



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

Email: office@brismes.org

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Professor Peter Mathieson
Principal and Vice-Chancellor
The University of Edinburgh

By email: principal@ed.ac.uk

17 August 2022

Dear Professor Peter Mathieson,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to urge you to clarify and restate your commitment to academic freedom in light of your partnership with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) whose annual conference, COP27, is scheduled to be hosted by Egypt in November 2022. Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the largest national academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. It is committed to supporting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

In line with COP27 objectives, the UNFCCC makes clear¹²³ that academic research is a key component of international efforts to combat climate change. The integrity of this research fundamentally relies on the principles of academic freedom and the freedom of expression. As such, in order for research institutions to obtain observer status and thus have an input in the COP process and the UNFCCC more generally, the UNFCCC explicitly requires the provision of evidence of ‘academic independence or academic freedom’⁴. These principles are also reflected in the University of Edinburgh Ethics Code, which states: ‘The University is committed to upholding freedom of expression and academic freedom, and facilitating an environment where all are able to inquire, study, and debate’⁵. These values, which we share, are central to both your institution, the UNFCCC and the COP27.

¹https://unfccc.int/ttclear/misc/_StaticFiles/gnwoerk_static/tec_rdandr/7a46dac52ee7409290470521bdfebb52/b3b35cef13e743aa8bce136b0bc25f53.pdf

²<https://unfccc.int/topics/science/the-big-picture/introduction-science>

³<https://unfccc.int/topics/science/the-big-picture/science-in-the-negotiations>

⁴https://unfccc.int/files/parties_and_observers/observer_organizations/application/pdf/unfccc_standard_admission_process_ngos.pdf

⁵<https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/freedomofexpressionstatement.pdf>



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Unfortunately, academic freedom is severely restricted in Egypt under the repressive regime of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. The current regime has proven to be hostile to academic freedom, creating a dangerous environment for both Egyptian scholars as well as scholars researching Egypt. Despite constitutional protections for academic research, there is substantial evidence that the Egyptian state has continually intervened to limit and censor academic expression⁶⁷⁸. Although some positive and welcomed steps have been taken in this area with the recent release of Ahmed Samir Santawy and Patrick George Zaki, many other academics and students remain imprisoned and subjected to human rights abuses.

According to Amnesty International⁹, the Egyptian regime does not disclose the official number of prisoners, nor their charges, and as such we cannot know the exact number of academics, students and researchers currently in detention. However, Scholars at Risk reported in 2019¹⁰ that at least 800 students were arrested between 2014 and 2016. The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression has also catalogued¹¹ many examples of academics being under attack. This includes the imprisonment of sociopolitical researcher, Ismail Alexandrani, currently serving a ten-year sentence in Cairo's Tora Prison for his research¹², and the ongoing detention of Dr Essam Hashish, a vocal member of the March 9 group for academic freedom, in Scorpion Prison. State violence is not limited to those affiliated with Egyptian institutions. In addition to the devastating torture and murder of University of Cambridge PhD student Giulio Regeni, University of Washington PhD student Waleed Salem (also referred to in the press as Walid "al-Shobaky" or "al-Shobaki") was also detained as a direct result of his academic research. Upon his release the Egyptian state then weaponised a travel ban to prevent him from returning to the United States to finish his studies¹³¹⁴¹⁵. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) reports¹⁶ that travel bans have been systematically implemented to restrict research and the freedom of expression. Human Rights activists for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Mohamed Bashir,

⁶<https://www.ec-rf.net/academic-freedom-and-scientific-research-freedom-in-egypt/>

⁷<https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78210>

⁸<https://www.anhri.info/?p=28049&lang=en>

⁹<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde12/3538/2021/en/>

¹⁰<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Scholars-at-Risk-AFTE-Egypt-UPR-Submission-1.pdf>

¹¹<https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/monitoring-reports-en/2020/03/19/18530-afteegypt.html>

¹²https://pen.org/writers-at-risk-database/?ajax_s=Ismail%20Alexandrani

¹³<https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2021-05-24-university-of-washington/>

¹⁴<https://fairsq.org/2022/07/06/egypt-arbitrary-travel-bans-throttle-civil-society/>

¹⁵<https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/scenes-from-my-ongoing-egyptian-captivity/>

¹⁶<https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Abuse-of-Travel-Bans-in-Egypt.pdf>



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Gasser Abdel Rizk, and Karim Ennarah have also been prevented from leaving the country due to their research and advocacy. More generally, the Egyptian state has been involved with numerous cases of academic repression. Cases include the firing of Professor Nagwa Sheta, allegedly for her views on the security services¹⁷; the withholding of a professorship and head of department position from Manar Al-Tantawi due to her marriage to prisoner of conscious Hisham Jaafar¹⁸; and the preventing of academic Kholoud Saber from receiving a scholarship from the Belgian Katholieke Universiteit Leuven¹⁹.

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, something that your partnership with the UNFCCC seeks to contribute to. As such, we believe that you have a duty to:

- Publicly condemn the violations of academic freedom and the freedom of expression being carried out by the Egyptian regime;
- Call on the Egyptian regime to release prisoners of conscience and to take steps to ensure that academic freedom and the freedom of expression are protected;
- Make your attendance at COP27 and contributions to the UNFCCC contingent upon these academic freedoms being ensured by the Egyptian regime.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

On behalf of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

¹⁷<https://www.anhri.info/?p=28049&lang=en>

¹⁸<https://egyptwatch.net/2021/04/30/manar-al-tantawi-punishing-an-egyptian-academic-for-defending-her-detained-husband/>

¹⁹<https://www.ec-rf.net/academic-freedom-and-scientific-research-freedom-in-egypt/>