



# 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](mailto:office@brismes.org)

Website: [www.brismes.ac.uk](http://www.brismes.ac.uk)

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Professor Adam Tickell  
Vice-Chancellor and Principal  
University of Birmingham

Sent By Email: [vc@bham.ac.uk](mailto:vc@bham.ac.uk)

16 January 2024

Dear Professor Adam Tickell,

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 Staff-Student Listening Session on the Current Situation in Palestine, organised by staff at the Law School, originally scheduled to take place on November 15th and then postponed to November 22nd, before being effectively cancelled.

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.

BRISMES is troubled by the implications that this event's cancellation has for academic freedom, and we support the sentiments communicated by our colleagues in the [University of Birmingham UCU branch letter](#). Although the response from the university to this letter suggests that the event was postponed rather than cancelled, the university continues to maintain unreasonable and unclear stipulations that effectively prevent the event from going ahead. This comes after the staff involved were already required to go beyond the usual procedures for organising internal departmental events, leading us to be concerned that the university is singling out this topic for exceptional restrictions.

We found the university's justification for its actions deeply worrying, and outline our four main concerns within this letter. First and foremost, legal protections for academic speech, as laid out under s.202(2)(a) of the Education Reform Act (ERA) 1988 and within the duty on universities to uphold freedom of speech under s.43(1) of the Education (No 2) Act 1986, provide no obligation for academic expression to be 'neutral' or 'non-partisan'. The recently enacted Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 will provide further onus on universities to protect academic freedom, defining academic freedom as "the freedom within the law (a) to question and test received wisdom; and (b) to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves

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at risk of being adversely affected in any of the ways described in subsection (7)". Expressions of support for Palestine by academics and students are further protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which, as a public body, the university is also obliged to uphold. The only limitations on academic freedom and freedom of speech are defined in law, for example, if the expression in question would stir up hatred, lead to a breach of the peace or amount to a terrorism-related offence.

Second, an 'academic' account of the legal situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory does not preclude and is in fact entirely compatible with expressing sympathies for the Palestinian people given the grave and continued [human rights violations](#) they face. To the best of our knowledge the university does not, for example, require a creationist on every panel discussing evolutionary biology. It is reputationally harmful and completely unfounded to suggest that the university staff who organised the event, themselves experts in international law, human rights law, criminal law, equalities law, and public law, could be 'unobjective', 'uninclusive' and unable to determine how best to present this discussion to their students.

Third, staff have expressed that the university has failed to meaningfully engage with their concerns and questions surrounding the cancellation, with the process being marred by opacity and delays. These delays have been interpreted and experienced as limiting academic discussion about an urgent and ongoing situation which has global implications. It should be the key role of a university to provide opportunities for discussions of these current events.

Fourth, the suggestion that association with the watermelon emoji is in some way prohibitive of being able to conduct important and educative discussions sets a dangerous precedent for the use of imagery and symbols in the university context. The watermelon is used by numerous groups for a range of different purposes relating to the Palestinian cause, and the university is obliged to establish that the use of this imagery is not protected under the 2023 Freedom of Speech Act. The policing of such imagery contributes to a climate of fear and suspicion on university campuses, threatening academic freedom and freedom of speech concerning the situation in Israel-Palestine.

Overall, the cancellation of the event and subsequent responses from the university contribute to creating a chilling effect with regards to discussions of the situation in Israel-Palestine and expressions of support for Palestinian rights. BRISMES has already issued a [public statement](#) about this alarming trend.

We call upon the university to inform the event organisers in writing of the specific grounds under the Code of Practice that were used to cancel/postpone this event.

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We further call on the university to allow this event to take place in line with its legal obligations, and to assure staff and students that their participation in/attendance at such an event will in no way adversely affect their working conditions and/or studies at the University of Birmingham. Additionally, we urge you to issue a statement affirming the University of Birmingham's commitment to academic freedom, including expressions of support for Palestinians.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

CC *Arif Ahmed, Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom, Office for Students*