



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom Statement on Academic Boycotts

The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) is firmly committed to academic freedom. In this statement, the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom explains its position that, contrary to common assumptions, academic boycotts can be consistent with—and even necessary for—upholding academic freedom and fundamental human rights, particularly in contexts of systemic injustice.

The BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom undertakes extensive work to monitor and defend academic freedom in the research, study and teaching of Middle East Studies, in the UK, the Middle East and North Africa, and across the world. We issue this statement to clarify the relationship between academic freedom and academic boycotts, which have become increasingly prominent in our field in recent years.

We recognise the potential *prima facie* tension between academic boycotts and academic freedom, with some opponents of academic boycotts claiming that an academic boycott of a specific country or its academic institutions would contravene the academic freedom of those working there, and of those who may wish to collaborate with those institutions. Nevertheless, as an association that is committed to academic freedom and to the free exchange of knowledge, we believe that, in certain contexts, academic boycotts can legitimately be used strategically to *advance* academic freedom and the fundamental rights upon which this freedom depends. Academic boycotts should thus not be understood as a principle, but rather a tactic that can be used to protect and defend academic staff and students whose freedom and rights are systematically violated. We accordingly concur with the American Association of University Professors' [statement](#) that 'academic boycotts are not in themselves violations of academic freedom; rather, they can be considered legitimate tactical responses to conditions that are fundamentally incompatible with the mission of higher education'.

The concept of academic freedom cannot exist in a vacuum, divorced from the social and political realities that shape the conditions of academic work. The freedom to produce and exchange knowledge depends upon access to other basic freedoms, including the rights to life, liberty, security of person, and freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention; the rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; the right to hold opinions without interference; the right to freedom of expression; the right to participate in public affairs; the right to equal protection and effective protection against discrimination; the right to freedom of association; the right to peaceful assembly; the right to work; the right to participate in cultural life; the right to education; and the right to freedom of movement. These are enshrined in international legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

To oppose academic boycotts in a context where entire populations are systematically denied their basic rights - including access to education - is to misunderstand the nature of (academic) freedom. It is not merely the absence of censorship or state control; it requires an environment where all



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individuals, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, or political identity, can participate freely in the exchange of ideas. In the absence of such conditions, calls for academic boycotts may be warranted.

Calls for the implementation of tactical academic boycotts are often inspired by their contribution to the dismantling of political and institutional systems built upon structural injustice, as in the case of the apartheid system in South Africa. Other calls have been prompted by situations where the violation of human rights and academic freedom had become systematic, as in the case of Turkey after the mass dismissal and prosecution of colleagues who signed the 2016 letter ‘We will not be part to this crime’ by Academics for Peace. In light of what numerous international legal experts and human rights organisations have characterised as a genocidal campaign waged by Israel on Gaza, the long-standing Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) has gained even greater prominence and provoked intense debate.

In this context, there is widespread evidence that academic freedom, freedom of expression and the right to education are systematically denied to Palestinian academics and students by Israeli authorities. Severe restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrests, and denial of access to education are daily realities for Palestinians. While Israeli academic institutions benefit from international partnerships, funding, and prestige, their Palestinian counterparts operate under occupation and siege, with academic life rendered nearly impossible. The ongoing [scholasticide](#) in Gaza follows almost two decades of blockade, which created a dire situation in which [students were frequently](#) denied permission to leave for studies abroad or even in the West Bank.

In the West Bank, Palestinian universities are frequently subjected to raids by Israeli military forces. For example, Birzeit University has been raided multiple times, with soldiers entering the campus, [breaking into student offices, and arresting student leaders](#). These acts are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of repression that undermines the right to education. Palestinian students, particularly those involved in activism or political movements, are often [subjected](#) to arbitrary arrest and administrative detention, a practice in which individuals are held without charge or trial for indefinite periods.

Crucially, academic institutions are not neutral actors. As highlighted during the era of apartheid in South Africa, universities exist within broader political and social systems and can therefore be implicated in and even actively perpetuate the structures of power and domination that define those systems. As has been well-documented by [scholars](#) and activists, many of Israel’s universities [collaborate](#) with Israel’s military and arms industry, developing weapons and technology used in the subjugation of Palestinians and the illegal occupation of their land. Meanwhile, Hebrew University in Jerusalem is built on confiscated [Palestinian land](#), reinforcing Israel’s annexation of the city (which is illegal under international law).

The [PACBI call](#) targets Israeli academic institutions, rather than individuals. This distinction is critical when evaluating the relationship between academic freedom and academic boycotts. The campaign seeks to hold these institutions accountable for their role in the systematic violation of



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Palestinian human rights. As with the South African boycott, such actions are intended to be lifted once their objectives—the restoration of rights and freedoms—are achieved.

BRISMES is deeply concerned by increasing reports that professional associations are shutting down debates and conversations about academic boycotts. For example, we understand that members of the Modern Languages Association (MLA), International Studies Association (ISA) and the American Historical Association (AHA) have recently seen their requests to hold discussions or votes on the academic boycott of Israel blocked or vetoed. These moves appear to themselves be violations of freedom of expression and open scholarly debate. We urge all professional associations to uphold the values of academic freedom by allowing open discussions about the situation in Gaza and strategies to confront it among their membership.

All academics deserve academic freedom, especially those who are systematically denied it. Assessments of academic boycotts must recognise their potential to serve as instruments for the defence of, rather than as violations of, academic freedom and the broader human rights on which it depends.

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

18 June 2025

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit: [Committee on Academic Freedom](#)