



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

Email: administrator@brismes.org Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

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

Professor Sir Chris Husbands
Vice-Chancellor
Sheffield Hallam University

By Email: c.husbands@shu.ac.uk

25 January 2022

Dear Professor Sir Chris Husbands,

Re: The investigation of Shahd Abusalama and cancellation of the class she was scheduled to teach.

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our concerns about reports that, following accusations of antisemitism in relation to her social media posts, Sheffield Hallam University is investigating Shahd Abusalama and that the class she was scheduled to teach has been cancelled ‘until further notice’.

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.

According to an article in *Jewish News* on 24 December 2021 and another by Campaign Against Antisemitism on 30 December 2021, Ms Abusalama is under investigation by Sheffield Hallam University for social media posts published on Twitter on 4 December 2021. In these posts, Ms Abusalama discussed accusations of antisemitism made against a member of the Sheffield Hallam Palestine Society for a banner created during a banner-making session, which stated “Stop the Palestinian Holocaust”. In her posts, Ms Abusalama stated that she herself would *not* use that term in the context of Palestine, but explained why someone may do so, providing examples of those who have done so, while claiming they had not been motivated by antisemitism.

We note the deeply troubling use of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism as the grounds for the complaint, according to the aforementioned media reports. BRISMES condemns without reservation antisemitism, as it does any form of racism. However, we, along with many legal experts and scholars of antisemitism, believe that the IRHA definition of antisemitism does not help universities to combat antisemitism, but rather creates

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confusion about what constitutes antisemitism.¹ Not only is the IHRA definition vague, but several of its accompanying examples are deeply flawed. Whilst some refer to antisemitic hate speech, several others risk stigmatising lawful speech. The lead author of the definition itself, Kenneth Stern, emphasised the definition's inadequacy in an academic setting and that it was never intended as a campus free speech guide. Indeed, BRISMES has received a growing number of reports of spurious accusations of antisemitism made against staff and students in UK universities which refer to examples in the IHRA definition conflating criticisms of Israeli governmental policies with antisemitic speech.

In a submission to the UK Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights in 2021, we stated that several of the working definition's examples:

risk stifling open discussions concerning the conditions under which Israel was established; Israeli laws, state policies and actions; Zionist ideology; and the ongoing implications of these laws and ideology for Palestinian human rights. We contend that applying such a definition risks discriminating against Palestinian students and staff in the UK and beyond with regard to their rights to freedom of expression, as well as impacting non-Palestinians who are speaking out in support of Palestinian human rights and against complicity with breaches of national and international laws.

We believe that the complaint as well as the media source in question have interpreted Ms Abusalama's social media posts were made in bad faith. The complaint also appears to ignore the experiences of Palestinian refugees, like Ms Abusalama herself, living under decades of illegal Israeli military occupation and blockade.

We are appalled by [reports](#) suggesting that Ms Abusalama only found out that the university was investigating her social media posts when she was approached by the Campaign Against Antisemitism and the Jewish News, which had reached out to her even before the administration had communicated with her that an investigation was underway or given her an opportunity to refute the defamatory claims. If true, this would constitute a dereliction of its duty of care towards Ms Abusalama as a PhD student, researcher and a member of staff. Reports of investigations into antisemitism against an individual can have career-destroying consequences – particularly for an early career academic – even when the complaints are not upheld. If the reports are true, it seems that you have not followed the university's [own guidelines](#) that promise PhD students that they may 'expect an environment that fosters an inclusive, supportive and collaborative University community'; that they will be 'treated with

¹ For example, Hugh Tomlinson. 'Counsel's Opinion on the IHRA Definition', 17 March 2017. Available at: <https://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/ihra-opinion/#sthash.kkEUpcB4.dpbs>; Geoffrey Robertson. Opinion 'Anti-Semitism: The IHRA Definition and its Consequences for Freedom of Expression', 31 August 2018. Available at: <https://prc.org.uk/en/post/3992>;



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respect, professionalism and courtesy'; that their personal information will be safeguarded'; and that the university will be a 'safe environment'.

We therefore call on the university to:

- 1) immediately inform Ms Abusalama of any accusations against her; of the evidence of any such accusations; and give her the right in consultation with her union to respond to those accusations;
- 2) to uphold Ms Abusalama's right to freedom of expression such as it is guaranteed under the law, particularly when it comes to speaking about her experiences as a Palestinian refugee from Gaza;
- 3) to publicly apologise to Ms Abusalama for the breach of confidentiality committed against her when the university informed the media of an investigation into her social media posts;
- 4) to revoke the decision to cancel the class she teaches;
- 5) to uphold its duty of care towards Ms Abusalama both as a student and member of staff at Sheffield Hallam University;
- 6) to rescind the use of the IRHA definition of antisemitism as a tool in complaints and disciplinary procedures.

Yours sincerely,

Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE

President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

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CC.

Sara Trentham-Black

Dr Kathy Doherty, Head of Postgraduate Research, C3RI

Dr Geff Green, Head of Department, Media Arts & Communication

Professor David Shepherd, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning

Chancellor, Baroness Helena Kennedy (The Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice)

Shahd Abusalama

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