



# BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

E-mail: [administrator@brismes.org](mailto:administrator@brismes.org) Website: [www.brismes.ac.uk](http://www.brismes.ac.uk)

BRISMES Administrative Office, Department of PAIS, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL

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Professor Michael Spence  
Provost, University College London  
By Email: [michael.spence@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:michael.spence@ucl.ac.uk)

CC:

Mr Victor Chu (UCL Council Chair)  
Wendy Appleby (Secretary to Council)  
Anne Marie O'Mullane (Assistant to Secretary of Council)  
By Email: [a.omullane@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.omullane@ucl.ac.uk)

30 March 2021

Dear Professor Michael Spence and Council members,

## **The UCL Academic Board Vote on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism**

I write on behalf of the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES). BRISMES was founded in 1973 to encourage and promote the study of the Middle East in the United Kingdom. It is the leading UK association in this field. We publish the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* and have hundreds of academic, student and professional members worldwide.

Firstly, we would like to recognise UCL's spirit and tradition of autonomy and democracy, as represented by the way it conducted an open and free debate on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. Secondly, we write to express our support for the recent Academic Board vote to retract and replace the IHRA definition and urge UCL Council to respect this decision. We believe the vote of the Academic Board not only reflects a consensus amongst UCL's academic community but also among BRISMES members. BRISMES has been extremely concerned about the UK government's campaign to force the adoption and dissemination of the IHRA definition in UK universities since 2017 and the significant impact it would have on our members who teach and research the Middle East across disciplines.

With respect to our mission, we condemn without reservation antisemitism, Islamophobia and all forms of racism and support UK universities' efforts in this regard. At the same time, we wish

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Ms Amy Brickhill



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to bring to your attention the concerns of our members that the IHRA definition (including its examples) is undermining the ability of academics to pursue legitimate academic activities, including research, teaching and wider public discussion of the history and current situation in occupied Palestine and Israel as well as the nature of Zionism, without fear of being accused of antisemitism. We are also concerned that academics employed on temporary contracts, as well as students, are particularly susceptible to self-censorship out of fear that any sort of accusations, even if false and malicious, could jeopardize their future ability to obtain permanent employment.

After tracking the use of the IHRA definition in different contexts, we are extremely worried that the use of the definition in universities may be silencing and delegitimizing those who support and speak out about Palestinian rights. An article in [The Conversation](#) has already revealed how a number of investigations have been launched at several institutions in the United States against staff or students who were critical of human rights abuses committed by the Israeli government. In the UK, there are already cases in which the IHRA definition has been cited in initiating disciplinary proceedings against respected colleagues or closing down discussion of Israel that is not prima facie antisemitic. This is despite the fact that the IHRA definition is not legally binding. For example, in 2017, the University of Central Lancaster banned an event entitled ‘Debunking misconceptions on Palestine’, claiming that it contravened the IHRA definition adopted by the government. The University and College Union has similarly noted cases where the IHRA definition has been used to ‘intimidate academics who are engaged in activities that are critical of the policies of the Israeli government but that are not anti-semitic.’

In reaching our stance on the IHRA definition, we have given due regard to the views of legal experts. For instance, in March 2017, Hugh Tomlinson QC stated that ‘The IHRA “non-legally binding working definition” of antisemitism is unclear and confusing and should be used with caution’. Geoffrey Robertson QC issued an opinion on 31 August 2017 stating that ‘the definition does not cover the most insidious forms of hostility to Jewish people and the looseness of the definition is liable to chill legitimate criticisms of the state of Israel and coverage of human rights abuses against Palestinians’.

Our view is also informed by widely-recognised authorities on antisemitism. For example, Kenneth Stern, the lead drafter of the IHRA definition and the Director of the Bard Center for the Study of Hate, has made clear that the definition was “never intended to be a campus hate speech code.” The definition, he explained, was “created primarily so that European data

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collectors could know what to include and exclude,” but political groups have “weaponized” the definition in ways that threaten freedom of speech.

We are above all concerned about the negative impact that the IHRA definition has had, and will continue to have, on academic freedom in research and teaching in Middle East Studies. The chilling atmosphere for many of our members who teach and research on matters concerning Israel and Palestine, as well as their students, will have a negative impact on pedagogy and knowledge production.

The above considerations, along with the commendable report of UCL’s Academic Board Working Group on Racism and Prejudice, are strong evidence for our view that the IHRA definition is incompatible with the principles of academic freedom and likely to stifle freedom of speech in the university system. We urge UCL to defend its autonomy against the government’s pressure to adopt the IHRA definition and to respect the AB’s resounding decision to retract and replace the definition.

Yours sincerely,

Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE  
**President, BRISMES**