



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

E-mail: administrator@brismes.org Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

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

Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli
Principal, University of Glasgow

By Email: principal@glasgow.ac.uk

19 October 2021

Dear Professor Sir Anton Muscatelli,

Re: ‘Protocol for Managing Speakers and Events’, the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, and their implications for Middle East Studies and Academic Freedom

We are writing on behalf of the Academic Freedom Committee of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our concern about the University of Glasgow’s ‘Protocol for Managing Speakers and Events’ and the University’s decision to adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism and their implications for Middle East Studies and academic freedom.

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 itself and in connection with the study of the region, both in the UK and globally.

It has recently come to our attention that the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Glasgow extended an invitation to Dr Somdeep Sen, Associate Professor of International Development Studies at Roskilde University, to deliver a talk on his new book *Decolonizing Palestine: Hamas between the Anticolonial and the Postcolonial* (Cornell University Press, 2020). After Dr Sen accepted the invitation and the event was publicized on the Department’s website ([here](#)), he was contacted by a member of staff who informed him that the Department had received ‘a message of concern from the University’s Jewish Society regarding the title and content’ of his talk. The staff member emphasized that the Department of Politics and International Relations was committed to free speech, but claimed, nonetheless, that they had to follow university protocols and thus address the students’ concerns. To this end, Dr Sen was asked to ‘provide some information about the content’ of his talk, such as the main points of his presentation and/or the slides he planned to use.

When he inquired about this process, Dr Sen was notified that the members of the Department do not usually ask seminar speakers to provide material ahead of time, but that they decided to follow the University of Glasgow’s ‘Protocol for Managing Speakers and Events’ because

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the Jewish Society had expressed concerns that the event might lead to negative repercussions for Jewish students. It was also intimated that the University intended to use the information he provided to reassure the students and attempt to resolve the matter. This, despite the fact that the scheduled talk would be delivered by an established and well-respected scholar about a book that has been published by a leading university press after going through a referee process—namely, the book is considered by experts to be a distinguished contribution to the field of inquiry.

The request to provide information about the content of the talk appears to indicate that the complaint submitted by the Jewish Society led to an escalation to Stage 3 as outlined in the University of Glasgow's 'Protocol for Managing Speakers and Events.' We assume that Stage 2 was triggered after the student's complaint. According to the University's Protocol, in order to reach Stage 3, 'the Head of School / Director of Research Institute / University Services Director' would have to have justifiable cause that Dr. Sen and/or the issues he intends to discuss satisfy at least one of the provisions appearing in Stage 2. The Protocol's text reads as follows:

- Does the proposed speaker have links to or represent a proscribed terror group or organisation as designated by the UK Government?
- What is the subject of the event? Is it likely to include content which breaches the legislation identified above?
- Has the speaker any recent history of prosecution for breaches of the law?
- What security provisions are proposed, and are they considered to be sufficient?
- Does the proposed event raise concerns about public order and security?

Our concern is that the University's request that Dr Sen submit content in advance of his talk is a breach of academic freedom. The request could even be interpreted as a violation carried out along racial lines. We call on the University to be transparent in its decision-making, specifically by 1) informing us and Dr Sen of the precise provision specified in Stage 2 that led University staff to trigger Stage 3 and on what basis this provision was affirmed; 2) informing us and Dr Sen of the precise provision listed in Stage 3 of the Protocol that constitutes the basis for the request for materials from Dr Sen; and 3) providing us and Dr Sen with a list of previous events for which actual scripts have been requested from speakers in advance and on what basis they have been requested (these can be supplied while anonymising the speakers).

Without further evidence to the contrary, the specific actions taken by staff members at the University of Glasgow and, indeed, the University Protocol itself, raise major concerns about

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the integrity of academic freedom at the University of Glasgow, particularly with regards to the discussion of the actions of the Israeli government and of Palestinian groups and movements.

Moreover, we fear that this apparent breach of academic freedom demonstrates the pernicious effect of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which the university has adopted and which has been widely criticised by legal experts and scholars of antisemitism and Middle East Studies for its conflation of criticisms of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism. In relation to this, we note with alarm a decision taken earlier this year by Glasgow University to apologise for a peer-reviewed article analysing pro-Israel advocacy groups in the UK, that was published in a postgraduate research journal in 2017. The apology assumed a racist intent to the article's subject matter despite any evidence to support such a conclusion.

We are deeply concerned about the impact of such decisions by the University of Glasgow, which serve to produce a chilling effect when it comes to public debate and research on Israeli government policies, pro-Israel advocacy and Palestinian groups. Such decisions risk leading to self-censorship on the part of individual scholars and students and, thereby, threaten the existence of a diversity of viewpoints within the field of Middle East studies not only at your university but also more widely in the UK.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE

President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice-President, BRISMES

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cc.

Professor Sara Carter, Vice Principal & Head of College of Social Sciences

Professor Christopher Carman, Department of Politics and International Relations

Dr Somdeep Sen, International Development Studies, Roskilde University

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