

# **A Collective Statement Calling on the University of Edinburgh to Protect Speech on Palestine, Address the Intimidation on Campus, and Cut University Links to Violence**

The horrific events of October 2023 continue to unfold in scenes of catastrophic violence and loss of life in Israel/Palestine. We recognise how the assault on and violation of Palestinian and Israeli life has produced anguish, grief and fear amongst all affected communities, and acknowledge the historical and ongoing causes. We are particularly alarmed by the current escalation of the state of Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, which has claimed over 10,569 lives of civilians as of 8 November 2023, including 4,324 children. About 2,350 others are reported missing in Gaza, including 1,300 children.

Rather than take a stand against the ongoing atrocities, the UK government is providing full political support for it, which extends to eroding civil liberties and enabling repression within UK academia. This includes the October 17 letter from Secretary of State for Education Gillian Keegan and Under Secretary for Higher Education Robert Halfon to Vice-Chancellors that directly equates support for Palestinians with support for Hamas, and Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle

Donelan's intervention insisting that members of the EDI advisory panel of UKRI whose social media posts were critical of the state of Israel be sacked. UKRI subsequently suspended the whole panel, which had just been named at the end of October.

We—networks, groups, and members of staff at the University of Edinburgh—wish to collectively express our deep concern over these interventions, and the climate of increasing intimidation and escalating restrictions on free speech within British higher education institutions on the topic of Israel/Palestine.

We are witnessing a growing atmosphere of fear and suspicion, which includes conflating criticism of the state of Israel's human rights violations with automatic support for Hamas, and reducing the space to discuss history and context in relation to Israel/Palestine, particularly the Palestinian condition.

It goes without saying that antisemitism and anti-Palestinian racism should not be tolerated on campus, and we stand against all forms of racism and discrimination. We also recognize that it is the speech and action in support of Palestinians and critical of the state of Israel that is overwhelmingly and institutionally targeted and treated as a potential security threat.

In this context, we note that the University of Edinburgh Principal's statement on Israel-Gaza on 13 October 2023 linked to a UUK statement that threatened 'any student or staff member found to be supporting Hamas' with treatment of the 'utmost seriousness.' This is particularly concerning because of the vague and punitive way in which 'support for Hamas' is intentionally conflated in the recent letter written by the UK Home Secretary to Police Chief Constables in England and Wales, which seeks to

criminalize symbols such as the 'Palestinian flag' and principled statements such as 'Palestine will be free'. The letter also states that police may subjectively decide whether such slogans 'glorify terrorism' or can be 'construe[d] as incitement or harassment.' These developments are extremely troubling for staff and students who teach and research on topics related to Israel/Palestine, especially those who are at risk of having their visas revoked.

These are not idle fears. Over the past month, academics and students throughout the UK who have spoken out in solidarity with besieged Palestinians in Gaza and against war crimes have been subject to threatening responses online, in the news media, and in some cases confronted with disciplinary or even legal action. Here at the University of Edinburgh, students have described incidents of intimidation, surveillance and attempts at criminalizing speech and action for Palestine, including the carrying of the Palestinian flag. Staff members have reported fears about carrying out teaching or research on Palestine given the climate of repression and intimidation, or being advised by their managers not to mention what is happening in Israel/Palestine over university email. An article targeting various University staff has already appeared, and we fear that such an article misrepresenting staff's research, teaching and speech could be used as a basis for targeting and monitoring individual members of staff.

Aggressive measures taken by the Government, vague and one-sided statements such as the UUK statement that was immediately (and uncritically) shared by our Principal, and reports of surveillance of and harassment at student protests are all dangerous elements restricting academic freedom and

intensifying anti-Palestinian racism on campus.

We believe that now, more than ever, education and debate is required in order to cultivate shared understandings about Israel/Palestine and forestall further catastrophic loss of life.

We call on the Principal and Senior Leadership Team to:

1. Reassure all staff and students in an official statement that speech about Israel/Palestine, including criticizing the state of Israel's violations of human rights and supporting the Palestinian people's right to self-determination – be it through teaching, events, demonstrations or communications – will not be surveilled or securitized. We also call on the University to commit to protecting staff and students who might be targeted for such speech. In particular, we ask the Principal to endorse the call of Amnesty International that: 'the UK must scrap the Prevent strategy in order to comply with its international human rights obligations'.

2. Reassure staff and students that the right to education and academic freedom will be protected. This should include suspension of the controversial IHRA definition of antisemitism and reversion to the 2010 Equality Act as the framework through which to fight antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination. In 2020, our University adopted the definition without consultation with staff or student groups who would be affected by its severe restrictions of academic freedom and freedom of speech—as recently reported by the British Middle East Studies Association (BRISMES) and the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC). If the University considers the 2010 Equality Act insufficient to tackle antisemitism, it must resume a process of considering

alternative definitions that enable action against antisemitism without drawing false equivalences between critique of Israel's racist state policies and antisemitism.

3. Acknowledge the University's connections to violence in Israel/Palestine. The University has a unique historical involvement with the root causes of violence in Israel/Palestine, and continues to be involved in violence through financial investments as well as research links with weapons companies.

Our University should acknowledge publicly that Chancellor Arthur James Balfour signed the 1917 Declaration on Palestine, a monumental imperial act denying the Palestinian people the right to self-determination in their own homeland. The University should also review, publicly disclose, and divest from all investments in companies that directly or indirectly profit from the illegal military occupation and colonization of Palestine, as well as research or other links with weapons companies that provide arms to the state of Israel, directly or indirectly.

4. Institutionally support and allocate resources to decolonial and anti-racist organizing happening right now between Palestinian, Jewish and various communities on campus, particularly initiatives that challenge the root causes of injustice in Israel/Palestine and their reverberations in the UK. Jewish and Palestinian staff, students, and allies at UoE have already begun this collective work. This requires holding space for the expression of compassion, sorrow and solidarity. We ask that the University meet with members of affected communities to discuss how to institutionally support and protect these important efforts.

## Signatories:

Centre for Ethics and Critical Thought (CRITIQUE), University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh Centre for International and Global Law, University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh Race Equality Network (EREN) Committee, University of Edinburgh

Jewish Staff Association Organising Committee, University of Edinburgh

Politics and International Relations Political Theory Research Group, University of Edinburgh

RACE.ED Steering Committee, University of Edinburgh

Staff BAME Network, University of Edinburgh

Staff of the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh

Staff Pride Network Committee, University of Edinburgh

The Centre for Security Research (CeSeR) Co-Directors, University of Edinburgh

The History Decolonisation Working Group Co-chairs, University of Edinburgh

UCU Edinburgh Branch Committee, University of Edinburgh

Womxn of Colour Collective, University of Edinburgh

Original statement

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Rather than take a stand against the ongoing atrocities, the UK government is providing full political support for it, which extends to enabling dual liberties and enabling repression within UK academia. This includes [the October 17 letter](#) from Secretary of State for Education Gillian Keegan and Under Secretary for Higher Education Robert Halfon to Vice-Chancellors that directly requests support for Palestinians with support for Harman, and Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle Donohue's intervention insisting that members of the EU advisory panel of UUK whose social media posts were critical of the state of Israel be sacked. [UUK](#) subsequently [suspended](#) the whole panel, which had just been named at the end of October.

We – networks, groups, and members of staff at the University of Edinburgh – wish to collectively express our deep concern over these interventions, and the climate of increasing intimidation and escalating restrictions on free speech within British higher education institutions on the topic of Israel/Palestine. We are addressing a growing atmosphere of fear and suspicion, which includes conflating criticism of the state of Israel's human rights violations with automatic support for Hamas, and reducing the space to discuss history and context in relation to Israel/Palestine, particularly the Palestinian condition.

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Aggressive measures taken by the Government, vague and one-sided statements such as the UUK statement that was immediately (and unthinkingly) shared by our Principal, and reports of surveillance and harassment of student groups are all dangerous elements restricting academic freedom and intensifying anti-Palestinian racism on campus.

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2. Reassure staff and students that the right to education and academic freedom will be protected. This should include suspension of the controversial 1988 definition of antisemitism and reversion to the 2018 Equality Act as the framework through which to fight antisemitism and all forms of racism and discrimination. In 2020, our University adopted the definition without consultation with staff or student groups who would be affected by its severe restrictions of academic freedom and [freedom of speech](#) – we recently [reported](#) by the British Middle East Studies Association (BMESA) and the European Legal Support Centre (ELSC). If the University considers the 2010 Equality Act insufficient to tackle antisemitism, it must resume a process of considering alternative definitions that enable action against antisemitism without drawing false equivalences between critique of Israel's racist state policies and antisemitism.

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