



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

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Members of the Board
UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)

Sent By Email

31 October 2023

Dear Members of the UKRI Board,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concern about the letter addressed to the Chief Executive of UKRI, Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser, and shared on the social media platform X by the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle Donelan MP over the weekend and the response to it.

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, in the UK and globally.

On the 28 of October, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle Donelan took the unprecedented step of [sharing a letter](#) on social media addressed to the CEO of UKRI. The letter expresses “disgust and outrage” at UKRI’s appointment of two named academics to an equality, diversity, and inclusion expert advisory group on the basis of their social media posts expressing lawful criticisms of the UK and Israeli governments, which the Secretary of State characterises as “extremist.”

The letter from Ms Donelan is the latest in a number of statements by UK government ministers since 7 October that misrepresent support for the Palestinian people as support for Hamas and, thus, as support for a proscribed terrorist organisation. Such statements contribute to a climate of fear and suspicion within UK higher education, which threaten academic freedom and freedom of speech concerning the situation in Israel-Palestine. BRISMES has already issued a public [statement](#) on this worrying trend.

Ms Donelan also criticises a social media post by one advisory group member for making reference “to Israel's ‘genocide and apartheid’”. The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and

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Technology might personally disagree with such comments, but the most prominent human rights organisations have accused Israel of carrying out the crime of apartheid while close to 900 scholars and practitioners of international law, conflict studies and genocide have warned that Israel's attacks on Gaza may amount to genocide. In effect, Ms Donelan disregards the research carried out by experts in the field and imposes her personal political beliefs on UKRI in an effort to stifle academic freedom. This, we believe, is an extremely dangerous development for the future of academic research in the UK.

Furthermore, we are disturbed that the Secretary of State is also pressuring UKRI to shut down the newly-formed expert advisory panel, which seeks to address long-standing inequalities in the allocation of research funding allocation. This appears to undermine the ability of UKRI to deliver its already agreed strategy, which identifies diversity as one of the key drivers of change. Moreover, the sharing of a letter via social media on a weekend, demanding a response by the end of Monday, appears unreasonable and even bullying. It seemingly goes against the spirit of the partnership principles between the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology and UKRI.

In response to the Secretary of State's social media post, the official UKRI X account posted a message from the CEO of UKRI, stating that: "We are deeply concerned to have discovered these comments. We are conducting an immediate investigation."

We find this response wholly deficient. As an independent body whose remit is the generation of "world-leading research to push the frontiers of knowledge", we expect UKRI to take a firm position to defend academic freedom, which is the foundation of intellectual inquiry and the condition of possibility of producing cutting-edge research.

We also wish to emphasise that, as a public body, UKRI has a duty to uphold Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression for all, and which is incorporated into UK law via the Human Rights Act of 1998. It is especially important in a democracy to protect the right to freely express viewpoints that differ from those of the sitting government.

It is essential that staff and students feel safe to freely discuss the situation in Israel-Palestine and to advocate for Palestinian human rights in order to deepen understanding of all viewpoints. Both Ms Donelan's letter and your social media response to it convey the impression to scholars and researchers that the highest level bodies tasked with supporting academic research are not prepared to defend academic freedom and freedom of expression. This not only deters individuals from speaking about current events in the Middle East, it may be considered an abject failure to protect and foster research and intellectual freedom.

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We call on UKRI to re-direct its concern towards the threat to academic freedom represented by the letter from the Secretary of State, to issue a clear statement in defence of academic freedom and rejecting government interference, to call off its announced investigation into supposedly concerning comments, and to ensure that the important work of the expert advisory board on diversity, equality and inclusion is not undermined in any way.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom