



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

27 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 would like to thank Dr David Duncan, Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary, for his letter of 21 October, 2021 regarding our inquiry about Dr Somdeep Sen’s planned talk on his recent book *Decolonizing Palestine* (Cornell University Press 2020) and the implications of the University of Glasgow’s intervention on academic freedom and freedom of speech. While we were relieved to learn from Dr Duncan that the University of Glasgow remains committed to academic freedom and freedom of speech, we believe that genuine commitment must manifest itself in the protocols, procedures and actions adopted by the University.

We would therefore like to follow-up on the questions laid out in our letter of 19 October, 2021, and to ask new questions, based on additional information that has come to our attention about the procedures that the University of Glasgow followed in Dr Sen’s case. We now understand that on 30 September, 2021, the University received a complaint from the University’s Jewish Student Society, where in the email’s subject Dr Sen’s lecture was characterized as anti-Semitic. Based on the information we have, the student group reiterated in the email the charge that the university was hosting an anti-Semitic lecture by Dr Sen and claimed that it would have repercussions for the safety of Jewish students on campus.

We would like to note that *already at this stage* both the email’s subject and content include defamatory allegations of anti-Semitism against a well-respected colleague in the field. In addition, as far as we can tell, the students who sent the letter failed to provide any evidence whatsoever as to why a talk delivered by a scholar on a book dealing with Israel/Palestine, which was purchased by the University of Glasgow library, might render Jewish students on campus unsafe or what about it was anti-Semitic. Both the charge of antisemitism and the claim of possible harassment are stated in the email without any evidence to back up such inflammatory accusations.

To the best of our knowledge, the University did not alert the students that such accusations are defamatory and has failed, to date, to initiate an investigation into the matter. We do know as a matter of fact that the University did not wait to receive any evidence from the students

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before asking Dr Sen to provide information about the content of his talk. Indeed, on 8 October Dr Sen received a letter requesting that he send material about the talk, whilst staff members met with the students only four days later, on 12 October. Furthermore, only after the 12 October meeting did the students send a document detailing their complaint. Clearly, the sequence of events, whereby Dr Sen was approached by staff members even before the students were questioned about their complaint and before receiving any supporting information—needless to say any evidence of antisemitism or possible harassment—is in serious breach of the University’s own protocol and has a detrimental impact on academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Moreover, it remains unclear *what* (if anything) contained in the four-page document that was later submitted by the Jewish Student Society led the University of Glasgow to pursue the allegations further. In a letter dated 21 October, 2021, Dr David Duncan, Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary, wrote to Dr Sen that ‘the Referral Group established under the University’s Protocol for Managing Speakers and Events... considered the proposed event and decided that it can proceed as a webinar with the proviso that you do not say anything during the presentation that breaches UK anti-terrorism legislation – bearing in mind that IQB (the military wing of Hamas) is a proscribed organisation under the UK’s Terrorism Act (2000)’. Dr Duncan then added:

May I also respectfully remind you that the University has adopted the IHRA’s working definition of antisemitism... I hope you will agree that this definition does not prevent you giving a presentation based on your book.

These two requests are highly unusual. Following scrutiny by BRISMES’s legal consultants, it appears that the Chief Operating Officer’s 21 October letter to Dr Sen may well constitute unlawful direct discrimination on grounds of philosophical belief contrary to s.13 (read together with s.29) of the Equality Act 2010, and unlawful indirect discrimination on grounds of race and/or religion or belief contrary to s.19 of the Equality Act 2010.

We would further like to emphasize that, according to Dr Duncan’s letter, the University of Glasgow is using the IHRA’s working definition as a code for identifying hate speech despite the fact that it has no legal basis. This, in itself, constitutes gross overreach in terms of stifling academic freedom and freedom of speech, and in this particular case was mobilised along racial lines. We would like to note that in addition to its misuse by the University of Glasgow, leading experts in the field, including UCL’s academic board adopted a working group’s report which concluded that the IHRA definition is ‘not fit for purpose’ given its [vagueness](#).

Dr Duncan’s reference to the anti-terror legislation also has far-reaching ramifications for academic freedom and freedom of speech, and appears to have been invoked in a discriminatory manner. Given that Glasgow’s Jewish Society failed to provide any evidence that Dr Sen has breached UK anti-terrorism legislation (as far as we are aware) and yet Dr

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Duncan asked him to confirm that he did not intend to during the talk, we can only assume that the University asks all Middle East scholars whom it invites to affirm that they comply by the legislation. If it does not, then this suggests that the intervention in Dr. Sen's case was indeed discriminatory.

Finally, we would like to know what the University's protocol is for dealing with libellous allegations made by members of its own academic community against a colleague, and how the University has dealt with the defamatory allegations made by the Jewish Society against Dr Sen.

Following consultation with Dr Sen, who is a BRISMES member, we are pleased to note that despite the defamatory allegations, the procedural failures and the discriminatory treatment he has been subjected to, Dr. Sen is firmly committed to academic freedom and freedom of speech and will not bow down to intimidation. He will therefore still be happy to deliver his talk provided the University issue an apology for the way it has handled the case before the scheduled talk and no later than Monday 1 November. He also insists that all official communications regarding his talk be made public in order to ensure that there is full transparency on what occurred in order to ensure that the proper lessons are learned from this case.

BRISMES is confident that Dr Sen's talk will enrich the vibrant academic and intellectual community at the University of Glasgow and we look forward to hearing from you again soon.

Sincerely,

Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE

President, BRISMES

Professor Neve Gordon

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

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cc.

Dr David Duncan, Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary

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

Professor Anne Kerr, School of Social and Political Sciences

Professor Christopher Carman, Department of Politics and International Relations

Dr Somdeep Sen, International Development Studies, Roskilde University

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