



# 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 Dame Sally Mapstone DBE, FRSE  
President, Universities UK  
**Sent via email:** [principal@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:principal@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Vivienne Stern MBE  
Chief Executive, Universities UK  
**Sent via email:** [vivienne.stern@universitiesuk.ac.uk](mailto:vivienne.stern@universitiesuk.ac.uk)

cc. Jo Grady,  
General Secretary, University and College Union  
**Sent via email:** [jgrady@ucu.org.uk](mailto:jgrady@ucu.org.uk)

23 October 2024

Dear Professor Mapstone and Ms Stern,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to follow up on the recent [expert statement](#) by United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, Gina Romero, in which she identifies systematic and concerted attacks on the student pro-Palestine movement, including by UK universities.

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.

As is noted in more detail in our statement welcoming the Special Rapporteur's intervention, which we append to this letter, their investigation found that many universities "demonstrated limited understanding of their role and capacity to facilitate peaceful protests, including occupations and camps, in compliance with the international standards on the right to peaceful assembly."

This deeply troubling finding echoes concerns that BRISMES has received and [expressed](#) on multiple occasions since October 2023, regarding UK universities' approaches to academic freedom and freedom of expression regarding Palestine/Israel.

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BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom is calling upon all UK universities to implement the Special Rapporteur's recommendations immediately and in full. We are writing to ask that you join us in this call and, specifically, that you announce what measures you plan to take to support member institutions to respect staff and students' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, of association and of expression on their campuses. We believe that this is essential in order to restore confidence amongst staff and students that their rights to freedom of assembly, protest and expression will be respected and to safeguard UK universities as places of open intellectual exchange.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Nicola Pratt**  
BRISMES President

**Dr Lewis Turner**  
Chair of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom  
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)

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## **BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom Statement on the Statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association**

The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) Committee on Academic Freedom welcomes the [new statement](#) by Gina Romero, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

The statement was produced in response to several persistent allegations of serious violations of student protestors' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association received between May and July 2024. The research involved at least 150 participants from different sectors, from around 30 countries, including the United Kingdom.

The Special Rapporteur found that student gatherings on university campuses in support of Palestinians were predominantly peaceful, and their predominant messages were legitimate calls in defence of human rights, and against Israel's unlawful occupation of Palestinian territory. Despite this, the student movement "faced systematic and concerted violent attacks of various forms - physical, threat and intimidation, moral, reputational, administrative, criminalisation and symbolic - both online and offline" including from university leaders and administrators. Protestors have been "subjected to excessive restrictions and harsh treatment due to their political stance and message, which reveals double standards," and "many" universities "imposed arbitrary restrictions, lacked transparency and objectivity in decision-making concerning the handling of protests," and responded with "severe and disproportionate retaliations," including disciplinary measures. As BRISMES has [previously](#) noted, staff and students of colour were particularly and disproportionately likely to face such measures.

The Special Rapporteur's findings concur with, and provide further evidence for, the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom August 2024 [statement](#), in which we detailed the numerous and varied ways that university managers have sought to "suppress, censor and surveil lawful expression and peaceful events on university campuses, [which included] cancelling events, creating unreasonable bureaucratic hurdles for event organisers, as well as subjecting staff and students to investigations."

Events since October 2023 have made it clear that, as the Special Rapporteur argues, many academic institutions, while "pledging publicly that they respect the right to peaceful assembly on campuses, demonstrated limited understanding of their role and capacity to facilitate peaceful protests, including occupations and camps, in compliance with the international standards on the right to peaceful assembly."

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Among her recommendations, the Special Rapporteur stated that it is “crucial to immediately cease the stigmatization and hostilities that directly or indirectly silence members of the academic community and discourage their rights to freedom of expression, of peaceful assembly, and of association.” This includes universities reviewing their internal regulations to ensure their regulations on hate speech and antisemitism are aligned with international standards for the protection of freedom of expression, and that their regulations more widely “are in line with international standards to promote, protect and facilitate the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, of expression, and of association.” Furthermore, the pursuit of contentious ideas or goals, the creation of disruption, and the use of symbols and expressions that other may find offensive, cannot be deemed as violent acts and thus used to justify the banning, suppression, or dispersal of peaceful protest. Peaceful campus assemblies must be guaranteed and protected, and universities must take all appropriate measures to ensure that freedom of peaceful assembly and association are enjoyed by all, without discrimination on the grounds of inter alia race, religion, and political opinion.

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom endorses the Special Rapporteur’s recommendations, and calls upon all UK universities to implement them immediately and in full.

*BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom*  
*23 October 2024*