

To the Rector of the University of Bern

To the Executive Board of the University of Bern

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Dear Prof. Dr Virginia Richter and members of the Executive Board,

We write to express our deep concern regarding the cancellation by the University of Bern of a public event organised by Amnesty International.

SeSaMO was established in 1995 and it is the leading Italian organisation devoted to the scholarly study of the Middle East and North Africa. The Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) of SeSaMO defends academic freedom, understood as the inalienable right to the transmission and circulation of research and knowledge, as well as all related freedoms (education, work, movement and residence, manifestation of thought and assembly) according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Art. 15.3) and the Italian Constitution (Art. 33). The Committee monitors governmental actions of censorship and restriction of research independence. 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.

The decision of the University of Bern was reported by [several](#) media and communicated through a [press release](#) dated 27 June 2025. The University also wrote a [statement](#) dated 30 June 2025 to further explain its decision to cancel the event. It should be emphasised that this cancellation follows other troubling events that have taken place at the University of Bern, which raise serious concerns about your University's record in defending and upholding [academic freedom](#).

The event, scheduled for 30 June 2025, featured Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, and Dr. Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International. The event had been fully booked, reflecting significant public interest. In your statement, you suggest that Albanese and Callamard—two globally respected legal and human rights experts and scholars—do not meet the standards of scientific independence and integrity. We find this deeply troubling. Dr Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International, has a long-standing and distinguished record as a human rights advocate. Her previous roles include UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions and Director of Columbia University's Global Freedom of Expression project. Albanese has extensively published on international humanitarian law, refugee law, and human rights, as demonstrated by her 2020 book published with

Oxford University Press, one of the world's leading scientific presses. Her academic rigour and impartiality are the reasons for her appointment as the UN Special Rapporteur in 2022, a role renewed in 2025. The findings in their work and reports are confirmed by numerous academic institutions, such as the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, as well as international, Israeli and Palestinian organizations, including Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, Al-Haq, Yesh Din, Adalah, Gisha, Breaking the Silence, and Médecins Sans Frontières. They are also consistent with the International Court of Justice's [advisory opinion](#) of 19 July 2024, which found Israel in breach of its obligations under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, particularly concerning apartheid and racial segregation.

Furthermore, the University's last-minute cancellation raises serious concerns regarding Switzerland's respect for academic freedom. We direct you to the recommendations set out by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Farida Shaheen, in her report "[Principles for the implementation of the right to academic freedom](#)" as well as by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, Gina Romero, in her [recommendations](#) to universities in the context of the ongoing mobilization in solidarity with Palestinians.

We also are concerned about your position on academic boycotts. As per your statement on June 30, you consider them to be an attack on academic freedom. Your position fundamentally misrepresents the [PACBI Campaign](#), to which you appear to refer, which targets institutions, *not* individuals. This distinction is crucial to assessing the relationship between academic freedom and academic boycotts. The Campaign seeks to hold Israeli academic institutions accountable for their complicity in the systematic violation of Palestinians' human rights. As has been documented by scholars and activists, many of Israel's universities collaborate with Israel's military, arms and surveillance industries, developing weapons and technology used in the subjugation of Palestinians and in the illegal occupation of their land. *Inter alia*, this was also the conclusion reached by a recent [report](#) of the University of Lausanne's Research Ethics Committee – a conclusion which brought the University to the [decision](#) to interrupt its cooperation with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

As with the academic boycott of apartheid South Africa, such measures are intended to end once their goals—the restoration of fundamental rights and freedoms—are achieved. The BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom has [already argued elsewhere](#) that “academic boycotts can be consistent with—and even necessary for—upholding academic freedom and fundamental human rights, particularly in contexts of systemic injustice”. A similar position is held by the [American Association of University Professors](#).

We are particularly concerned because your categorical rejection of academic boycotts and of legitimate debates about boycotts affect members of staff and students at your University, who have a right to debate and to support such campaigns. That right is itself part of academic freedom and freedom of expression.

We therefore urge the University of Bern to:

1. Issue a formal public apology to Francesca Albanese and Agnès Callamard for the cancellation of their participation and for the implications conveyed in the public statements issued by the university, and to find another date to hold the event at the university.
2. Provide full transparency regarding the circumstances that led to the withdrawal of the room reservation, including who was involved in the decision and on what grounds it was made.
3. Clarify and publish the university's internal procedures and criteria for organizing public events, ensuring that these are transparent, consistent, and applied without discrimination.
4. Uphold the right of students and staff to engage in peaceful protest and critical inquiry within the university, and respond to their concerns and fears with due respect.

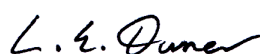
5. Actively protect students and staff from political pressure, intimidation, and media attacks that threaten their safety or academic freedom.
6. Avoid the instrumentalization of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism in ways that curtail legitimate academic or political expression, particularly when related to critiques of state policies.
7. Publicly commit to fostering open, critical, and evidence-based debate on international humanitarian law and human rights.
8. Refrain from adopting or supporting measures that compromise the university's role as a space for pluralism, critical thought, and dissent, especially in matters of global justice.

We thank you for your attention and look forward to your response regarding the steps you will take to address these urgent concerns. This letter will be published on our website, as per standard practice.

Yours sincerely,




Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President



Dr Lewis Turner
Chair of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom



Professor Rosita Di Peri
SeSaMO President



Dr Maria Chiara Rioli
Chair of SeSaMO Committee on Academic Freedom