



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

Professor Yifat Bitton
President, Achva Academic College

Sent By Email: yifat.bitton@achva.ac.il

27 November 2023

Dear Professor Yifat Bitton,

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Committee of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) in order to express our profound concern over the dismissal of Dr. Uri Horesh from Achva Academic College.

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.

It is our understanding that Dr. Horesh, who served as senior lecturer of linguistics, had his employment terminated by Achva Academic College on November 12, 2023, due to two entries that he had posted on his personal Facebook page. On October 7, the day of Hamas's heinous massacre in Israel, he changed his Facebook cover photo to an image that states in Hebrew 'Free Ghetto Gaza' and in English 'Free Gaza', and then on October 14, he posted on his Facebook wall the following statement: 'End the Genocide Now, Let Gaza Live'. While many might disagree with these posts and find them offensive, they do not in any way contravene the law.

We further understand that on 15 October, while attending an academic conference in York, UK, Dr. Horesh received a letter from you, informing him that he was suspended from teaching at the College pending a disciplinary hearing. Immediately, Dr. Horesh sought advice and representation from the chairperson of the College union. The chairperson, however, responded that she was unwilling to intervene on his behalf since she was in agreement with the administration's decision and then proceeded to write to all union members claiming that in his social media posts, Dr. Horesh had expressed support for Hamas and the massacre perpetrated on 7 October. Given that the chairperson's letter is potentially libelous, the university is also potentially culpable for the damage caused by this letter since she used the university email servers to incite staff members and



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colleagues against Dr. Horesh. This would appear to be in breach of Achva Academic College's own protocols.

On 24 October, without prior notification and in contravention of due process and fair procedure, Dr. Horesh was blocked from access to the College's digital information systems, including his institutional email. On 29 October, you sent Dr. Horesh a detailed letter notifying him that while the college Tenure and Promotions Committee had decided during its meeting of 2 August 2023 against his promotion and instead extended his probation for a year, due to the two social media posts mentioned above, the Tenure and Promotions Committee reconvened and decided to cancel the extension it had agreed upon. You conclude the letter by notifying Dr. Horesh that as a result the College is considering his dismissal, and invite him to appear before the Tenure and Promotions Committee on 8 November, which will be convening to discuss his dismissal. We understand that Dr. Horesh did not appear before the committee and on 12 November, he was informed via email that his employment at the College had been terminated.

We believe that Dr. Horesh's dismissal constitutes both a procedural and substantive breach of his rights. Procedurally, it is unclear on what procedural grounds the Tenure and Promotions Committee that extended a staff member's probation for a year can reconvene after three months and cancel the extension. It would seem that such a cancellation would first require inviting Dr. Horesh to appear before the College's disciplinary committee to assess whether the two posts mentioned above violated the law and/or university protocol. Circumventing this process appears to have violated Dr. Horesh's right to due process.

Substantively, you wrote in your letter of 29 October that in the past the College decided not to respond to social media publications made by Dr. Horesh, even though 'their content was similar' to the ones mentioned above, because the College 'believes in your [Dr. Horesh's] right to voice them'. You add, however, that the publication of these claims in the wake of the Hamas massacre jeopardizes the delicate relations of shared life which the college has built for many years and therefore raises questions about Dr. Horesh's suitability for the College. We find this extremely worrying, given that 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.

We therefore call on you to publicly restate your commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression on your campus, and to rescind your decision to dismiss Dr. Horesh. Additionally, we urge you to remind the chairperson of the College's union of her obligations to abide by university

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protocols at all times, and particularly the requirement not to incite against colleagues, even if they express views that she finds offensive or challenging.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom