



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

Professor Stephen J Toope
Vice-Chancellor
University of Cambridge
The Old Schools
Trinity Lane
Cambridge CB2 1TN

By email: VCO.Enquiries@admin.cam.ac.uk

18 August 2021

Dear Professor Toope,

PROPOSED UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE DEAL WITH UAE

We are writing on behalf of the Academic Freedom Committee of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) and the Board of Directors of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our concern about the proposed academic deal, widely reported in the press and other media, between the University of Cambridge and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Our understanding is that under the proposed deal, which would be worth around £400 million in total, the UAE would commit to funding £312 million and Cambridge would contribute £90 million through staff time to create the UAE-Cambridge Innovation Institute, which would eventually develop into a staffed physical location within the UAE.

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. MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa, and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

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As organisations with strong international focus, BRISMES and MESA are in principle keen to encourage mutually beneficial academic exchange between British universities and partners in the region. There are, however, a number of aspects of the present proposal that give cause for concern. These principally relate to the poor record of the UAE in the field of academic freedom, and indeed, of human rights and freedom of expression more generally. The most graphic recent illustration of this in relation to a UK academic is the case of the former Durham University doctoral student Matthew Hedges, arrested in the UAE 2018, who was held in poor conditions in solitary confinement for months, sentenced to life imprisonment on falsified spying charges, and only released after sustained international pressure, including intervention at the highest Ministerial level. Further details of his case, which is currently the subject of ongoing legal action, are available in an extended interview (with which you are no doubt already familiar) that Matthew gave to your own University's student newspaper, *Varsity*, on 8 July 2021 (<https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/21747>).

Although, so far as we are aware, Matthew's experience remains a unique one in relation to UK students, other examples could be given of the UAE's failure to observe accepted international standards, for example, by denying academics entry to the country on the basis of their views. More generally, and crucially, freedom of expression and other basic human rights allowed to Emiratis themselves remain tightly restricted. Amnesty International's 2020 report on the UAE, for example, noted that 'Over two dozen prisoners of conscience, including well-known human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor, continued to be detained in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The state continued to restrict freedom of expression, taking measures to silence citizens and residents who expressed critical opinions on COVID-19 and other social and political issues. A number of detainees remained in prison past the completion of their sentences without legal justification' (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/united-arab-emirates/report-united-arab-emirates/>).

Press reports suggest that at least some of these concerns have been noted and acknowledged in internal discussion within the University. We find it astonishing that, despite this, the University appears to be intent on proceeding with a deal of this scale - which far outstrips that of most academic partnerships - with a country with UAE's record in the field of academic freedom. Hedges' arrest was an illustration of the risks academics can run in states with few

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protections for their rights. BRISMES and MESA remain unconvinced that the University will be able to find appropriate and adequate safeguards in the future in the context of the proposed scheme. We add our voice to those of the many other organisations and individuals that have already voiced opposition to this deal and urge you to reconsider the proposal.

Yours sincerely,

Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE

President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Dina Khoury

President, MESA

On behalf of the MESA Board of Directors

CC

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