



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

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary
University and College Union
Carlow Street
London
NW1 7LH

Sent by Email: jgrady@ucu.org.uk

25 October 2023

Dear Dr Grady,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) regarding the profound threats to free speech and academic freedom that academics and students currently face since the outbreak of violence in Palestine and Israel on 7th October.

As we detailed in a recent [statement](#), and has been noted by numerous others, including UCU's [Black Members' Standing Committee](#), British universities are witnessing a political backlash, which is creating an atmosphere of fear on our campuses, particularly within Middle Eastern Studies and amongst racialised academics and students. Academics and students who are speaking out against war crimes and in solidarity with besieged Palestinians in Gaza are being subject to threatening responses online, in news media, and in some cases are being confronted with disciplinary or even legal action. Several academics and students have received threatening communications, including death threats. Many of these academics - and many more who are fearful of speaking out in the current climate - are members of UCU.

We are particularly concerned by the recent comments from the [Secretary of State for Education](#), the [Home Secretary](#), and the [Immigration Minister](#), that effectively criminalise symbols and slogans of Palestinian solidarity, encourage the use of Prevent, and state that academics and students may have visas cancelled because of their views on recent events. We are deeply worried that Prevent and anti-terror legislation are being used to stifle legitimate discussion and lawful speech on Palestine and Israel, and to threaten academics and students with potentially severe and irrevocably damaging accusations, which UCU [itself](#) noted has occurred previously. These most recent



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governmental interventions will only add to the climate of fear in UK universities on this issue which has for a long time faced disproportionate surveillance, monitoring and silencing. These measures, furthermore, will particularly affect migrant staff and students, and staff and students of colour, who are disproportionately targeted by the aforementioned threats and accusations.

In this context, it is vital that organisations across the sector work together, to ensure that our colleagues are supported and academic freedom is defended. We are grateful for the assistance that many UCU reps across the country are already providing, and are writing to ask for your assurance that any UCU member who is targeted with accusations, or whose free speech and academic freedom is restricted or impinged with regards to Palestine, will have the full support of the union, including the union providing and covering the cost of legal representation that they may require to defend their rights and careers. A public statement from UCU confirming this support will help reassure staff in this difficult time. Such a statement would be in keeping with UCU's stated obligations of protecting and promoting the professional interests of its members, promoting equality, defending academic freedom, and actively opposing all forms of harassment, prejudice and unfair discrimination.

We look forward to hearing from you and to working together on these important questions going forward.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom