



# 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 FRSE  
Principal and Vice-Chancellor  
University of St Andrews

Sent by Email: [principal@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:principal@st-andrews.ac.uk)

28 November 2023

Dear Prof. Dame Sally Mapstone,

I am writing on behalf of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) Council of Trustees and Committee on Academic Freedom to express deep concern over the University's response to Rector Stella Maris' recent [communication](#) to students in the wake of the catastrophic violence and loss of life in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

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.

Following our letter to you on 16th October this year and your response from 3 November, we are now writing to express particularly grave concerns at the University Senior Management Team's response to the Rector's email.

Firstly, [your letter](#) suggests that the Rector “put her right to freedom of expression ahead of her **duty to represent all students, and to be concerned for their welfare**” and that she effectively failed to show equal regard for Palestinian and Israeli lives. However, any fair reading of the Rector's letter will note that it goes to very considerable lengths to repeatedly condemn *all* acts of violence – specifically and repeatedly naming those committed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups as well as those committed by Israeli armed forces – while emphasising that a plurality of views must be acknowledged, accepted and welcomed within the student body.

Secondly, your letter alleges that the Rector's email has caused “**harm**” among the student body. It thus appears that you accept the [complaints](#) made by a few students who accused the Rector of making “**inflammatory and unfounded accusations of 'genocide,' 'apartheid,' and 'occupation'**” against Israel. Indeed, your letter states that “the language [the Rector's letter] used,

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and some of the sources it cited have caused alarm, division, and harm in our community, and more widely.” Actually, however, both the language and the sources in the Rector’s letter reflect a broad legal and scholarly consensus. There is, for example, no reasonable doubt that Palestinian territories are occupied, as both the United Nations and the UK government recognise. Likewise, there is broad legal and scholarly consensus that Israel’s military occupation of those territories entails systematic discrimination and segregation between Jewish Israeli settlers – whose settlements the [UK government](#) itself recognises as “illegal under international law” – and Palestinians with leading human rights organisations such as [B’Tselem](#), [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) having accused Israel of carrying out “the crime of apartheid.” Finally, among many others, a statement by over 800 [genocide and conflict scholars](#), a letter signed by [36 UN Special Rapporteurs](#), and the [International Commission of Jurists](#) have all expressed grave concern that the Israeli government’s actions in Gaza may fit the definition of war crimes, crimes of against humanity, and of genocide as they are defined in instruments such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the 1948 Genocide Convention. While there are legitimate disagreements on aspects of these issues, to state that the Rector’s statements are “inflammatory and unfounded” fails to take into account academic and human rights research and knowledge, and is not a charge we would have expected from academic leaders.

Thirdly, we are concerned by the rise of antisemitism and islamophobia in the UK since October 7th, and believe that precisely in such times higher education institutions have a responsibility to highlight evidence-based research and initiate conversations that deal with historical processes. This is how we read the Rector's letter. Yet free speech and academic freedom over the question of Palestine/Israel – which had already been [shrinking](#) before October 7<sup>th</sup> – has seen a [sudden further restriction](#) and we are currently witnessing the resulting **chilling effect**. Within the ensuing atmosphere of fear and suspicion, academics and students discussing war crimes and human rights have been threatened online and in the media, and in some cases students who have merely expressed solidarity with Palestinian civilians or called for an end of violence through the implementation of a ceasefire have been confronted with investigations, disciplinary hearings, suspensions, or even the revocation of visas. In this context, your letter appears to suggest that the Rector’s views – despite being grounded in scholarship, reinforced by human rights reports and calling for a ceasefire – ought not to be stated because to do so *in itself* is offensive to members of your community. By doing so you participated in undermining an environment in which all can express their views in a respectful way – as the Rector did – and thus compromised the very mission of higher education.

Your letter rightly asserts the principle that “diversity, inclusion, and tolerance are at the heart” of what a university stands for. This means a university also has an obligation to ensure that students who agree with Rector Maris feel accepted, included and welcomed regardless of their faith, ethnic

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or national backgrounds or indeed their position on these issues so long as they “express their views within the law” and are willing “to be accountable for them, and should expect that they may be debated, or challenged.” If human rights are universal, it must follow that their violation must be condemned impartially and independently of who violates those human rights or on whose rights have been violated. Such a commitment is the best way to guarantee equality, diversity and inclusion within an academic community.

**Finally, we believe that the Rector’s letter is well crafted, scholarly, and evinces great sensitivity to the diverse community of St. Andrew’s, and that university leaders should be proud to have such a Rector in their midst.** We therefore urge the University’s senior staff to reconsider the position expressed in their public statement of November 24, lest it undermine the confidence of scholars and students that the University provides a safe environment for *all* to debate, to be heard and to stay safe.

We urge the University’s senior staff to lead by example by supporting open scholarship and debate on this issue, and by accepting that a plurality of views within the law is both legitimate and a necessary step to bringing those views into dialogue, thus strengthening the student community, however uncomfortable some may feel being exposed to these.

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

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Council and the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom