



Restrictions on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression in and Concerning the Middle East and North Africa

Cases Documented by the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom (2025–2026)



BRISMES
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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Cover photographs

Top right: Student encampment, Newcastle University, May 2024.

Image credit: Isla Thompson.

Bottom left: Hands Off Student Rights rally, Berlin, April 2024.

Image credit: Mariam Aboughazi.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents all cases addressed by the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) and BRISMES Council between 1 January 2025 and 31 May 2026 concerning restrictions on academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to education in and concerning the Middle East and North Africa. The BRISMES CAF was set up in 2019 to monitor and defend academic freedom in the research, study and teaching of Middle East Studies in the UK and anywhere in the world, including in academic institutions in the Middle East and North Africa. The report covers developments in the United Kingdom and Europe, as well as in the Middle East and North Africa region. Taken together, the cases reveal how academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to education are being constrained through a range of institutional, legal, political, and military mechanisms.

KEY FIGURES (2025–2026)

28 cases documented

20 cases in UK/Europe

8 cases in MENA

1 scholar-at-risk case

1 student mobility case

7 countries in MENA covered

Academics and students at **13+** institutions directly targeted

18+ academic and research institutes targeted by military attacks

In the United Kingdom and Europe, the report examines restrictions on lawful academic and political expression in universities and related academic institutions. All cases, with the exception of two, documented in this part of the report concern expression relating to Israel-Palestine. They include the cancellation of academic events, disciplinary action against staff and students, censorship of political expression on campus, employment disputes raising concerns about political discrimination, and sector-level narratives that shape the boundaries of legitimate debate. Although universities and academic institutions in the UK and Europe operate within legal frameworks that formally protect freedom of expression and academic freedom, the cases documented here suggest that these protections are being weakened in practice by administrative barriers, broad interpretations of harassment and neutrality, external political pressure, and the use of disciplinary processes to regulate lawful speech.

The cumulative impact is a chilling effect on scholarship, teaching, protest, and public engagement, particularly for those working on or speaking about Israel–Palestine.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the report documents more direct and often more severe forms of repression, including state-led restrictions on scholars, researchers, and educational institutions. These include the detention and prosecution of scholars and public intellectuals under national security, terrorism, or espionage-related charges; the confiscation of research materials and interference with scholarly work; intimidation of independent educational initiatives operating outside state-controlled institutions; and military attacks on universities that disrupt teaching, research and student life. Cases from Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Bahrain, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory illustrate how academic freedom is undermined not only by restrictions on speech, but also by attacks on the institutional and material conditions necessary for research, teaching, and learning.

The report also highlights the growing importance of sanctuary and safe passage for scholars at risk, particularly scholars from conflict zones. It draws attention to the destruction of higher education in Gaza and the targeting of academics, as part of a longer-term pattern of scholasticide, and the urgent need for international support for displaced scholars and for the rebuilding of educational institutions in conflict-affected settings.

“Across very different contexts, restrictions on academic freedom share a common effect: narrowing the space in which scholars, students and public intellectuals can research, teach, speak and debate freely.”

Across these different contexts, several broad patterns emerge. First, states and institutions increasingly rely on the language of security, safety, public order, or neutrality to justify restrictions on expression and academic activity. Second, disciplinary and legal frameworks are often used in ways that transform lawful expression into alleged misconduct or criminality. Third, repression frequently targets not only speech, but also the production, circulation, preservation, and institutional support of knowledge itself, whether through interference with research, attacks on universities, restrictions on academic mobility, or pressure on scholarly activity. Fourth, attacks on universities and restrictions on movement show that academic freedom cannot be separated from the right to education and from the wider political conditions in which scholars and students live and work. Finally, many of the cases documented here are transnational in both their causes and their possible remedies, including diplomatic pressure, cross-border scholarly solidarity, international legal norms, and the responsibilities of universities and governments beyond the immediate site of abuse.

The report argues that academic freedom must be understood as part of a wider ecosystem of rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary detention, and the right to education. Where those rights are eroded, academic freedom is also at risk. The restrictions documented here differ in form and severity, but they are connected by their shared effect of narrowing the space for critical thought, dissent, and intellectual exchange.

“Academic freedom cannot be understood in isolation from freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary detention, and the right to education.”

BRISMES therefore calls on universities and research institutions to uphold their obligations to protect free expression and academic freedom; on governments and public authorities to refrain from criminalising peaceful scholarly and political activity and to facilitate safe pathways for scholars at risk; on international organisations to strengthen monitoring and accountability for attacks on scholars and educational institutions; and on scholarly associations and academic networks to continue documenting and speaking out against violations, supporting those at risk, and fostering international solidarity. Protecting academic freedom therefore requires not only responding to individual violations, but also confronting the institutional, political, legal, and military structures that enable repression, exclusion, and the erosion of intellectual autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

The [British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Committee on Academic Freedom \(CAF\)](#) monitors and defends academic freedom in the research, study and teaching of Middle East Studies in the United Kingdom and worldwide, as well as academic freedom more broadly in the Middle East and North Africa. BRISMES CAF defines academic freedom in line with the 1997 [UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel](#) as the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely opinions about the institution or system in which scholars work, freedom from institutional censorship, and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.

CAF also emphasises that freedom of expression more broadly, including political commentary in the media and the right to protest, is an essential foundation for academic freedom. Erosions in the right to dissent and to hold decision-makers to account inevitably spill over into other areas of expression, including teaching and academic research.

Between January 2025 and May 2026, BRISMES CAF intervened in **17 cases** involving restrictions on lawful academic and political expression at universities, research institutions and in the wider public sphere in the United Kingdom and Europe, and **8 cases** involving violations of academic freedom and attacks on educational institutions in the Middle East region. In addition, CAF intervened in **1 case** involving an academic from Gaza seeking sanctuary in the Republic of Ireland, **1 case** in which CAF offered a critique of a Higher Education Policy Institute paper, and **1 case** concerning the introduction by the UK Home Secretary of an “emergency brake” on student visas for applicants from Sudan, Afghanistan, Cameroon and Myanmar.

As this is the first CAF annual report, we have decided to cover a 17-month period. However, in future years, the report will cover a 12-month period (May-May), reflecting the reporting requirements of CAF vis-a-vis the BRISMES Annual General Meeting.

The cases documented in this report represent all cases addressed by BRISMES CAF or BRISMES Council during this period. Interventions typically occur following requests from BRISMES members or from individuals and organisations directly affected. As a small, volunteer-run committee, BRISMES CAF does not have the resources to undertake comprehensive monitoring of academic freedom.

Nevertheless, the cases presented here illustrate wider patterns of restrictions affecting scholars and students in the UK, Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. Some of these patterns have been extensively documented by the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC) ([here](#), in the case of Germany, and [here](#), in the case of the UK), Middle East Studies Association of North America [Committee on Academic Freedom](#) (covering cases in the Middle East and North America), and [Pen International](#) and [Scholars at Risk](#) (covering cases in the Middle East and beyond).

In the UK and Europe, all cases, with the exception of two, relate to Israel–Palestine. This continues a trend that predates 7 October 2023 but has intensified since then. The [BRISMES–ELSC report of 2023](#) already highlighted the use of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism in restricting and sanctioning political and academic expression critical of Israel on UK university campuses. The cases documented in this report involve administrative decisions, disciplinary procedures, institutional policies and actions by authorities that have restricted or discouraged lawful expression by students and scholars and, in one case, the wider public. Universities frequently justify such measures on grounds including campus safety, combatting harassment, or institutional neutrality. Meanwhile, authorities draw on counter-terrorism legislation and public order frameworks. The cases presented here raise concerns that these frameworks are being applied in ways that disproportionately affect expression relating to Israel–Palestine, particularly where scholars, students or members of the public express solidarity with Palestinian rights.

The report identifies several recurring patterns in the UK and Europe:

- Cancellation of academic events or imposition of disproportionate administrative requirements, including security-based justifications that lack transparency.
- Disciplinary investigations or sanctions targeting lawful political expression, often through expansive interpretations of conduct or harassment policies.
- Broad or vague institutional policies that risk discouraging legitimate academic debate and political expression.
- External political pressure on universities, including interventions by government officials and defamatory media campaigns.
- A chilling effect on scholarship, teaching and broader political and academic expression, particularly affecting early-career scholars, international students and those employed on precarious contracts.
- Restrictions on academic mobility due to changing visa regulations and/or limited access for scholars at risk.

Taken together, these developments risk undermining universities' obligations to protect freedom of expression and academic freedom. Universities play a crucial role in facilitating critical debate about complex political issues, including war, international law, colonialism and human rights. Ensuring that scholars and students can engage in such debates without fear of institutional sanction is essential to the mission of higher education and to the functioning of democratic

societies.

“Universities play a crucial role in facilitating critical debate about war, international law, colonialism and human rights.”

While the restrictions on political and academic expression in UK and European universities do not reach the levels of repression experienced in parts of the Middle East, they are nonetheless deeply concerning and contribute to a broader erosion of freedom of expression globally. BRISMES CAF’s experience indicates that authorities in the Middle East point to restrictions on expression in the UK and Europe in order to justify repressive measures in their own countries.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the report documents instances of state repression affecting scholars, researchers, students and intellectuals. These cases include the imprisonment of academics, restrictions on scholarly work and attacks on educational institutions. As noted above, these do not represent the full range of violations occurring across the region.

The cases documented in the Middle East region highlight several recurring threats to academic freedom and freedom of expression:

- Detention and prosecution of intellectuals and scholars under national security or terrorism-related charges.
- Harassment and intimidation of independent educational initiatives, particularly those operating outside state-controlled academic institutions.
- Violence against educational institutions, including military attacks that disrupt teaching and learning.

These cases illustrate the structural challenges facing scholars and intellectuals across the region. Restrictions on freedom of expression and academic activity not only affect individual academics but also undermine the broader intellectual environment necessary for research, teaching and public debate.

While the nature of the restrictions differs, the cases documented in both sections illustrate the vulnerability of academic freedom and freedom of expression when political pressures—whether driven by governments, university administrations, military actors, or external pressure groups—limit the ability of scholars and students to engage in open inquiry and debate. In particular, the report highlights the growing use of discourses of security and safety by national authorities and universities to justify restrictions on dissent.

“The report highlights the growing use of discourses of security and safety by national authorities and universities to justify restrictions on dissent.”

The report consists of three sections in addition to a conclusion. Section I examines restrictions on academic freedom and freedom of expression in the UK and Europe, as well as the question of sanctuary for scholars at risk. Section II examines restrictions on academic freedom and freedom of expression in the Middle East and North Africa region. Section III presents recommendations for universities, governments and national authorities, international organisations and scholarly associations.

SECTION I: RESTRICTIONS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE UK AND EUROPE

INTRODUCTION



This section of the report summarises cases in the United Kingdom and Europe addressed by the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) and BRISMES Council between January 2025 and May 2026. These cases concern restrictions on lawful academic and political expression in universities and, in some cases, in the wider public sphere where such restrictions have implications for academic freedom and scholarly debate.

Universities and academic institutions have both legal and normative obligations to protect freedom of expression and academic freedom.

Across Europe, freedom of expression and academic freedom are protected under [Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights](#), as well as by long-standing principles of university autonomy and scholarly independence. Article 10 protects not only speech that is favourably received or regarded as inoffensive, but also speech that may “offend, shock or disturb” ([Handyside v United Kingdom, 1976](#)).

The European Court of Human Rights has also recognised academic freedom as a matter of special importance under Article 10, while Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union explicitly guarantees that “[t]he arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint” and that “academic freedom shall be respected.”

The 2020 Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research [affirms](#) that freedom of scientific research is a fundamental right and public good closely linked to freedom of expression. It emphasises the responsibilities of governments and research institutions to protect researchers and institutions from censorship, discrimination, and political interference while ensuring conditions for independent inquiry.

In the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 states that all public bodies (which includes universities) have to comply with the rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

In England there are further protections for freedom of expression: the [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Act 2023](#) requires universities to take reasonably practicable steps to secure freedom of speech within the law for their students, staff, members and visiting speakers. The [Office for Students' Regulatory Advice 24 \(RA24\)](#) further clarifies universities' duties regarding the protection of free expression and the development of institutional codes of practice.

The cases documented in this section of the report illustrate several mechanisms through which lawful speech by university staff and students has been restricted or discouraged, including:

1. cancellation of academic events,
2. disciplinary investigations and sanctions,
3. censorship of political or academic expression,
4. employment disputes involving academic freedom, and
5. sector-level narratives and institutional responses that shape the boundaries of permissible debate.

Although each case arises within a specific institutional context, taken together they reveal broader patterns that raise concerns about the protection of academic freedom in European higher education. All cases, with the exception of two, documented in this part of the report concern expression relating to Israel-Palestine.

Table 1: summary of cases in the UK and Europe

TYPES OF VIOLATIONS	NUMBER OF VIOLATIONS
Harassment, threats, smearing and intimidation	1
Bans, cancellations, censorship and administrative restrictions	5
Investigations, disciplinary procedures and legal processes	2
Professional, educational and financial repercussions legal processes	5
Interference with research, teaching and knowledge production	1
Arrest, detention, prosecution and restrictions on movement	3
Violence, killings and attacks on educational institutions	0
Other: Right to education; scholar at risk; critique of sector report on student encampments	3

The categories used in Table 1 are analytical categories used for monitoring purposes. Individual cases often involve more than one type of violation and are therefore discussed in thematic sections below according to their primary characteristics.

CASES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

A. Event Cancellations

University of the Highlands and Islands

According to reporting in *The National*, the University of the Highlands and Islands cancelled an invited lecture by Professor Mazin Qumsiyeh entitled “*Sustainability and Biodiversity Preservation in Developing Countries*,” scheduled to take place in Inverness on 21 November 2024.

Professor Qumsiyeh is an internationally recognised Palestinian environmental scientist and academic. The cancellation was reportedly communicated via a brief email without explanation.

[BRISMES CAF wrote to the university’s Principal and Vice-Chancellor](#), Professor Vicki Nairn, on 15 January 2025 expressing concern over the last-minute cancellation. The letter also noted that a similar cancellation had previously affected a lecture by Palestinian artist Feda’a Al-Hassanet. No response was received from the university.

Under section 26 of the [Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#), Scottish universities must aim to uphold the academic freedom of staff in their teaching and research so far as the higher education provider considers reasonable. As part of their duties under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, higher education providers must protect the freedom of expression of academics and staff. Administrative practices that prevent academic events from taking place, without transparent justification, risk falling short of this obligation.

B. Disciplinary Investigations and Sanctions for Lawful Expression

Student Disciplinary Cases



BRISMES CAF intervened in three cases (King’s College London, SOAS and an unnamed English university) in which universities subjected students to disciplinary measures as a result of their political expression. In each case, universities stated that the individuals were not being disciplined for their political views but for alleged breaches of other institutional policies, such as protest regulations or harassment codes. In practice, however, BRISMES CAF is concerned that universities may be reclassifying lawful speech or protest as misconduct. The Committee is also concerned about the severity of some disciplinary measures.

Office for Students RA24 states that:

“The terms of any code, contract or policy should not be so broad that they suppress the lawful expression of a particular viewpoint or of a wide range of legally expressible content.” ([Section 158](#))

i. King’s College London

King’s College London indefinitely suspended Usama Ghanem, a student of International Relations, following disciplinary proceedings related to his participation in protests against Israel’s war in Gaza.

Because Mr Ghanem is an Egyptian national, the suspension had potential immigration consequences, including the revocation of his UK visa. As a result, [he risks](#) being removed from the UK and returned to Egypt, where he faces credible risks to his safety due to previous imprisonment and torture.

On 3 November 2025, [BRISMES wrote to university leadership](#) expressing concern about the potential consequences of the suspension and urging the university to review its decision in light of its duty of care toward students. [The university responded](#) that it could not discuss details of ongoing legal proceedings and that its disciplinary decisions follow established procedures.

ii. SOAS University of London

SOAS expelled Haya Adam, a second-year Law and International Relations student and president of the SOAS Palestine Society, following a disciplinary hearing on 8 August 2025.

The decision reportedly related to a video posted on social media criticising a student union co-president. The disciplinary panel concluded that the remarks constituted harassment.

[BRISMES expressed concern](#) that the interpretation of harassment in this case appeared to extend beyond the legal definition and risked penalising political criticism of elected student representatives. Such criticism forms a core element of democratic participation within universities. SOAS [responded](#), refuting the notion that any student is or has been subject to disciplinary action at SOAS in response to their political protests in solidarity with Palestine. SOAS stated that such cases involve specific violations of the SOAS Code of Conduct.

iii. Disciplinary Sanctions for Demonstration Speech (private correspondence for the protection of the confidentiality of the students concerned)

In early 2025, a disciplinary committee at an English university sanctioned two students for statements made during a campus demonstration on 7 October 2024.

The students asserted that Palestinians have a right to resist occupation and

referred to resistance “by any means necessary.” The university concluded that these remarks constituted unwanted conduct that created a hostile environment.

BRISMES CAF argued that the statements formed part of broader debates about international law and anti-colonial resistance. Such debates are widely discussed within academic disciplines including politics, history and area studies. Disciplining students for invoking these concepts risks discouraging legitimate academic and political discussion. Following BRISMES’s intervention, the university’s preliminary finding was subsequently overturned on appeal.

C. Censorship of Political and Academic Expression

Queen Mary University of London

Staff members at Queen Mary University of London were instructed to remove materials described as “pro-Palestine,” “anti-Israel,” or reflecting “personal political opinions” from office doors and campus spaces.

[BRISMES wrote to the university on 7 January 2026](#) expressing concern about the reasoning behind these instructions and their uneven implementation across departments.

The letter raised concerns about:

- the conflation of criticism of Israeli state policies with antisemitism,
- selective interpretations of institutional neutrality, and
- the use of discomfort or disagreement as a justification for restricting expression.

BRISMES urged the university to suspend these instructions and clarify its commitment to protecting academic freedom. No response was received.

In previous years, BRISMES has [raised concerns](#) about the use of references to institutional neutrality, safety concerns or the creation of an “uncomfortable” environment to justify restrictions on political and academic expression. In this regard, it is important to note that the Office for Students guidance related to freedom of speech ([Section 2, no. 121](#)) makes clear that it is the existence of a specific threat to *physical* safety that is the relevant factor when considering whether “safety” justifies restrictions on freedom of expression.

Open University

The Open University (OU) received a complaint from UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) concerning the use of the term “ancient Palestine” in teaching materials for the module *A111: Discovering the Arts and Humanities*. UKLFI is a political advocacy organisation that seeks to promote support for Israel in the United Kingdom and

has previously intervened in disputes relating to teaching and research concerning Palestine.

In a response to UKLFI, the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences acknowledged that the term “ancient Palestine” was academically appropriate but stated that it would not be used in future learning materials. BRISMES CAF expressed concern that this appeared to constitute a commitment by the university to prohibit the future use of terminology that it simultaneously recognised as academically legitimate.

BRISMES further questioned the rationale that changing political circumstances rendered the term problematic despite its acknowledged academic validity. The Committee also raised concerns about the role of an external political lobbying organisation in influencing decisions relating to curriculum content and academic terminology.

On 26 February 2026, BRISMES [wrote](#) to the university calling on it to publicly affirm that academic staff remain free to use terminology they consider academically appropriate, including the term ‘ancient Palestine’; to clarify that decisions concerning caveats and revisions to teaching materials rest with relevant academic specialists; and to review the procedures through which external complaints relating to teaching content are handled.

The University [responded on 2 March](#), stating that the university has not prohibited nor decided to cease using the term ‘ancient Palestine’ and affirming that academic colleagues “remain free to use the terminology they judge to be academically appropriate, in line with disciplinary conventions and their professional expertise”. The university emphasised that they remain committed to their obligations under the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act. BRISMES CAF [replied on 30 March](#), welcoming their letter and commitments, and encouraging the OU to review its code of practice on free speech to ensure that the academic freedom of staff members is fully protected from pressure by external actors.

This case raises broader concerns regarding academic autonomy, institutional responses to politically motivated complaints, and the ability of academic staff to exercise professional judgement in teaching and curriculum design without interference from external lobbying organisations.

D. Sector-Level Discourse and Institutional Responses

Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Report

[BRISMES CAF issued a statement](#) in response to a report published by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) examining student encampments on UK campuses during the summer of 2024.

While the report included recommendations encouraging universities to uphold freedom of expression, BRISMES expressed concern that aspects of its analysis risked undermining protections for lawful political expression relating to Israel–Palestine.

The statement highlighted several areas of concern, including:



- failure to distinguish clearly between antisemitism and anti-Zionism,
- interpretations of expressions associated with Palestinian identity that risked framing solidarity with Palestine as extremist,
- comparatively limited discussion of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism,
- the tendency to frame student activism primarily in terms of emotion and trauma rather than as political mobilisation engaging with international law, and
- a largely neutral treatment of severe institutional responses including arrests, surveillance and cooperation between universities and police.

BRISMES called on universities and sector bodies to reject the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, address Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism with equal seriousness, and protect the right of students and staff to protest and organise around issues of international justice.

National Union of Students

BRISMES Council [issued a statement](#) expressing concern regarding the response of the leadership of the National Union of Students (NUS) to an open letter signed by a number of elected student union representatives as well as civil society organisations (BRISMES included).

According to reports, NUS leadership suggested that the open letter constituted '[antisemitism and harassment](#)' and wrote to Student Unions' Chief Executives to encourage them to take action against signatories who are elected student union officers.

BRISMES emphasised that elected student representatives must be able to express political views—including anti-Zionist positions—without fear of intimidation or reputational attacks. The statement called on NUS leadership to engage constructively with the signatories and uphold principles of freedom of expression and democratic accountability.

E. Employment Disputes and Academic Freedom

University of Bristol – Professor David Miller

Professor David Miller, a sociologist formerly employed at the University of Bristol, was dismissed from his position in October 2021 following an internal investigation into comments he had made that were critical of the Israeli government, Zionism and pro-Israel lobbying organisations. Professor Miller challenged his dismissal before the UK Employment Tribunal. In its judgment issued on 5 February 2024, the [tribunal determined](#) that anti-Zionist beliefs constitute a protected philosophical belief under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and are therefore protected under the Equality Act 2010. The tribunal also identified shortcomings in the university's internal procedures, including evidence of discriminatory behaviour in the handling of the investigation. The University of Bristol decided to appeal the tribunal's ruling.

On 24 January 2025, [BRISMES wrote to the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Bristol](#) expressing concern over the university's decision to appeal the tribunal's ruling. Whilst we appreciate that many individuals, including BRISMES members, disagree with Professor Miller's statements, nonetheless, the letter urged the university to reconsider its decision and to publicly confirm that it does not contest the tribunal's conclusion that anti-Zionist beliefs are protected philosophical beliefs under UK law.

BRISMES also called on the university to review its internal investigative procedures to ensure that disciplinary processes are conducted in a fair and impartial manner and that lawful political beliefs—including anti-Zionist positions—are not subject to discriminatory treatment.

This case raises broader concerns about the protection of lawful political beliefs within universities and highlights the importance of ensuring that institutional disciplinary processes are consistent with statutory protections for freedom of expression and belief.

Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL) vs Dr Toufic Haddad

Dr Toufic Haddad, a Palestinian-American scholar of Palestine, was dismissed in 2024 from his position as Director of the Kenyon Institute in East Jerusalem, operated by the Council for British Research in the Levant.

Dr Haddad has since initiated legal proceedings in the United Kingdom alleging discrimination and politically motivated dismissal. The allegation that Dr Haddad may have been dismissed because of his political views, particularly those critical of UK or Israeli government policies, raises significant concerns.

BRISMES Council believes that CBRL, as a publicly funded research institution supported through its relationship with the British Academy, has an obligation to uphold principles of academic independence and freedom of expression. Any

perception that political views influence employment decisions risks undermining the credibility of UK-funded research institutions.

[BRISMES Council also expressed concern](#) regarding reports that CBRL sought to have the case heard in Israeli courts. East Jerusalem is widely regarded under international law as occupied territory, and the UK government does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over it.

[CBRL issued a statement](#) on 1 September rejecting the allegation that Dr Haddad's dismissal was related to his political or academic views and clarifying that the question of jurisdiction would be determined by UK courts.

F. Policing of Political Expression

Arrests related to the slogan "Globalise the Intifada"

In January 2026, BRISMES Council and the Committee on Academic Freedom [wrote jointly to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police](#) and then, in March, to [the West Yorkshire Police](#) regarding the arrests of Palestine solidarity protesters who had displayed placards or chanted slogans containing the phrase "Globalise the Intifada".

BRISMES expressed concern that these arrests appeared to criminalise lawful political expression and risked creating a chilling effect on protest and public debate. Drawing on its expertise in the Arabic language and Middle Eastern history, BRISMES emphasised that *intifada* is an Arabic term meaning "shaking off" or "uprising" and has historically been used in a variety of political contexts across the Arab world. The organisation argued that the term is not inherently violent and does not inherently denote terrorism.

The letter further warned against approaches that treat political slogans associated with Palestine as inherently criminal irrespective of context, intent, or evidence of incitement. BRISMES argued that such practices risk misrepresenting Arabic political language, undermining freedom of expression, and disproportionately affecting Palestinians and those expressing solidarity with Palestinian rights.

The intervention called on the police forces to review any operational guidance treating the phrase as inherently criminal; cease arrests based solely on its use absent evidence of criminal conduct; ensure that assessments of political speech in Arabic draw upon appropriate linguistic and regional expertise; and reaffirm their commitment to protecting freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

This case illustrates the broader context in which academic freedom operates. Restrictions on political expression in wider society may have consequences for academic debate, teaching, research, and public engagement concerning the Middle East and Palestine.

G. Academic Mobility and Access to Higher Education

UK Home Office – Restrictions on Student Visas

In March 2026, the UK Home Secretary announced an “emergency brake” on student visas for applicants from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan. The policy was justified by reference to an increase in asylum claims associated with the student visa route among applicants from those countries.

BRISMES CAF [wrote to the Home Secretary](#) expressing concern that the measure risked undermining academic freedom, academic mobility, and the principle of equal access to higher education. The Committee noted that universities depend upon international exchange and that students from conflict-affected or politically unstable countries make important intellectual, cultural and scholarly contributions to academic life in the United Kingdom.

The Committee called on the Home Office to reconsider the measure and to engage with universities and relevant stakeholders in developing approaches that address government concerns without undermining academic mobility, international collaboration, or the openness of the UK higher education sector.

CASES IN EUROPE

Although legal and statutory frameworks differ across European countries, the cases documented below reveal similar patterns to those observed in the United Kingdom, including event cancellations justified by security concerns, disciplinary measures against scholars and political interventions affecting academic activity and expression.

Academic freedom and freedom of expression are protected under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authorities.

A. Event Cancellations

Free University of Berlin

The Free University of Berlin cancelled lectures scheduled for 19 February 2025 featuring the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese, and Professor Eyal Weizman, founder of Forensic Architecture.

The university justified the cancellation on security grounds. [BRISMES CAF questioned the credibility of this justification](#), noting that Albanese has spoken at numerous European universities without incident.

The cancellation followed public criticism of Albanese by political figures and diplomatic actors. BRISMES expressed concern that such pressures may have influenced the university's decision and warned that external political intervention risks undermining university autonomy and academic freedom. No response was received.

University of Bern

The University of Bern cancelled a public event organised by Amnesty International featuring Francesca Albanese and Amnesty International Secretary-General Agnès Callamard.

[BRISMES and partner scholarly associations expressed concern](#) about the last-minute cancellation and called on the university to provide transparency regarding the decision-making process and to reaffirm its commitment to academic freedom and open debate. No response was received.

Collège de France

In November 2025, the Collège de France cancelled a symposium titled “Palestine and Europe,” organised by the Chair of Contemporary History of the Arab World in collaboration with the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies.

The cancellation followed political criticism of the event and public statements by the French Minister of National Education and Youth questioning its academic legitimacy. [BRISMES, together with several international scholarly associations, expressed concern](#) that political intervention had influenced the decision and warned that such actions risk setting a dangerous precedent whereby political pressure determines which topics may be discussed in academic institutions.

No response was received. The symposium ultimately took place at an alternative venue and was successfully livestreamed.

B. Disciplinary and Legal Measures Against Scholars

The University of Lausanne

The University of Lausanne did not renew the contract of visiting professor Joseph Daher following a disciplinary procedure initiated after he expressed support for student protests concerning Palestine. The disciplinary procedure did not relate to his political expression but rather to an administrative matter.

[BRISMES and partner scholarly associations expressed concern](#) that the decision appeared disproportionate and followed a period of public criticism directed at Professor Daher in the media.

The organisations called for the reinstatement of Professor Daher and urged the university to ensure that scholars are protected from political pressure and smear campaigns that may threaten academic freedom. No response was received.

European Research Council – Dr Harry Pettit

In March 2026, BRISMES CAF [wrote to the leadership of the European Research Council](#) (ERC) expressing concern regarding public calls by Members of the European Parliament for the withdrawal of an ERC Starting Grant awarded to Dr Harry Pettit. The grant, worth €1.5 million, had been awarded in July 2025 for a project entitled *Money as Infrastructure: The Struggle over the Means of Money Circulation in a (Cash)less World*.

The calls for the withdrawal of the grant followed criticism of Dr Pettit's views and public commentary on developments in the Middle East. BRISMES argued that academic freedom extends beyond the university and includes the right of scholars to participate in public debate as citizens and public intellectuals. The Committee expressed concern that attempts to withdraw research funding on the basis of lawful political expression risk undermining academic freedom, creating a chilling effect on public engagement by scholars, and compromising the independence of research funding bodies.

The letter called on the ERC to defend the integrity of its funding processes, affirm that lawful political expression cannot constitute grounds for withdrawing a research grant, and confirm that research funding decisions remain based solely on academic merit.

The ERC [replied on 25 March](#) acknowledging receipt of our letter and confirming that they are currently assessing complaints made against Dr Pettit.

France – François Burgat

In May 2026, BRISMES CAF joined the academic freedom committees of the French Society for Middle Eastern and Muslim World Studies (SEMOMM) and the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMO) in issuing a [statement](#) expressing solidarity with François Burgat, a retired research director at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and internationally recognised scholar of political Islam. Burgat appeared before a court in Aix-en-Provence on charges of “glorifying terrorism”. The proceedings followed an earlier trial in which he had been acquitted; prosecutors subsequently appealed the decision and sought a one-year suspended prison sentence.

The joint statement expressed concern that the case formed part of a broader trend towards the criminalisation of intellectual debate concerning developments in the Middle East, particularly discussion of Israel's war on Gaza and criticism of Israeli government policies. The organisations warned that the use of terrorism-related legislation in this context risks undermining academic freedom, freedom

of expression, and public debate on matters of significant public concern.

The statement called on public authorities to uphold academic freedom and freedom of expression and to ensure that counter-terrorism legislation is not used in ways that suppress legitimate scholarly inquiry, political analysis, or criticism of states and non-state actors.

C. Scholars at Risk and Access to Sanctuary

Armed conflict and political repression increasingly place scholars, students and university staff at immediate risk to their lives and livelihoods. Academic freedom cannot be meaningfully protected if scholars whose lives are at risk are unable to leave conflict zones or continue their work in safety. In such circumstances, access to sanctuary and temporary academic positions in other countries can be essential for preserving both individual safety and the continuity of scholarly work.

During the reporting period, BRISMES CAF intervened in a case concerning a Palestinian scholar from Gaza who had secured a fellowship at a university in the Republic of Ireland. Arrangements had been made to host the scholar and provide institutional support upon arrival in Ireland. However, at the time of our intervention, evacuation arrangements did not include the scholar's family.

In correspondence sent to the relevant authorities, BRISMES emphasised that evacuating the academic without his family would place him in an "impossible and devastating situation," both personally and professionally. The letter highlighted the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, including continuous and indiscriminate bombardment, and warned that delays in evacuating the scholar's family placed them at immediate risk. No response was received.

This case appears to reflect a wider problem. Anecdotal reports suggest that a number of scholars who were able to secure fellowships abroad have faced similar obstacles, including restrictions preventing them from leaving Gaza together with their families. Such constraints create profound ethical and practical dilemmas for scholars who may be forced to choose between personal safety and remaining with their families.

The case also reflects the broader humanitarian situation in Gaza, where the population has faced severe restrictions on movement. In May 2024, Israeli authorities closed the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt—the only crossing through which civilians could leave Gaza—preventing most people from escaping the war. The crossing did not reopen until February 2026, and, even then, only for limited categories of movement, primarily patients requiring medical treatment outside Gaza and a small number of returnees. The crossing was again closed at the beginning of March 2026, with the start of Israel's military attacks on Iran.

BRISMES has [previously condemned](#) the widespread destruction of universities in Gaza and the targeting of academics. The destruction of higher education

institutions in Gaza forms part of a longer-term pattern of systematic attacks on Palestinian education, termed 'scholasticide'. [The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory](#) has also raised concerns that attacks on educational institutions form part of broader violations of international law in Gaza, including genocide.



In response to the destruction of Gaza's higher education system, in 2024–2025, BRISMES raised £25,000 for [ISNAD](#), a programme run by the charity Taawon that supports students in Gaza in continuing their university education and helps universities pay their staff, who have continued to teach on-line, despite the destruction of campus infrastructure.

BRISMES also helped to promote and hosted on our website an [open letter](#) in the summer of 2025 calling on the UK government to waive biometric visa requirements for students from Gaza and to support the evacuation of students who had secured places at UK universities.

The situation highlights the urgent need for stronger international support mechanisms for scholars and students affected by war and political violence. Universities and academic associations across Europe have an important role to play in supporting displaced scholars, providing fellowships and temporary positions, and assisting in the long-term rebuilding of higher education systems affected by conflict.

BRISMES calls on universities, governments and academic associations across Europe to take concrete steps to support scholars, researchers and students from Gaza and other conflict zones, including facilitating safe evacuation, providing academic placements and contributing to the reconstruction of higher education institutions.

BRISMES also pays tribute to university teachers and students in Gaza, Sudan and other conflict-affected regions who continue to pursue teaching, research and learning under extraordinarily difficult conditions.

EMERGING PATTERNS IN THE UK AND EUROPE

Taken together, the cases documented in this section reveal several concerning trends affecting academic freedom and freedom of expression in universities and academic institutions in the United Kingdom and Europe.

1. Administrative suppression of academic events

Universities have cancelled or restricted academic events addressing Israel–Palestine, citing security concerns, reputational risks or public controversy. In several cases, such justifications were not accompanied by transparent explanations or evidence that less restrictive measures had been considered.

Late-stage cancellations and heightened administrative barriers may have the effect of discouraging controversial but lawful speech and limiting opportunities for scholarly debate. When such measures are applied unevenly or without clear procedural safeguards, they risk undermining universities’ legal obligations to facilitate freedom of expression.

2. Use of disciplinary procedures to regulate political expression

Students and scholars have faced disciplinary investigations or sanctions linked to political speech or protest activity. Universities frequently state that disciplinary action relates not to speech itself but to alleged breaches of conduct policies, protest regulations or harassment provisions.

However, these frameworks may be applied in ways that effectively penalise lawful political expression. In several cases documented by BRISMES CAF, disciplinary processes appear to have been triggered by political speech relating to Israel–Palestine and subsequently framed as misconduct through expansive interpretations of institutional regulations.

The severity of disciplinary measures—including suspension or expulsion—may also create disproportionate consequences for students and staff and contribute to a climate in which individuals become reluctant to participate in political debate.

3. Expansive interpretations of harassment and institutional neutrality

In contrast to the Office for Students [guidance](#), which understands harassment according to its definitions in the Equality Act 2010 and the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, some institutional responses appear to rely on broad interpretations of harassment, “hostile environment,” or institutional neutrality policies. When applied without clear thresholds, such frameworks risk conflating legitimate political disagreement with discrimination or harassment.

Similarly, references to institutional neutrality, campus safety, or the avoidance of discomfort have been used to justify restrictions on political expression. While universities have legitimate responsibilities to ensure a safe and inclusive environment, policies must be applied in ways that do not suppress lawful academic or political debate.

4. Sector-level narratives shaping the boundaries of debate

The cases examined also illustrate how sector-level actors—including policy institutes and student representative bodies—play an important role in shaping the broader environment in which universities respond to political activism.



Reports, public statements and institutional responses that blur the distinction between antisemitism and political criticism of Israel may contribute to a climate in which solidarity with Palestinian rights is framed as inherently problematic or extremist. Such narratives can influence institutional decision-making and contribute to pressures that discourage universities from facilitating debate that some may consider controversial.

At the same time, attempts to delegitimize or intimidate students and their elected representatives who express dissenting political views raise concerns about the health of democratic debate within the student movement and higher education sector.

5. Employment disputes and the protection of academic independence

The cases highlight concerns regarding employment decisions involving academic staff and research institutions. Allegations that scholars may have faced dismissal or disciplinary action because of their political views raise serious questions about the protection of academic freedom.

Research institutes and universities—particularly those receiving public funding—have a responsibility to ensure that employment decisions are not influenced by political considerations. Perceptions that political views may affect hiring or dismissal decisions risk undermining trust in the independence and integrity of academic institutions.

The cases also raise broader concerns regarding attempts to subject academic careers and research funding to political scrutiny on the basis of scholars' lawful political beliefs or public expression.

6. Academic freedom increasingly extends beyond the university

Several cases demonstrate that academic freedom is affected not only by decisions taken within universities. Police practices, immigration policies, research funding decisions, legal proceedings, and the activities of external lobbying organisations may all shape the environment in which scholars teach, research, publish, and participate in public debate. Protecting academic freedom therefore requires attention to a wider ecosystem of institutions and actors

beyond higher education itself.

7. External political pressure on universities

Several cases suggest that universities and academic institutions are facing pressure from political actors, pressure groups, diplomatic representatives or media campaigns regarding events or activities related to Israel–Palestine. In some cases, universities appear to have modified or considered modifying academic activities, teaching materials, or institutional decisions in response to such pressures.

Such pressures place universities in difficult positions, particularly when controversies attract significant public attention. However, allowing external political pressure to shape academic decision-making risks compromising institutional autonomy and undermining the principles of academic freedom.

In some instances, pressures have extended beyond universities themselves and have involved attempts to influence research funding decisions or the use of legal proceedings against scholars engaged in public debate.

8. A cumulative chilling effect

The cumulative effect of these developments risks creating a chilling effect on research, teaching and public engagement related to Israel–Palestine.



“The cumulative effect of these developments risks creating a chilling effect on research, teaching and public engagement related to Israel–Palestine.”

Students may become reluctant to study politically sensitive topics, while scholars—particularly early-career researchers, migrant workers and those employed on precarious contracts—may hesitate to engage publicly in debates concerning Israel-Palestine, including opposing war crimes and human rights violations.

Universities play a vital role as spaces for critical inquiry and open debate. Ensuring that academic institutions remain environments in which controversial issues can be examined rigorously and freely is essential to the mission of higher education.

SECTION II: RESTRICTIONS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

INTRODUCTION

This section reviews cases taken up by the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) during the reporting period concerning violations of academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to education in the Middle East and North Africa. The cases documented here concern Egypt, Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In some instances, BRISMES directed its interventions not only to authorities within the country where the violation occurred, but also to institutions or authorities outside that country, in an effort to secure protection, accountability, or a resolution.

BRISMES's interventions in these cases are informed by [UNESCO's 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel](#). The Recommendation affirms that higher-education teaching personnel should enjoy freedom of expression, assembly, and association, and should not be subjected to "arbitrary arrest or detention." It defines academic freedom as encompassing freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom to conduct research and to "disseminate and publish the results thereof," freedom to express opinions about the institution or system in which scholars work, and "freedom from institutional censorship." It further affirms the right to carry out research "without any interference, or any suppression," and to publish and communicate research findings. UNESCO also states that higher education institutions should uphold academic freedom and fundamental human rights, protect staff from violence, intimidation, and harassment, and ensure access to teaching, research, and information resources "without censorship".

The cases documented in this section illustrate several forms of violation: detention and prosecution of scholars and public intellectuals under vague or poorly defined allegations related to national security, terrorism, or espionage; the confiscation of research materials and interference with scholarly work; the intimidation of independent educational initiatives operating outside state-controlled institutions; and direct attacks on universities that disrupt teaching, research, and student life. Several cases also demonstrate the vulnerability of higher education institutions during armed conflict and the importance of international humanitarian law in protecting universities, scholars, students, and research infrastructure. Taken together, these forms of repression undermine the conditions UNESCO identifies as essential to academic freedom: liberty and

security of person, freedom from repression, freedom to conduct research and publish, protection from censorship, and an educational environment in which scholars and students are able to work without fear.

These patterns are not new in the Middle East. Rather, they reflect a longer trajectory of shrinking academic and civic space across the region. At the same time, they should not be viewed in isolation from broader global pressures on academic freedom and freedom of expression. Collectively, the cases in this report demonstrate how restrictions on dissent, research, teaching, and institutional autonomy reinforce one another, narrowing the space for critical thought both within universities and across public life.

A final methodological point is worth noting. Some cases could plausibly fall under more than one thematic category. To avoid repetition, each case has been placed under the theme that best captures its primary form of violation, while recognising that many cases involve multiple and overlapping violations.

Table 2: summary of cases in the Middle East and North Africa

TYPES OF VIOLATIONS	NUMBER OF VIOLATIONS
Harassment, threats, smearing and intimidation	0
Bans, cancellations, censorship and administrative restrictions	0
Investigations, disciplinary procedures and legal processes	0
Professional, educational and financial repercussions legal processes	0
Interference with research, teaching and knowledge production	1
Arrest, detention, prosecution and restrictions on movement	4
Violence, killings and attacks on educational institutions	3

CASES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

A. Detention, prosecution of scholars and public intellectuals

This theme covers cases in which states used detention, criminal prosecution, national security procedures, terrorism-related allegations, or espionage charges to intimidate or punish peaceful expression, scholarship, or public intellectual activity.

Egypt - Alaa Abdel Fattah

After several previous arrests, author and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah (an Egyptian-British citizen) was arrested again by the Egyptian authorities in 2019 and held in remand detention for two years (2019–2021). He was subsequently sentenced to five years in prison. The authorities refused to count his pre-trial detention toward the sentence, effectively extending his imprisonment beyond his scheduled release date of 29 September 2024. The case had a severe impact on his family, leading his mother, Professor Laila Soueif, Professor of Mathematics at Cairo University, to undertake a prolonged hunger strike in protest against her son's detention, which resulted in her hospitalisation. Alaa Abdel Fattah himself also undertook a hunger strike in protest against his conditions of detention. Egyptian authorities pursued the case under terrorism-related and speech-related charges linked to his public expression, including Facebook posts.

On 2 June 2025, [CAF](#) wrote to the UK prime minister and foreign minister concerning the case and called for Alaa Abdel Fattah's immediate and unconditional release. The Committee also urged stronger action through diplomatic and legal mechanisms. The intervention framed the case within the broader framework of academic freedom and freedom of expression due to its wider implications for lawful speech and intellectual activity. It also noted BRISMES' previous engagement with the UK Government, including correspondence in October 2024 following the onset of Professor Laila Soueif's hunger strike, and the response from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office at the time stating that the case remained a "priority". No response was received. Alaa Abdel Fattah was eventually released from prison in September 2025.

Iran - Dr Ahmadreza Djalali

Dr Ahmadreza Djalali, an Iranian-Swedish scientist and scholar of disaster medicine who is affiliated with three different academic institutions, Karolinska Institutet in Sweden, Università del Piemonte Orientale in Italy, and Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium, was arrested while visiting Iran in 2016 at the invitation of the University of Tehran and the University of Shiraz and has been detained since then. In 2017, following what was described as a forced confession, he was sentenced to death on espionage charges and has remained under threat of execution, a threat described as especially acute since 2020. After months of uncertainty regarding his condition, it was reported that he remained alive but has been on hunger strike.

On 9 October 2025, BRISMES CAF sent [correspondence](#) concerning Dr Djalali's continued imprisonment to Ulf Kristersson, Prime Minister of Sweden; Vincent Blondel, President of the Belgian Senate; Freya Van de Bossche of the Flemish Government; and Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy. BRISMES called on the governments addressed to press the Iranian authorities to reverse the death sentence, reconsider the charges, and secure Dr Djalali's immediate release. BRISMES framed the case as part of a broader pattern of repression targeting

academics in Iran and as a serious violation of academic freedom and freedom of expression. The case raised particular concern because it involved the detention of an academic invited to Iran for scholarly purposes, the reported use of a forced confession, and the continued threat of execution. No response was received.

Kuwait - Dr Jassim Aljezza

Dr Jassim Aljezza, lecturer in Arab and Islamic history, was reportedly summoned by Kuwaiti national security authorities on 9 November 2025 and subsequently detained in connection with an article he had written and posted on X on 2 November 2025. The detention appears to have been linked to Dr Aljezza's political expression.

On 20 November 2025, CAF [wrote](#) to H.E. Bader Almunayekh, Ambassador of Kuwait to the UK, urging him to raise the matter with the relevant authorities and to ensure that Dr Aljezza's rights were protected and that he received appropriate legal safeguards. BRISMES argued that the detention violated Article 41 of Kuwait's Constitution, which guarantees freedom of opinion and scientific research, and warned that the case set a dangerous precedent for Kuwait's democratic and institutional life. No response was received. Dr Aljezza was released on 26 November 2025.

Bahrain - Dr Abduljalil al-Singace

Dr Abduljalil al-Singace, a Bahraini engineer, blogger and human rights activist, was arrested in 2011 and sentenced to life imprisonment for his pro-democracy activism during the 2011 uprisings. He remains in detention in Bahrain until today. BRISMES has previously written to Bahraini authorities about Dr al-Singace's case in [January 2023](#), [July 2023](#) and [August 2024](#). BRISMES linked its [intervention](#) in 2025 to his prolonged liquid-only hunger strike, which had continued for four years and was initiated in protest at the confiscation by prison authorities of his research manuscripts on Bahraini dialects of Arabic. The letter also raised concern about his conditions of detention, including solitary confinement at Kanoo Medical Centre and denial of adequate medical care and access to daylight.

On 18 July 2025, CAF [wrote](#) to Shaikh Fawaz bin Mohamed bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, Ambassador of Bahrain to the UK, copying Hamish Falconer MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Middle East. BRISMES called for Dr al-Singace's immediate and unconditional release and, pending release, requested improved detention conditions, adequate medical care, an end to solitary confinement, and the return of his confiscated research to his family. BRISMES argued that Dr al-Singace's detention violated constitutional protections for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. In March 2026, CAF was also signatory to a [letter](#) jointly signed by 18 other human rights organisations calling on the Bahraini authorities to release Dr al-Singace and other imprisoned human

rights defenders. Although discussed in that letter primarily as a case of detention and imprisonment, the confiscation of Dr al-Singace's research manuscripts also makes this an important case of interference with scholarly production and academic work. No response was received.

B. Harassment and intimidation of independent educational initiatives

This theme captures efforts to restrict academic work that takes place outside state-controlled university structures, especially where independent platforms create alternative spaces for teaching, research, and collaboration.

Iran - Independent Online Educational Platform

Multiple scholars and academics in Iran were reportedly arrested in connection with their affiliation with an online virtual university platform that supports independent teaching, research, and scholarly collaboration. Reports indicated that the arrests were carried out without clear charges or due process. Although some academics were later released, the repeated pattern of arrest appeared designed to intimidate those involved and deter participation in academic initiatives outside state control. On 17 November 2025, CAF sent a [letter](#) to the President of Iran, the Minister of Science, Research and Technology, the Chief of the Judiciary, and the Iranian Ambassador to the UK. BRISMES CAF called for an end to harassment of academics linked to the platform, guarantees against re-arrest and intimidation, transparent legal processes, and respect for academic freedom and freedom of expression. BRISMES viewed the case as a violation of academic freedom and freedom of expression, and as inconsistent with Iran's international obligations, including under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The case falls under harassment and intimidation of independent educational initiatives, while also reflecting detention and prosecution of scholars and public intellectuals. No response was received.

C. Violence against educational institutions and the right to education

This theme addresses military attacks on universities and the conditions necessary for teaching and learning.

Occupied Palestinian Territory – Birzeit University

On 6 January 2026, Israeli forces raided Birzeit University during a gathering held in solidarity with Palestinian prisoners. According to trusted media outlets, soldiers stormed the campus, broke through the main gate, entered university buildings, and used live ammunition, stun grenades, and tear gas in areas where students and staff were present. The raid disrupted academic activities, caused panic, and injured at least eleven students, who were hospitalised; others were

affected by tear gas inhalation, rubber-coated bullets, and shrapnel.



On 20 January 2026, BRISMES CAF, together with the Academic Freedom Committee of the German Middle East Studies Association (DAVO), issued a public [statement](#) condemning the attack. BRISMES and DAVO described the raid as a violation of the rights and safety of students, academics, and staff; an infringement of the right to education; and a direct assault on academic freedom and the ability of educational institutions to operate without coercion or violence. They also situated it within a broader pattern of systemic targeting of Palestinian educational institutions.

Lebanon – Lebanese University

In the context of Israel's military assault on Lebanon, Israeli forces attacked facilities belonging to the Lebanese University (LU), Lebanon's only public university. The attack resulted in the deaths of Professor Hussein Bazi, Director of the Faculty of Sciences, and Professor Mortada Srour, Professor of Chemistry and Physics. Israeli authorities alleged that Professor Srour was affiliated with Hezbollah.

BRISMES CAF issued a [statement](#) in April 2026 condemning the attack and noting that no evidence was publicly provided to substantiate this claim. Moreover, even if such allegations were accurate, Professor Srour was not reported to have been engaged in any military activity when he was killed.

CAF further emphasised that attacks on universities and educational institutions raise serious concerns under international humanitarian law. Educational institutions are civilian objects and enjoy protection unless and for such time as they are used for military purposes. The targeting of university facilities and academic personnel risks depriving students of educational opportunities and undermining the intellectual and cultural foundations of society.

CAF called for an immediate end to US-Israeli aggression on Lebanon and Iran and reiterated its support for a full arms embargo on Israel.

Iran – Attacks on Universities and Research Institutions

BRISMES CAF released a [statement](#) in April 2026 expressing unequivocal condemnation of the targeting of universities, schools and research institutions across Iran by the United States and Israel. According to available reports, at least sixteen universities and research centres sustained damage, including facilities at Sharif University of Technology, Iran University of Science and Technology, Isfahan University of Technology, and the Pasteur Institute.

BRISMES also noted reports that at least five university professors, sixty students, and more than a hundred schoolchildren had been killed during the attacks. Among those reported killed was Dr Saeed Shamghadri of Iran University of Science and Technology, who was reportedly killed alongside members of his family in what appeared to be a targeted attack against a scientist.

Beyond the immediate loss of life, BRISMES stressed that attacks on universities undermine scientific development, destroy educational infrastructure, and threaten the future of higher education. Such actions affect not only current students and researchers but also future generations whose access to education and scientific advancement may be diminished.

CAF called on the UK Government to urge respect for international humanitarian law, demand an end to attacks on universities and civilian infrastructure, oppose the targeting of academics and researchers, and support independent investigations into alleged violations. It also called on international scholarly associations and academic institutions to speak out against attacks on higher education and to defend the integrity of academic and scientific institutions globally.

EMERGING PATTERNS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

1. The securitisation of scholarship and public expression

A recurring pattern across the Egypt, Iran, and Kuwait cases is the use of national security, terrorism, espionage, or similar frameworks to criminalise peaceful expression and intimidate critical voices. What is at stake is not only individual liberty, but the wider message such cases send to scholars, students, and public intellectuals about the risks of speaking, writing, or participating in public debate.

2. Repression targets knowledge production, not only opinion

The Bahrain case highlights that academic freedom violations are not limited to punishing speech or dissenting opinion. They may also take the form of direct interference with the production, preservation, and circulation of knowledge. Confiscating research manuscripts, obstructing publication, and preventing scholars from retaining or sharing their work undermine the conditions necessary for research and teaching and therefore affect the educational process itself. These practices harm not only individual academics, but also the wider scholarly and student communities deprived of access to that knowledge. The case therefore illustrates a deeper form of repression: one that targets scholarship as a social and intellectual practice. This goes to the core of UNESCO's protection of academic freedom, including freedom in research, dissemination and publication, and freedom from censorship and interference.

“Academic freedom violations are not limited to punishing speech or dissenting opinion. They may also take the form of direct interference with the production, preservation and circulation of knowledge.”

3. Independent educational spaces are treated as threats

The Iran Academia case suggests that governments may view autonomous educational initiatives as politically suspect precisely because they enable teaching, collaboration, and intellectual exchange outside state-controlled frameworks. This widens the academic freedom question beyond universities narrowly defined and raises concerns about the shrinking space for alternative forms of higher learning and knowledge production.

4. Academic freedom and the right to education are inseparable

The cases of Birzeit University, the Lebanese University, and the attacks on universities and research institutes in Iran demonstrate that academic freedom cannot be reduced to questions of freedom of expression alone. These cases demonstrate that universities are not merely sites of expression but also physical institutions whose destruction can eliminate the practical possibility of teaching, learning, and research. Universities require physical safety, institutional continuity, and protected educational spaces in order for teaching, research, and learning to occur. Military attacks on campuses, educators, students, laboratories, and research infrastructure directly undermine both the right to education and the conditions necessary for academic freedom. The case also underlines that attacks on universities must be understood in relation to wider systems of political domination and violence, which affect not only what can be said and taught, but whether education can take place at all.

“Academic freedom cannot be reduced to speech alone. Where military violence disrupts campus life, injures students and interrupts teaching, the right to education and the institutional conditions for academic freedom are directly attacked.”

5. Many cases are transnational in their consequences and remedies

Several interventions were directed to foreign governments, embassies, or international actors rather than only to the state directly responsible for the violation. This reflects the transnational nature of academic work and of academic freedom advocacy: remedy often depends on diplomatic pressure, international scholarly solidarity, and cross-border institutional support. It also reflects the fact that academic repression is shaped by an international environment in which states learn from one another, justify restrictions by reference to practices elsewhere, and benefit from weak global accountability for attacks on scholars and institutions.

6. Academic repression reflects the wider shrinking of civic and political space

Taken together, these cases show that restrictions on academic freedom are closely linked to the broader suppression of free expression and political opposition within the state. Universities and scholars do not operate outside society; where political environments are marked by authoritarianism, repression, and the criminalisation of dissent, academic life is inevitably affected. The erosion of academic freedom is therefore both a symptom and a mechanism of wider democratic decline.

7. Regional patterns are reinforced by a wider global decline in academic freedom and free speech

Although the forms of repression documented in this section are shaped by the specific political realities of the Middle East and North Africa, they should also be read in relation to a broader international retreat from protections for academic freedom and free expression. Restrictions on controversial scholarship, growing political intervention in universities, and the narrowing of space for dissent are visible well beyond the region. As demonstrated by the cases documented in the United Kingdom and Europe, pressures on academic freedom are not confined to authoritarian contexts. Although the forms of repression differ substantially in severity, restrictions on controversial scholarship, political expression, and institutional autonomy are increasingly visible across diverse political systems. This wider international deterioration matters not only because it weakens global norms, but also because it enables states in the region to normalise repression and deflect criticism by pointing to restrictions elsewhere.

SECTION III: RECOMMENDATIONS

UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS

- Ensure institutional policies comply with international norms of academic freedom and legal obligations protecting freedom of expression and academic freedom.
- Avoid cancelling academic events unless there are compelling and clearly documented security risks that cannot be addressed through less restrictive measures.
- Ensure disciplinary procedures are transparent, proportionate, and consistent with protections for lawful academic, political, and protest-related expression.
- Apply harassment, discrimination, and conduct policies in ways that do not penalise lawful political viewpoints or academic debate.
- Ensure that criticism of states, governments, political ideologies, political movements, or public institutions is not treated as discrimination, harassment, or hate speech in the absence of conduct that meets the relevant legal thresholds.
- Protect scholars and students from external political pressure, lobbying campaigns, and defamatory media attacks.
- Defend university autonomy against state and external interference in governance, teaching, research, curriculum design, and public programming.
- Build robust accountability mechanisms for reporting, reviewing, and remedying violations of academic freedom.
- Provide fellowships, sanctuary opportunities, and temporary placements for scholars at risk, including displaced academics and students from conflict-affected regions.
- Support the rebuilding of higher education systems affected by war, military occupation, and armed conflict.

GOVERNMENTS AND PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

- Release scholars, students, and public intellectuals detained or prosecuted for peaceful expression, academic activity, or political advocacy.
- Refrain from using national security, counter-terrorism, public order, or similar legislation to criminalise academic research, teaching, protest, or public debate.
- Respect and protect institutional autonomy and refrain from political interference in academic activities, appointments, teaching, and research.
- Facilitate safe evacuation, family reunification, and accessible visa pathways for scholars and students at risk.
- Ensure that immigration and border policies do not create unjustified barriers to academic mobility and international scholarly exchange.
- Respect international humanitarian law and the protected status of educational institutions, students, teachers, researchers, and educational infrastructure.
- Support independent investigations and accountability mechanisms where attacks on educational institutions or scholars may constitute violations of international law.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

- Strengthen monitoring of attacks on academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to education.
- Investigate attacks on universities, scholars, students, and educational infrastructure and support accountability under international law.
- Expand international programmes supporting scholars and students at risk.
- Develop stronger international mechanisms for monitoring and responding to systematic violations of academic freedom.
- Support reconstruction and recovery efforts for higher education systems affected by conflict, occupation, or political repression.

SCHOLARLY ASSOCIATIONS AND ACADEMIC NETWORKS

- Document and speak out against violations of academic freedom and raise awareness of threats to scholars, students, and institutions.
- Provide support networks, advocacy, and practical assistance for scholars facing repression, displacement, or political pressure.
- Foster international collaboration aimed at protecting academic freedom and rebuilding educational institutions in conflict-affected regions.
- Defend the principle that lawful scholarly inquiry and political expression should not be restricted because of their subject matter or political implications.
- Promote academic freedom as a universal principle applicable across all regions and political contexts.

CONCLUSION

The cases documented in this report illustrate the diverse ways in which academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the right to education are under pressure both in the Middle East and North Africa and in relation to the teaching, research, and public discussion of the region internationally. While the forms of restriction differ significantly across contexts, they share a common effect: narrowing the space in which scholars, students and public intellectuals can research, teach, speak, and debate freely. In many cases, they also undermine the production, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge itself, whether through censorship, intimidation, imprisonment, restrictions on movement, or attacks on educational institutions.

In the United Kingdom and Europe, the pressures documented in this report largely arise through institutional processes within universities and the wider higher education sector. These include the cancellation of academic events, disciplinary proceedings related to political expression, the expansive use of harassment or conduct policies, and the influence of external political pressure on university decision-making. Although these measures operate within democratic systems that formally protect freedom of expression, they nevertheless risk creating a chilling effect on scholarship and teaching, particularly on issues related to Israel–Palestine.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the threats to academic freedom documented here are more direct and often more severe. Scholars, researchers and public intellectuals have faced detention, capital punishment, prosecution and harassment for peaceful expression, while independent educational initiatives have been subjected to intimidation and interference. In conflict settings, universities themselves may become targets of military violence, undermining the right to education and the institutional conditions necessary for academic freedom to exist.

Despite these differences, the cases documented in this report demonstrate that academic freedom cannot be understood in isolation from broader political and social conditions. Where freedom of expression is restricted, where dissent is criminalised, or where educational institutions are subject to political pressure or military violence, academic life is inevitably affected. Universities are embedded within wider societies, and the protection of academic freedom therefore depends on the health of the civic and political environments in which they operate.

The report also highlights the increasingly transnational nature of both threats to academic freedom and efforts to defend it. Scholars move across borders, research networks span multiple countries, and responses to academic repression often depend on international solidarity and diplomatic engagement. Universities, governments and scholarly associations therefore share a responsibility to defend the principles that allow research, teaching and intellectual exchange to flourish.

Protecting academic freedom requires not only responding to individual cases but also addressing the broader structural conditions that allow restrictions to emerge. Ensuring that universities remain spaces for critical inquiry, open debate, and the pursuit of knowledge is essential not only to the mission of higher education, but also to the preservation of democratic life, intellectual freedom, and the possibility of a more just and informed society.

“Academic freedom cannot be understood in isolation from freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom from arbitrary detention, and the right to education.”



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