



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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Sir John Robins QPM DL
Chief Constable, West Yorkshire Police

Sent via email

10 March 2026

Dear Chief Constable Robins,

We write on behalf of the **British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) Council and its Committee on Academic Freedom**. BRISMES is an academic association representing scholars of the Middle East and North Africa across the United Kingdom and internationally. Our membership includes experts in Middle Eastern history, politics, law, and the Arabic language. We are committed to the defence of academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the accurate public understanding of the region we study and teach.

We wish to express our serious concern regarding the recent arrest of a Palestine solidarity protester following a protest in Leeds on the 27th December 2025. We understand that one individual has been arrested on suspicion of ‘inciting racial hatred’ for chanting slogans that include the phrase **“globalise the intifada,”** and that they are currently released pending further investigations. On the information available to us, this arrest appears to reflect a troubling and unwarranted criminalisation of political speech and to risk inconsistent application of the protections guaranteed under domestic human rights law.

As scholars of the Arabic language and Middle Eastern history, we emphasise that the term *intifada* (انتفاضة) is an Arabic word meaning “*shaking off*” or “*uprising*.” It has been used historically across the Arab world to describe popular movements against colonial domination, military occupation, authoritarian rule and other forms of oppression and injustice. In the Palestinian context the term is widely associated with popular uprisings against Israeli military occupation and has encompassed a range of tactics, including both non-violent and armed resistance. Whilst the term is most known in relation to the Palestinian context, it has also been used to refer, amongst others, to protests against the Iraqi monarchy in 1952, against Syria’s occupation of Lebanon in 2005, and to popular revolts against austerity measures (*intifada al-khubz*) in Tunisia and Morocco in 1984. The term is not inherently violent, nor does it denote terrorism. Contrary to what some British politicians have

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claimed, there is no historical evidence that the term constitutes an incitement of violence against Jewish people. Like words such as “uprising,” “rebellion,” or “resistance” in English, its meaning is contextual and political rather than criminal.

At its core, the phrase “globalise the intifada” is commonly used as a call for international solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for liberation and justice. Treating the phrase as inherently criminal risks mischaracterising Arabic political language and Palestinian political agency and risks discriminatory enforcement against those expressing Palestinian political identity or solidarity.

We are additionally concerned that the policing of this phrase sits alongside attempts to characterise other political slogans — such as “**From the River to the Sea**” — as criminal per se, rather than assessing context, intent, and any evidence of direct incitement. Such an approach risks creating a chilling effect on lawful protest and political speech, particularly among Palestinian communities and their supporters.

We are particularly concerned that these arrests may contravene the protections afforded by the **Human Rights Act 1998**, including **Article 10** (freedom of expression) and **Article 11** (freedom of peaceful assembly). UK jurisprudence has consistently held that freedom of expression protects not only popular or inoffensive ideas, but also those that “offend, shock or disturb.” Any interference with Articles 10 and 11 must be prescribed by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate in a democratic society.

In light of the above, we urge West Yorkshire Police to:

- **Review** any operational guidance that treats the phrase “Globalise the intifada” as inherently criminal, threatening, or indicative of terrorism;
- **Cease** arrests of protesters solely for using this language (absent clear evidence meeting the legal threshold for criminal offences such as incitement);
- Ensure that assessments of political speech in languages other than English are informed by **appropriately qualified linguistic and regional expertise**, and by context and intent; and
- **Reaffirm** your commitment to upholding freedom of expression and peaceful protest without discrimination.

As an academic association dedicated to rigorous scholarship and public understanding, BRISMES stands ready to provide expert input or dialogue should this be of assistance. We believe that

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informed engagement, rather than criminalisation, is essential to maintaining public trust, democratic values, and the rule of law.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom and the BRISMES Council
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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