



# 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)

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Prof. Dr. Günter M. Ziegler

Prof. Dr. Julia von Blumenthal

Prof. Dr. Geraldine Rauch

Berlin University Alliance

Sent By Email: [praesident@fu-berlin.de](mailto:praesident@fu-berlin.de), [praesidentin@hu-berlin.de](mailto:praesidentin@hu-berlin.de), [p@tu-berlin.de](mailto:p@tu-berlin.de)

28 May 2024

Dear Professor Ziegler,

Dear Professor von Blumenthal,

Dear Professor Rauch,

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 the continued restriction of protests against the war in Gaza and actions in solidarity with the Palestinian people on campuses in Berlin. We are equally concerned about the defamation campaign against members of academic staff who have called upon the Berlin University Alliance to respect students' right to protest on campus, to engage in dialogue with protesters, and to refrain from calling the police to forcefully disband 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. As such, we are deeply concerned about the increasingly pervasive infringements of the rights to expression, assembly and protest on German campuses. This is particularly evident in the context of pro-Palestinian protests in Berlin, where police violently dispersed peaceful demonstrators at Humboldt University of Berlin on May 3, 2024 and at Freie Universität Berlin on May 7, 2023.

It has come to our attention, for example, that on May 7, 2024, the "Berlin Student Coalition" established a protest camp in the "theatre courtyard" of Freie Universität Berlin. Shortly thereafter, the management of Freie Universität Berlin, in coordination with the Berlin Senator for Higher Education and Research Ina Czyborra, called the police to evict the peaceful encampment. There were no attempts to establish dialogue with the protesters, who were merely informed of the decision to evict them. Attempts by the students to negotiate the terms of their encampment were rejected.

Notably, the evacuation order was not given as a result of criminal offenses committed by any of the participants in the encampment and, therefore, it was a grave violation of the right to freedom of

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expression and freedom of assembly—two basic rights in any democracy. Based upon the request of the FU management, police forces proceeded to clear the area, resorting to excessive force against the peaceful protesters. Eyewitness accounts from students and faculty and video footage document police violence, which included the beating of students and using pepper spray. Over 70 people were arrested, and over 150 criminal investigations and investigations into administrative offenses were filed. Those charged may face detrimental consequences, especially international students, who, if prosecuted, risk losing their residency status.

Likewise, on May 25, 2024, students who had occupied the social science faculty building were forcibly removed from campus by police units in spite of prior agreement with HU management that the protests would be tolerated. Police forces violently detained squatters despite HU's decision not to file any charges against the student protesters. In a statement to the press, HU president Julia von Blumenthal indicated that the eviction had been directly ordered by the Berlin Mayor Kai Wegener in an unprecedented intervention and violation of university autonomy.

Against this backdrop we urge you to oppose these political interventions clearly and publicly and to ensure the safety of students from politically motivated repression on campus. We welcome the letter by FU president Günther Ziegler to students and university staff on May 13, 2024, in which he emphasized the importance of academic dialogue and announced that the university would be taking legal action against the defamation of those members of faculty who had criticised the forceful disbanding of protests. We furthermore welcome the attempts made by the presidents of TU, HU, and FU Berlin since the eviction of the protest camp at FU Berlin to seek out dialogue with student protesters and refrain from dispersing demonstrations on the university premises on May 14, May 16, and May 23, 2024. However, these steps were effectively undermined when charges were filed against protesters for trespassing despite a commitment by university leaders to engage in dialogue with students rather than pursuing a police-centered approach.

We thus urge you to drop all charges that are not related to hate speech or incitement to violence and to allow for a sustainable dialogue between students and management of the Berlin University Alliance about the modes of protest on campus.

We also urge you to publicly distance yourselves from politicians from various parties who have been defaming students and academic staff who supported the right to protest. These politicians wrongfully accused students and staff of endorsing violence in an effort to justify dangerous new laws and regulations aimed at enhancing political repression through the expulsion of students and the dismissal of staff members.

In light of these worrying developments, we call upon you as presidents of the Berlin University Alliance to respect and protect the constitutionally guaranteed right of students and faculty members

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to protest and to refrain from enacting further restrictions upon these rights. We ask you to fulfill your duty of care to your staff and students and engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue with protesters over their concerns and demands. We furthermore urge you to publicly oppose and correct any attempts to frame the student protests and supporting staff as violent and antisemitic.

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 look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom