- 4) publicly reiterate your commitment to academic freedom.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

Cc. *Huda Fakhreddine, Associate Professor of Arabic Literature, University of Pennsylvania*
Sara ten Brinke, The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation