



# 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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Prof. Dr. Walter Rosenthal  
HRK-Präsident  
Sent By Email: [praesident@hrk.de](mailto:praesident@hrk.de)

28 May 2024

Dear Professor Walter Rosenthal,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our profound concern over the continued restriction of protests against the war in Gaza and actions in solidarity with the Palestinian people on the campuses of German universities.

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.

We welcome the [statement by the German Rectors' Conference HRK](#) on May 14, 2024, which states that universities have a responsibility to provide spaces of open discussion and dialogue, including with regards to controversial topics. We also welcome your insistence on protecting the autonomy of academic institutions and your criticism of attempts to defame individual scholars for their beliefs and utterances. However, we believe that the HRK urgently needs to reiterate this position in light of the most recent developments. More specifically, we believe that your statement falls short of voicing a clear commitment to students' and faculty exercising their basic right to protest on German campuses and we ask you to endorse the students' right of assembly.

We understand that since November 2023, there have been multiple attempts by prominent politicians, including the German Federal Minister of Education Bettina Stark-Watzinger, the Mayor of Berlin Kai Wegener, and the Berlin Senator for Higher Education and Research Ina Czyborra to pressure the management of Berlin's higher education institutions to restrict the right of students to protest. We understand that in their view student protests are not a basic right but rather as a security risk, and that they have urged you to rely on police forces to disband student encampments and protests. We further understand that these interferences came to a head on May 23, 2024 when the Berlin Mayor bypassed a negotiated agreement between the president of Humboldt University of Berlin Julia von Blumenthal and student protesters and instructed the police to forcibly disband a



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peaceful occupation of the social science faculty building of HU Berlin. The police proceeded to subject all participants of the occupation to intimidation, and, in some cases, detained students and physically abused them. This unprecedented intervention into university autonomy and neglect of students' right to assembly sets a deeply concerning precedent.

We are equally concerned about the defamation campaign against students and academic staff who have called upon universities to respect students' right to protest on campus, to engage in dialogue with protesters, and to refrain from calling the police to forcefully disband protests. Many scholars who signed a [statement in defence of the right of students to demonstrate](#) have been subjected to hate speech, personal threats, and public smear campaigns. We have also learned that some university administrations have used their power to intimidate employees and to threaten disciplinary action. In the context of the increasing prevalence of precarious positions within universities, these pressures have led to an alarming trend towards self-censorship. We thus call on you to clearly denounce any threats and disciplinary measures against university employees due to their involvement in or support for the protests.

It is precisely during times of war that academic freedom and freedom of expression are tested and need to be assiduously and robustly protected. This will inevitably and necessarily include defending the right of individuals to express views that others may find offensive or challenging.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor Neve Gordon**

Vice President, BRISMES

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom