



# BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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3 November 2022

## Open Letter to COP27 Attendees

I write on behalf of the [Committee for Academic Freedom](#) of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to provide you with some essential information regarding the state of academic freedom in Egypt prior to your visit to COP27 this November. 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.

Protecting academic freedoms is paramount for productive discussions and for the pursuit of effective climate solutions. The principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression are [explicitly upheld by the UNFCCC](#) as foundational to the COP process. As such, we believe that it is important to highlight some serious breaches of these freedoms by Egyptian authorities.

### **Environmental Research & Civic Space:**

- Due to a [2019 Egyptian law](#), climate researchers and NGOs are prevented from publishing information considered ‘political’ without government permission, including on local environmental trends. As such climate researchers, such as University of British Columbia researcher [Mohammed Rafi Arefin](#), have flagged that they have been prohibited from conducting essential research into Egypt’s environmental policy.
- [According to Human Rights Watch](#), “the Egyptian government has imposed arbitrary funding, research, and registration obstacles that have debilitated local environmental groups, forcing some activists into exile and others to steer clear of important work”.
- The [Egyptian Foreign Minister reiterated](#) on October 24 2022, that there would be no room for “political and economic polarization” at COP27.
- The government created a special technical system to register for the conference to ensure that only pro-government NGOs would be able to register successfully and guaranteeing that voices critical of the government would be excluded.
- Consequently, key local NGOs working on protecting the freedom of expression, including the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression and The Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms [have been blocked from registering for COP27](#). Many of these excluded groups are members of [COP Civic Space](#) which aims to leverage the international attention brought to Egypt due to COP27 to call for the creation of an ‘open civic space’.
- Numerous climate activists, including [Greta Thunberg](#), [Naomi Klein](#) and [Caroline Lucas](#), have authored articles and signed letters and petitions protesting the Egyptian state’s

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repressive practices and expressing concerns that through hosting COP27, these practices are being legitimated.

### **The Wider Context of Academic Freedom in Egypt:**

- Freedom of expression and academic freedoms are routinely violated. University independence is highly restricted, with deans of faculties being appointed through political mechanisms despite calls for an accountable election process to be reintroduced. Student Union elections have been prohibited since 2013 in order to prevent students from engaging in politics.
- There are **currently around 60,000 political prisoners detained in Egypt, often in inhuman conditions.** In 2019, Scholars at Risk [reported](#) that at least 800 university students were arrested in Egypt between 2014 and 2016.
- Many academics have also been imprisoned for expressing their research and/or peacefully expressing political views, including Alexandria University Assistant Professor of Political Science, [Dr Ahmed Al-Tohamy Abdel-Hay](#), Helwan University's former Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, [Dr Elsayed Hassan Shehabeldin Abo Zaid](#), Egyptian Professor of Engineering [Dr Mohamed Ali Beshr](#), Egyptian scholar and United States resident [Dr Salah Soltan](#), sociopolitical researcher, [Ismail Alexandrani](#), currently serving a ten-year sentence for his research, and [Dr Essam Hashish](#), a vocal member of the March 9 Movement for the independence of universities.
- [Moaz El Sharkawy](#), who was elected in 2012 as president of the Tantra University Student Union and vice president of the Student Union of Egypt, has been detained since 2018.
- Prominent British-Egyptian author and activist [Alaa Abd El-Fattah](#) has been in detention since September 2019 for the alleged misuse of social media. He has currently been on hunger strike for over 200 days demanding his legally-mandated consular access.
- Due to his research into Egyptian trade unions, University of Cambridge PhD student and Italian national Giulio Regeni was tortured and murdered in 2016.
- Travel bans have been widely used to restrict academic research and human rights advocacy. University of Washington PhD student [Waleed Salem](#) was detained for his academic research, and is now under a travel ban to prevent him from returning to the United States to finish his studies. Human Rights activists for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, [Mohamed Bashir](#), [Gasser Abdel Rizk](#), and [Karim Ennarah](#) have also been banned from leaving the country due to their research and advocacy.
- The Egyptian state has been involved with numerous other cases of academic repression, including the firing of [Professor Nagwa Sheta](#), allegedly for her views on the security services; the withholding of a professorship and head of department position from [Manar Al-Tantawi](#) due to her marriage to prisoner of conscience Hisham Jaafar; and the

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preventing of academic [Kholoud Saber](#) from receiving a scholarship from the Belgian Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.

While it is essential for the Global South to be leaders in climate change efforts, we believe that this must come in the form of genuine engagement with local environmental groups, researchers and communities in a context of freedom of expression. In addition to the vast moral and ethical considerations, we see this hostile environment to academic research as inhibiting the agenda of effectively tackling climate change. During your visit to Sharm El-Sheikh, which promises to be [carefully stage-managed](#) for the conference, we urge you to bear these realities in mind. We also call on you to write to your political representatives raising the issue of Egypt's human rights violations, including the fate of political prisoners; [sign the COP Civic Space petition](#); and, where possible, to ensure that your organisation considers these human rights violations when partaking in research collaborations with Egyptian institutions.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice-President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom