



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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The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Minister of State (Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education)
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Sent By Email: Halfon.PS@education.gov.uk

18 October 2023

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Council and Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express deep concern over the political backlash within UK academia in the wake of the horrific events of October 2023 in Israel and Palestine and the catastrophic violence and loss of life.

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, both in the UK and globally.

BRISMES is deeply troubled following the sudden restriction of free speech within several British higher education institutions and that the atmosphere of fear and suspicion, particularly within Middle East Studies, has reduced the space to discuss the history and context of one of the longest ongoing conflicts in the world today. Academics and students who have spoken out against war crimes and in solidarity with besieged Palestinians in Gaza have been subject to threatening responses online, in the news media, and in some cases were confronted with disciplinary or even legal action. Several academics and students have received threatening communications, including death threats.

This is discouraging our members and those with expertise to comment on the current situation. Crucially, any criticism of the Israeli government risks being labelled abusive, anti-semitic, or as



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support for terrorism. BRISMES and the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC) just last month [published a report](#) outlining evidence of the dangers of the IHRA definition of antisemitism on free speech and academic freedom. We are very concerned that the definition may be used to stifle legitimate debate and speech, and obfuscate the genuine and incredibly troubling cases of antisemitism. We are furthermore, in light of the Secretary of State for Education's recent comments, very concerned about the ways in which Prevent may be used to stifle legitimate discussion, and to threaten academics and students with potentially severe and irrevocably damaging accusations.

Over the last few days, there has been a surge in reports of campus events being cancelled, academics being harassed in the media, and student societies being shut down over statements made in response to initial scenes on October 7th before verified reports of civilian deaths appeared.

Also concerning is the recent [letter](#) written by the Home Secretary to the Police Chief Constables with vague wording that effectively criminalises symbols such as the 'Palestinian flag' and statements such as 'Palestine will be free,' and stating that Police have to subjectively decide whether they may 'glorify terrorism' or be 'construe[d] as incitement or harassment'. The direction of travel here is accelerating towards the banning of all pro-Palestinian demonstrations as has happened in [France](#) on October 12. Citing this, the UCL Provost has already threatened disciplinary and legal implications and created an atmosphere of fear particularly for staff teaching about and researching Israel/Palestine and students who [risk](#) having their visas revoked.

BRISMES also condemns the [direct bombing](#) of two universities: the Islamic University of Gaza and the Al-Azhar Universities that will impact thousands of Palestinian students for years to come.

We welcome the statement by the LSE that reassures staff that free speech will be protected. We support the [statement](#) by the Department for Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Toronto that "it is not only permissible, but it is essential for scholars to situate the current war in its broad historical contexts, including those of settler colonialism, US imperialism in the Middle East, and the global movement for indigenous rights."

We believe that now, more than ever, education and debate is required in order to forestall further catastrophic loss of life. We therefore call on you to reassure students and academic



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staff that the right to education, freedom of speech, and academic freedom will be protected; and to affirm that the expression of unpopular and controversial views is an inevitable and crucial part of academic freedom and protected by law and a cornerstone of democracy in the UK.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Council and the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom