



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

Ms Bettina Stark-Watzinger
German Federal Minister of Education and Research
Sent By Email: bettina.stark-watzinger@bmbf.bund.de

23 May 2024

Dear Ms Bettina Stark-Watzinger,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our profound concern over your remarks in the Bild-Zeitung and the ensuing defamation campaign against academic staff in Berlin who have been calling upon universities to respect the right of students to protest on campus for a ceasefire in Gaza, to engage in dialogue with protesters, and to refrain from calling for the police to dissolve protests.

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.

On May 7, 2024, the “Berlin Student Coalition” established a protest camp in the “theatre courtyard” of Freie Universität Berlin to protest against the ongoing war in Gaza. Shortly after the camp was set up, the management of Freie Universität Berlin, in coordination with the Berlin Senator for Higher Education and Research Ina Czyborra, called the police and then asked them to evict the camp. Police subsequently proceeded to clear the area, resorting to excessive force against peaceful protesters. Over 70 people were arrested, and over 150 criminal investigations and investigations into administrative offences were filed.

In response to the actions of the university management and police, more than 300 lecturers from Berlin universities and hundreds of academics from outside Berlin published a [statement in defence of the right of students to demonstrate](#). At the time of writing, more than 1,000 scholars have signed the statement.

We understand that in reaction to this open letter, you gave an interview to the Bild-Zeitung newspaper on May 8, 2024, in which you insisted on the imperative for professors and lecturers to “stand on the ground of the Basic Law.” While it is a given that both scholars and students need to abide by the law, these remarks were widely understood as questioning the signatories’ loyalty to the



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

German Basic Law and therefore represent an unprecedented intervention into academic freedom and university autonomy. This impression was only reinforced by your comments on social media platform X, where you wrote that "instead of taking a clear stance against hatred of Israel and Jews, university squatters are being recast as victims and their violence has been played down," thus insinuating that the protests were anti-Israel, antisemitic and violent and, therefore, that the signatories of the open letter, by supporting the students' right to protest, were in effect expressing support for hatred of Israel and Jews and championing violence.

Most worryingly, Bild-Zeitung also printed photographs of a number of the lecturers who signed the open letter, calling them "perpetrators" (Unversitätäter). Such public demarcation of researchers as targets is reminiscent of the infamous public defaming of the signatories of the "Academics for Peace" statement in Turkey and has no place in a democratic society. It threatens the safety of those academics targeted.

These accusations triggered a massive defamation campaign against the signatories, placing both faculty and students in danger. Following your remarks, several local politicians have written letters of complaint to the universities that single out some of the petition's signatories. Moreover, Bild-Zeitung has reported that the leader of the CDU party in the state of Brandenburg has demanded that "extremists" at universities should be placed under surveillance by the domestic intelligence service Verfassungsschutz.

Such demands clearly constitute a threat to institutional autonomy and academic freedom in Germany. Indeed, BRISMES has received information that in response to your public statements and the articles in the Bild-Zeitung, scholars who signed the petition have received defamatory hate mail and have been subjected to threatening and defamatory posts on social media. Many fear for their physical safety and the safety of their families. Those who are migrants and/or belong to religious minorities feel particularly vulnerable.

In light of these profoundly concerning developments and the unprecedented defamation of highly-reputed scholars and experts, the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom expresses its solidarity with the faculty members concerned. It is not acceptable that these scholars are smeared as extremists and antisemites, and that their loyalty to the German constitution is questioned solely for supporting students' principled and constitutionally guaranteed rights to protest (even while some of them do not support the protesters' demands).

It is precisely during times of war that academic freedom and freedom of expression are tested and need to be assiduously and robustly protected. This will inevitably and necessarily include defending the right of individuals to express views that others may find offensive or challenging. We join those



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

institutions criticized in the open letter and an increasing number of German academic associations, including the German Sociological Association (DGS) and the German Association for Middle East Studies (DAVO), in clearly rejecting the attacks on the signatories of the open letter.

We call on you to, immediately and in full, rescind your earlier remarks and allegations against the signatories of the open letter, to apologize for your remarks and publicly denounce the defamation campaign against the signatories, including the public targeting of scholars with their respective photographs and names, and to confirm your commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression in German universities. We furthermore underscore our solidarity with students and staff who are being subjected to police violence and to restrictions on their right to free speech and assembly on campus, and call upon the German government to safeguard these constitutionally-guaranteed rights. We ask you to publicly state and demonstrate your commitment to the rights of students and academic faculty to demonstrate peacefully, as guaranteed by the German Basic Law.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom