



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. Patrick Cramer
President of the Max Planck Society
Sent by Email: praesident@gv.mpg.de

Prof. Dr. Ursula Rao
Executive Director, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle
Sent by Email: office.rao@eth.mpg.de

13 February 2024

Dear Professor Cramer and Professor Rao,

We are 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 your decision to sever relations with Professor Ghassan Hage, a world-leading anthropologist and social theorist. We consider your decision an egregious violation of academic freedom and freedom of expression, and one that negates MPS's very mission of offering the infrastructure and intellectual environment to "conduct cutting-edge, fundamental research for the benefit of all humankind, in keeping with our motto: 'Insight must precede application'."

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in 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, in the UK and globally.

We understand from different media sources that your decision to end the Society's relationship with Professor Hage was based on a number of posts he had shared on social media. In particular, you appear to have been concerned with: 1) his harsh criticism of Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, which according to the International Court of Justice is [plausibly genocidal](#); 2) his critique of Israel's ethno-nationalist character, which was described as 'apartheid' in reports by [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) and [B'Tselem](#); and 3) his comparison between policies carried out by the Nazi regime and Israel's policies against Palestinians.

We find your decision to terminate relations with Professor Hage in breach of academic freedom and indeed of MPS's own mission. As an academic body whose remit is the generation of "cutting-edge, fundamental research for the benefit of all humankind", we expect MPS to take a firm position to

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defend academic freedom, which is the foundation of intellectual inquiry and the condition of possibility of producing cutting-edge research. We also wish to emphasise that, as a public body, you have a duty to uphold Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression for all, and – as opposed to the IHRA definition of antisemitism – has been incorporated into German law. It is especially important in a democracy to protect the right to freely express viewpoints that differ from those of the sitting government and the prevailing public debate.

Your decision to end MPS’s relationship with Professor Hage appears to have been based on a flawed definition of antisemitism that has been [institutionalised](#) in Germany, but is *not legally binding* according to the German government. As you know, antisemitism denotes abhorrent conspiracy theories about Jewish control of the media, finance, and governments, blood libel accusations, Holocaust denial tirades, and dehumanising caricatures of Jews. But it appears that your decision to remove Professor Hage was based on the IHRA working definition of antisemitism and its illustrative examples, which conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism as well as criticism of Israel, and in one of its examples renders it antisemitic to draw “comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

It is noteworthy, in this context, that the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Prof. E. Tendayi Achiume, has [warned](#) against the use of the IHRA definition “due to its susceptibility to being politically instrumentalised and the harm done to human rights resulting from such instrumentalization.” BRISMES has shown in one of its [recent reports](#) that there is widespread agreement among genocide scholars and legal experts (including the lead drafter of the IHRA definition, Kenneth Stern) that the IHRA definition is not appropriate for academic settings where critical thought and free debate are paramount. Finally, at least three leading members of the Max Planck Society were among the initial signatories of the [Jerusalem Declaration of Antisemitism](#), which was drafted to counter the IHRA definition precisely because the majority of genocide scholars believe it is unfit for purpose.

Moreover, MPS has a responsibility to ensure that staff feel safe to freely discuss the situation in Israel-Palestine and to put forward Palestinian perspectives on what is happening in order to deepen public understanding of all viewpoints. MPS’s decision suggests that those tasked with supporting academic research are not prepared to defend academic freedom and freedom of expression when it is put under pressure from external actors. This not only deters individuals from speaking about current events in the Middle East, but may also be considered a failure to protect and foster research and intellectual freedom.

Finally, MPS’s decision unjustly and unjustifiably tarnishes Professor Hage’s outstanding reputation as a leading international scholar.

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We therefore ask that you revoke your decision to end MPS's relationship with Professor Hage and issue a public statement supporting his academic freedom and freedom of expression.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom