



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

Mr Ray Perman
Senior Lay Member, University Court, University of St Andrews
Sent by Email: court@st-andrews.ac.uk

23 September 2024

Dear Mr Perman,

Thank you for your reply of 23rd August.

The BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom has carefully considered your response to our letter, but unfortunately it does not provide us the reassurances we sought. We remain deeply concerned about how the University has handled this matter and reiterate our expectation that Rector Maris be reinstated. We would also like to make the following observations regarding your letter, and request your response to them.

Your letter seeks to clarify that the decision to dismiss Rector Maris had nothing to do with her statement to students of November 2023. This claim does not withstand scrutiny. Since the Court's decision was purportedly based on Rector Maris' refusal to accept the findings of the report by Lady Ross KC, the conclusions of the report regarding the statement and the Court's endorsement of this judgment remain inseparable from the decision to dismiss her. Moreover, both the report and the University's statement announcing the Court's decision make several baseless and deeply concerning claims about Rector Maris' statement. They form part of the basis on which the decision to dismiss her was publicly justified. Our letter sought to correct these claims, but we note with concern that your reply does not acknowledge or respond to these arguments. We would reiterate our request that these claims are retracted and an apology issued.

Your letter also draws attention to social media posts made by Rector Maris, and her refusal to accept the findings of the report regarding them, as a further basis for her dismissal. Yet we also find no basis in the findings of the report for the conclusions drawn or the decision reached by the Court in this respect. The report refers to three social media posts to determine she was in breach of her obligations. The first was a post in which, according to Lady Ross's report,

‘she posted a message referring to a message supporting her and stating: “These are the voices the university is refusing to acknowledge. Let’s make it harder for them.” This was



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

followed by a watermelon emoji (signifying support for the Palestinian cause) and a fist emoji.’

Lady Ross determines that ‘encouraging people online to do something which “makes it harder” for the University is plainly not acting in the University’s interests’ (para 6.14). Yet this ignores the possibility that encouraging the University to acknowledge the voices of its students and stakeholders on a matter of importance to them could in fact be fully consistent with upholding the interests of the University. This is also a vital aspect of her role as Rector, which (according to the ‘Role of the Rector’ document shared as Annex A to the report by Lady Ross) includes ‘familiarity with the views of the student body, and ability to intervene with authority on their behalf if necessary, outside the proceedings of the Court’ and a ‘willingness to champion a cause without fear or favour’.

The second social media message that the report discusses is a post in which Rector Maris, in response to an allegation of antisemitism against her wrote: ‘I Don’t Hate Jewish People Please stop being weird’. The Ross Report finds that in particular the use of the word ‘weird’ was ‘insulting’ to Jewish students, and that the Rector ‘must have known that [Jewish students] would read it’ (para 6.18). While Rector Marris might have chosen a better way to express herself, she made this post at a time when she was receiving a huge volume of racist abuse and intense and unreasonable criticism on social media. We find it concerning that the University continues to make no acknowledgement of this environment, and the immense strain and distress it caused Rector Maris, in its handling of this matter. In our view, this comment, while perhaps imprudent, is not a basis for dismissal, as the Ross report itself concludes, or for insisting on a retraction on pain of dismissal, especially in the circumstances she was facing.

We would furthermore note that while your letter insinuates (through reference to her election promise to support and show empathy to all St Andrews’ students), that Rector Maris has shown no empathy for those who disagreed with her, namely, some Jewish students, as the report notes, on 25 November 2023, the Rector stated clearly ‘To the Jewish community who feel unsafe due to my words, I am deeply sorry’ (para 6.6).

The third social media post with which the report finds fault raises wider issues of concern to us as an organisation that aims to promote academic freedom in the research and study of the Middle East. The post is a quotation from an article by Rabea Eghbariah, a Palestinian human rights lawyer, entitled ‘The Ongoing Nakba: Towards a Legal Framework for Palestine’. Despite the article having been ‘commissioned, edited, fact-checked, and prepared for publication’ by the *Harvard Law Review*, the editors of the journal then refused to publish this article in a concerning act of censorship, as has been [publicly documented](#). The piece was subsequently published online in [The Nation](#) magazine instead. Rector Maris’ quotation from the article reads as follows:

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales.

Company Number: 08747770 | Registered Charity Number: 1161206 | VAT Registration Number: 828 5681 90



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

‘We must imagine that one day there will be a recognized crime of committing a Nakba, and a disapprobation of Zionism as an ideology based on racial elimination. The road to get there remains long and challenging, but we do not have the privilege to relinquish any legal tools available to name the crimes against the Palestinian people in the present and attempt to stop them. The denial of the genocide in Gaza is rooted in the denial of the Nakba. And both must end, now.’

In her report Lady Ross takes no issue with the content of the quotation itself. This is quite correct, since it merely articulates a widely held and legitimate position in scholarly, legal, and political debates on Palestine. Instead, Lady Ross finds the quotation objectionable on the grounds of a *misattribution* to Mohammed El-Kurd, a Palestinian poet and journalist. Lady Ross says of El-Kurd (para 6.15):

‘Internet research shows that Mohamed El-Kurd is a controversial figure, with claims that he expresses antisemitic views. Whether or not that can be fully substantiated, and I have read arguments in both directions, inclusion of material from him was distressing for those in the Jewish Society who read it, and Ms Maris must have known that that would be the case. This was very unwise. It exacerbated a difficult situation and was contrary to the University’s interests.’

We would add our voices to those who would refute allegations of antisemitism against El-Kurd, which are part of a wider trend of false accusations against Palestinians who express political opinions critical of Israel. Lady Ross herself does not feel sufficiently confident to make this accusation, and with good reason. Even if the words *were* from Mohamed El-Kurd, quoting them would be no basis for dismissal. Moreover, though, this claim is factually incorrect, and instead the false attribution (and associated smears) have been used to achieve the perverse effect of redoubling the censorship of the original article by Rabea Eghbariah. We reiterate that this allegation should form no part of the basis for any actions taken against Rector Maris.

Finally, in response to our request for reassurance regarding the ways in which the University dealt with concerns raised by an external funder you write: ‘That matter was addressed and resolved fully prior to Court’s receipt of the Ross report. It played no part in the subsequent discussions and deliberations of governors.’ We note that you make no comment on how the concerns were ‘resolved fully’, even though it would clearly be in the interest of transparency to do so. We would request a full account of how these concerns were handled, and particularly whether this had any role in the decision to commission the Ross report in the first place, which ultimately formed the basis of the disciplinary action against Rector Maris.

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales.

Company Number: 08747770 | Registered Charity Number: 1161206 | VAT Registration Number: 828 5681 90



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

Website: www.brismes.ac.uk

We conclude by reiterating our request that Rector Maris be reinstated, an apology issued, and full transparency regarding the role of the funder provided. This case represents not only an injustice to Rector Maris, but more broadly an erosion of the principle of freedom of speech, which is a cornerstone of academia and democracy.

We look forward to your response to each of the issues raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

cc. Professor Dame Sally Mapstone
Principal, University of St Andrews

Previous letters and statements from the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom are available to read on the BRISMES website:

www.brismes.ac.uk/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales.

Company Number: 08747770 | Registered Charity Number: 1161206 | VAT Registration Number: 828 5681 90