



# BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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

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Michelle Donelan MP  
Minister of State for Universities  
Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith Street  
Westminster  
London SW1P 3BT

**By Email:** [michelle.donelan.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:michelle.donelan.mp@parliament.uk)

26 May 2021

Dear Ms Donelan, Minister of State for Universities,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our deep concerns about comments that were made during the Education Select Committee on 27 April 2021, regarding the IHRA definition of antisemitism and the autonomy of universities.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES aims to encourage and promote the study of the Middle East region, and to provide a forum for educators and researchers working in Middle East Studies. As part of our remit, we are committed to supporting academic freedom, particularly in relation to issues involving discussions of the region. It is precisely in relation to our remit that we write to express grave concerns about the ongoing pressure being exerted on universities to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, as evidenced in the Education Select Committee meeting of 27 April 2021.

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 to bring to your attention the concerns of our members that the IHRA definition (specifically 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.

In reaching our stance on the IHRA definition, we have given due regard to the views of legal experts. For instance, 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'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/ihra-definition-antisemitism-not-fit-purpose>



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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 collectors could know what to include and exclude,” but political groups have “weaponized” the definition in ways that threaten freedom of speech.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, in March, hundreds of scholars in the fields of Holocaust history, Jewish studies and Middle East studies wrote that the IHRA working definition is not fit for purpose and, instead, proposed the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism as a more precise definition that provides more helpful guidance for combatting antisemitism.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the adoption of the IHRA definition does not add any substantive content that might help reduce racist speech and hate crimes on campuses. As the UCL’s Academic Board Working Group on Racism and Prejudice report found, “The IHRA working definition is unhelpful in identifying cases of harassment ... the core definition itself is too vague and narrow, and the 11 examples often do not match experience.”<sup>4</sup> Based on this report, the university’s academic board recommended retracting the adoption of the definition and replacing it with one “fit for purpose.”

We are above all concerned that the IHRA definition is creating a chilling atmosphere for many of our members who teach and research on matters concerning Israel and Palestine, as well as their students, and that this will have a negative impact on pedagogy and knowledge production. Academics employed on temporary contracts (who constitute a significant proportion of university teaching staff), as well as students, are particularly susceptible to self-censorship out of fear that any sort of accusations, even if not upheld, could jeopardize their future ability to obtain permanent employment. In some cases, there is evidence that the IHRA definition is being deployed to suppress lawful speech that is critical of Israel, its actions and its supporters.

Furthermore, we are alarmed that in the course of discussions of the IHRA definition at the Education Select Committee meeting, MP Jonathan Gullis called for the summary dismissal of Stuart Croft, Vice Chancellor of the University of Warwick, and two other academics at the same university, in relation to unsubstantiated allegations of antisemitism. Whilst you explained to Mr Gullis that it is not possible for government ministers to “sack” VCs or academics, you then went on to say, “I agree with you, certain universities do need to go further on this area”, while Robert Halfon suggested that universities were “hiding behind employment law” in failing to sack academics.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect>

<sup>3</sup> <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucu/sites/ucu/files/wg-racism-and-prejudice-report.pdf>, p. 4.



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Academic freedom and freedom of speech are essential pillars of democracy. A cornerstone of academic freedom is the independence of universities and the freedom of academics to research and teach free from government interference. This is underlined in a 2018 report on *Freedom of Speech in Universities* by the House of Commons-House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights. It states:

Everyone has the right to free speech within the law. This can include the right to say things which, though lawful, *others may find disturbing, upsetting or offensive*. This right is a foundation for democracy. It is important in all settings, but especially in universities, where education and learning are advanced through dialogue and debate. It underpins academic freedom. This right extends to all forms of expression.<sup>5</sup> (Our emphasis).

We urge you, as Minister for Universities, to reconsider the Government's policy of imposing the IHRA definition of antisemitism onto universities and to make clear your full and unequivocal support for academic freedom and the autonomy of universities.

Yours sincerely,

**Professor The Baroness Afshar OBE**

President, BRISMES

on behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

CC:

Professor Julia Buckingham CBE, President, Universities UK

Dr Vicky Blake, President, UCU

Mr Matt Western, Shadow Universities Minister

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<sup>5</sup> House of Commons-House of Lords Joint Committee on Human Rights report on *Freedom of Speech in Universities* (HC 859/HL PAPER 111) (2018)

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/589/589.pdf>, p. 48.