



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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Report on meeting with Michelle Donelan, Minister for Universities

On 28 October, members of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom met with the Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan, and Baroness Barran, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education, in follow-up to our correspondence with the Minister regarding the IHRA working definition of antisemitism. We were able to explain our concerns about the impacts of the IHRA working definition on academic freedom and freedom of expression in the field of Middle East studies. Specifically, we argued that, based on the cases that have been brought to our attention:

- The IHRA working definition is not fit for purpose and as a result is creating confusion about what is lawful speech in relation to the discussion of Israeli government policies and Zionism;
- The use of the IHRA working definition is creating a chilling effect, leading to self-censorship in discussions of Middle East politics, thereby preventing students from gaining nuanced understandings about the actions of the Israeli government and the history of Zionism.

The minister reiterated the UK government's position that the IHRA working definition is a vital tool for universities to combat antisemitism and that legislation currently going through parliament will strengthen freedom of speech and academic freedom in universities. The BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom remains seized of the matter and will continue to monitor the impact of the IHRA working definition on academic freedom in the field of Middle East studies. In relation to this, members are encouraged to contact us with their concerns.