



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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BRISMES Statement Regarding the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism

The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), Britain's leading academic organisation for the study of the Middle East and North Africa, expresses profound concern about the pressure applied on universities by the current UK government to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. In October 2020, the education secretary Gavin Williamson, amid a national crisis of the education sector due to the Covid-19 pandemic, wrote a letter to English university vice-chancellors requesting that they adopt the IHRA definition or face financial penalties. We believe such government intervention - particularly in its reliance on what many in the academic community consider a faulty definition of antisemitism - will have a chilling effect on academic freedom and the university sector in Middle East Studies and beyond.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES aims to encourage and promote the study of the Middle East region, and to provide a forum for educators and researchers working in Middle East Studies. As part of our remit, we are committed to supporting academic freedom, particularly in relation to issues involving discussions of the region. It is precisely within this context that as experts on the region we have studied and analysed the IHRA definition and consulted widely. While we welcome steps to root out antisemitism and all forms of racism from university campuses, we have come to the conclusion that this particular definition risks conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism and will have a detrimental impact on researchers and students. It is especially telling that of the eleven illustrative examples the definition relies upon, seven relate to Israel.

We note that Kenneth Stern, who was among the IHRA definition's drafters, rejects its adoption as a campus hate speech code arguing that it "will harm not only pro-Palestinian advocates, but also Jewish students and faculty, and the academy itself." A letter signed by eight senior lawyers, published on 7 January 2021, challenges the legal basis of the definition and charges Gavin Williamson with "improper interference". In a comprehensive report, scholars at UCL outline the problematic implications of adopting the IHRA definition for teaching and academic research. A letter from 122 Palestinian and Arab intellectuals detailed the ways the IHRA definition, and its attendant examples, has been instrumentalised in several contexts to silence defenders of Palestinian rights.

Indeed, after tracking the use of the IHRA definition in different contexts, we have concluded that it is being deployed to use the false charge of antisemitism to silence and delegitimise those who support Palestinian rights. An article in *The Conversation* has already traced how a



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number of investigations have been launched at several institutions in the United States where staff or students were critical of Israeli human rights abuses.

The adoption of the IHRA definition does not add any substantive content that might help reduce racist speech and hate crimes on campus. In fact, the anti-racist working groups made up of staff and students within universities with whom we have consulted are all vehemently against adopting the IHRA definition.

We urge universities to protect academic freedom, to defend their autonomy against the government's pressure to adopt the IHRA definition, and to retract the definition where it has been adopted.