



# 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](mailto:office@brismes.org)

Website: [www.brismes.ac.uk](http://www.brismes.ac.uk)

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Professor Evelyn Welch  
Vice Chancellor and President  
University of Bristol  
**Sent by Email:** [vc-team@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:vc-team@bristol.ac.uk)

24 January 2025

Dear Professor Welch,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concern at the University of Bristol's decision to appeal the employment tribunal's February 5, 2024, judgement on the dismissal of Professor David Miller. This decision raises significant questions about the protection of academic freedom and the broader implications for free speech within the UK higher education sector.

Professor Miller's dismissal followed an investigation into his comments critical of Israeli government policy, Zionism, and pro-Israel groups. BRISMES CAF previously communicated our concerns to the university, including in this letter of [October 2021](#).

Founded in 1973, the British Society for Middle East Studies (BRISMES) is the largest academic association in Europe focused on the study of the Middle East and North Africa. BRISMES is committed to academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and as part of its remit to advance the knowledge and study of the region both in the United Kingdom and worldwide. BRISMES is firmly opposed to racism in all its forms, including antisemitism and anti-Palestinian racism, and is committed to the struggle against it.

As was determined by the tribunal, and affirmed by the KC you appointed, Ms McColgan, criticisms of Israel and Zionism are protected by the law. More specifically, the tribunal recognised anti-Zionist beliefs as meeting the Grainger criteria of philosophical beliefs under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), making them protected under the 2010 Equality Act. Furthermore, despite these legal protections for anti-Zionist beliefs, the tribunal judgement revealed shortcomings in your internal processes. These included findings of discriminatory behaviour by a member of staff responsible for conducting investigations, which were later upheld by an internal appeal panel.

This case highlights a concerning trend across the UK university sector of restricting or suppressing expressions of anti-Zionism, often resulting in (threats of) disciplinary action against both staff and students. Such actions are often driven by the widespread adoption of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, which incorrectly conflates antisemitism with criticism of Israel and Zionism. Our joint [report](#) with the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC) documents the resulting chilling effect, in which academic speech that criticises Israel and/or advocates for the Palestinian people has been substantially stifled.



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We appreciate that many may disagree with Professor Miller's statements, including BRISMES members. However, lawful expressions of objectionable or offensive views are protected by Articles 9 and 10 of the ECHR, Section 10 of the 2010 Equality Act, and the 1986 Education Act. Upholding these protections is essential for maintaining academic freedom, which benefits all academics and universities.

In light of this, we urge the university to reconsider its decision to appeal the tribunal's judgement. If the appeal proceeds, we call on the University to publicly confirm that it is not contesting the tribunal's conclusion that anti-Zionism is a legally-protected philosophical belief. Furthermore, we encourage the University to affirm its commitment to upholding this standard and ensuring robust protections for lawful speech.

Regardless of the University's next steps concerning the Professor Miller case, we call on the University to review and improve its internal investigative procedures to prevent discrimination against anti-Zionist beliefs. It is essential that all staff and students feel safe to engage in lawful discussions, including those critical of state policies or advocating for Palestinian rights. This is particularly urgent given the current context, where numerous legal experts and human rights organizations have raised concerns that Palestinians in Gaza face a credible risk of genocide. Suppressing lawful speech that criticises Israel's actions against Palestinians risks creating a climate of complicity in severe violations of international law, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, and potentially even genocide.

We urge the University to ensure compliance with its obligations under the 1986 Education Act, Articles 9 and 10 of the ECHR, Section 10 of the 2010 Equality Act, and Section 2(8)(c) of the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act. These legal frameworks guarantee the freedom of academic staff to challenge received wisdom and express controversial opinions without jeopardising their employment or standing.

We look forward to your response and to seeing the University take decisive steps to uphold its commitment to academic freedom.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Nicola Pratt**  
BRISMES President

**Dr Lewis Turner**  
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom  
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:

[Committee on Academic Freedom](#)