



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

Email: office@brismes.org

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Kai Wegner, Governing Mayor of Berlin

Dr. Ina Czyborra, Senator for Higher Education and Research, Health, and Long-Term Care

Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Günter M. Ziegler, President of FU Berlin

Sent via Email: Der-Regierende-Buergermeister@senatskanzlei.berlin.de, wegner@cdu-fraktion.berlin.de, SenBuero@senwgp.berlin.de, praesident@fu-berlin.de

21 February 2025

Dear Kai Wegner, dear Dr. Ina Czyborra, dear Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Günter M. Ziegler,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our condemnation of the Free University of Berlin's cancellation of the lectures planned for February 19th by the UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, and the Israeli architect Prof. Eyal Weizman.

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.

Francesca Albanese and Prof. Eyal Weizman were invited to speak about 'Conditions of life calculated to destroy: Legal and forensic perspectives on the ongoing Gaza genocide'. Both Prof. Eyal Weizman's analysis, as well as that of Francesca Albanese, who, in light of FU Berlin's cancellation gave a presentation in the offices of the 'Junge Welt' newspaper on February 18th and an online lecture (shown to students via stream) on February 19th, are analogous to the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) advisory [opinion](#) from July 19th 2024. This found that Israel is in breach of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination's Article 3 (on racial segregation and apartheid).

Based on the ICJ's advisory opinion, UN experts [requested](#) that states should review all diplomatic, political, and economic interactions with Israel to ensure they do not support or provide aid or assistance to its unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; impose a full arms embargo on Israel; and cancel or suspend economic relationships, trade agreements and academic relations with Israel that may contribute to its unlawful presence and apartheid regime in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Instead of suppressing events that seek to discuss Israel's serious breaches of international law, universities and local governments should enable them and allow open discussion of international law and the obligations of all parties in this regard.

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The accusations of antisemitism levelled against Albanese draw on the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, which erroneously conflates criticism of Israel and Zionism with antisemitism, and which has frequently been used to discriminate against individuals based on their political opinion. It has been widely demonstrated in recent years that the [IHRA definition](#) is not fit to be used as a tool to assess whether individuals' utterances or views constitute antisemitism. One of the IHRA definition's own [drafters](#), Kenneth Stern, has repeatedly clarified that it was not designed for nor is it suitable to be used in an academic setting. Moreover, the definition has been instrumentalized for political purposes. As a result, over 100 civil society organisations from across the world [wrote](#) to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, urging the United Nations not to adopt the definition, because it has "often been used to wrongly label criticism of Israel as antisemitic, and thus chill and sometimes suppress, non-violent protest, activism and speech critical of Israel and/or Zionism."

The university administration's justification that there was an incalculable security risk is unsubstantiated and hardly credible: Albanese has been able to speak without incidents at numerous other European universities and her presentation at 'Junge Welt' posed no security risk whatsoever, even though police entered the premises against the will of the 'Junge Welt' editorial team. Universities have to be a place where discussions can be held, including those that are deemed controversial by some. In fact, the cancellation by FU Berlin only occurred after public pressure from the German Israeli Society (DIG), the Israeli Embassy in Berlin, the Governing Mayor Kai Wegner and the Berlin Senator for Higher Education and Research, Health, and Long-Term Care Dr. Ina Czyborra, who discredited Albanese and accused her of antisemitism. This represents a form of state-ordered censorship of fact-based criticism of Israel's military actions - an unacceptable interference in freedom of opinion and academic freedom as well as university autonomy. Universities must remain places of open discourse. It is disingenuous to make it a prerequisite that opposing positions must be represented on the panel itself - a demand that is not raised for other topics and speakers. The cancellation of Albanese and Weizman due to political pressure contributes to the dangerous myth that fighting antisemitism requires the silencing of those criticizing Israel over its serious breaches of international law. Nothing could be further from the truth.

FU Berlin's cancellation came after the cancellation of a lecture by Albanese by the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich a week earlier and is part of a series of measures to suppress discussion of Israel's violence and warfare in Palestine, which the ICJ has found to plausibly amount to genocide. This constitutes an arbitrary restriction of the constitutionally guaranteed right to academic freedom. Scholars in Germany and worldwide are alarmed by this, as also indicated by the [2024 scholars at risk report](#), which mentions multiple attacks on academic freedoms in Germany for the first time, many in relation to this issue. Your censorship of views that contradict the German government's positions creates a climate of intimidation, fuels self-censorship and in effect allows lobby groups and foreign embassies to restrict academic freedom based on their narrow political interests and the misuse of a highly contested definition of antisemitism.

As mentioned in the cancellation statement by Prof. Ziegler, freedom of expression, including academic freedom, is protected by numerous human rights instruments and international

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organizations of which Germany is a signatory or member. The European Court of Human Rights treats academic freedom as a special concern of the Article 10 freedom of expression clause, Article 13 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights explicitly guarantees academic freedom, Article 19 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights protects freedom of expression. The 2020 Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research affirms the central role of freedom of scientific research as a common core value and principle for research cooperation within the European Research Area. In Germany, in addition to the aforementioned protections under international law, academic and artistic freedom are under the special protection of the Basic Law, subject to limits determined by the German Criminal Code. Under the constitutional protections afforded to art and science, the state may not dictate content to artists and academics or restrict them based on the recipients' political viewpoint. Discrimination on the basis of political opinion is specifically prohibited by Article 3 paragraph 3 of Germany's Basic Law.

Therefore, we urge you - in the strongest possible terms - to issue a public apology to Francesca Albanese and Prof. Eyal Weizman. We furthermore call on you to:

- publicly confirm your commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression and to safeguarding these constitutionally guaranteed rights for all people in Germany;
- withstand pressure from the press and politicians and defend university autonomy;
- abandon the IHRA definition of antisemitism.

We look forward to hearing what measures you will take in order to respond to the concerns outlined in this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:
[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)

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