

# Court of the University of St Andrews in Scotland dismiss rector Stella Maris for opposing Gaza genocide

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In a cowardly and cynical attack on free speech, the Court of the University of St Andrews has discharged rector Stella Maris from her position as court president.

Maris, a Nigerian born 26-year-old, who was elected rector last year, has also been removed as a trustee of the university. A statement from the university court said the decision was made “after the Rector repeatedly declined to accept the conclusion of an independent investigation which found that she had made some St Andrews students ‘fear for their safety’,” and that she had “breached her responsibilities and legal obligations” as a Court member and trustee.

The statement hypocritically claimed the decision “has no bearing on Ms Maris’s freedom of speech”. But, as Maris has made clear, she is being victimised because she has consistently opposed the genocide being carried out by the Israeli government, with full US and UK backing, in Gaza.

Maris told St Andrews student newspaper *The Saint*, “I have been removed from University Court because I called for an end to Israel’s war crimes against Palestinians, and I will not apologise for doing so. As a young, neurodiverse Black woman with limited financial resources, I have faced the full force of the University, including a KC investigation, all because I made a statement supported by the overwhelming majority of students, calling for an end to a genocide.”

Maris is being targeted because of an email she sent on November 21 last year, to all 10,000 St Andrews students calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. She wrote of the “deep sorrow and collective humanity that bind us together in times of crisis” following two vigils that had been held at the university, one “honouring the lives lost in the largest massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust”, the other “following weeks of genocidal attacks by the Israeli

government against Gaza.”

Maris’ carefully worded statement, issued following consultation with a number of student groups, noted the “common thread of humanity: the understanding that every loss, irrespective of identity, is a profound tragedy” expressed in both vigils. She wrote of the “staggering human toll” which had already amounted to 13,000 people, mostly children and women along with 1.7 million Palestinians displaced while “Palestinians remain trapped under the rubble of collapsed buildings, as relentless bombardments, decimated infrastructure including roads, and lack of fuel due to the ongoing Israeli siege (continuous since 2007) prevent rescue workers from reaching them.”

Maris urged students to “continue to recognize and condemn acts that are internationally regarded as humanitarian and war crimes. These include practices such as apartheid, siege, illegal occupation and collective punishment, which have been observed in the treatment of Palestinians.” She called for an understanding of the historical context of the “current dynamics and resultant suffering”, insisted “my words are not intended to justify violence or dismiss the pain of any community” and called for “informed and compassionate dialogue.”

The pains Maris took to offer understanding to all students, particularly Palestinian and Jewish, were ignored and an orchestrated campaign set in motion against her. An open letter claiming to be from 1,400 “alumni, students, and friends of the University of St Andrews” and given prominence in the right-wing *Daily Telegraph*, was launched, accusing her truthful account of “reinforcing a certain narrative that drives violent antisemitism” and calling for her resignation.

On November 24, the “senior leadership” of the University issued a statement which, after a pro-forma

statement that the rector was “entitled to freedom of speech”, claimed Maris’ “message, the language it used, and some of the sources it cited have caused alarm, division, and harm in our community, and more widely.”

The statement demanded she “take such action as is necessary to restore confidence in her leadership amongst all students, and the wider community.” It was signed by Professor Dame Sally Mapstone, Principal and Vice-Chancellor and 10 others.

Mapstone is also the head of Universities UK—the body which represents Britain’s 141 universities—and serves in a clutch of academic umbrella groups. In 2017, she was awarded a medal by US Foreign Policy Association of America for her “leadership” in higher education. In May this year, accompanied by the Union of Jewish Students, the Community Security Trust and the Jewish Chaplaincy, Mapstone attended a meeting with then Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to “de-escalate” the wave of anti-genocide protests in UK universities. Mapstone told *Sky News*, “What we manifestly don’t want to see is any kind of incidence of the sort of activity that we have seen on US campuses, which is so distressing.”

Maris responded to the accusations made against her, “I reject the notion that my email about the Israel-Palestine conflict was anti-semitic. In my email, I not only denounce anti-semitism but also clarify that opposing the actions of the Israeli government is not equivalent to anti-semitism.”

Maris, a former student who spent three years as Rector’s Assessor responsible for student welfare and inclusion, was backed by staff, students and signatories to another open letter which expressed “sincere gratitude for your recent statement addressing the genocidal war in Gaza. Your call for a cease-fire, condemning the death of all civilians, and advocacy for the Palestinian people have not only demonstrated your commitment to peace but have also inspired a sense of pride in the St Andrews community.”

In response, the university court sought cover by commissioning a report from Morag Ross KC to explore whether Maris was in breach of her obligations under the university court’s code of conduct and as a charity trustee. Ross’ report, which the University Court has had for months, was finally released with their statement announcing the dismissal.

Despite much of the media presentation of the issue, Ross’ report does not call for Maris’ sacking. Instead, it notes repeatedly that even if the court considers obligations have been breached “dismissal would be a

disproportionate response.” This applies to the initial statement, which Ross notes was a single issue and that “[d]ivision in the University was not entirely due to the Statement. Dismissal would interfere with Ms Maris’ rights to freedom of expression in an unjustified way.”

This also applies to a social media furore which erupted after the statement. In Ross’ view, while some of Maris’ social media messages were “ill judged”, they were not “of the most serious kind” and “there was, in general terms, provocation from others.” Ross makes the same remarks regarding Maris’ participation in anti-genocide protests, noting “freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are protected rights”. None of this mattered to the court, who dismissed Maris anyway.

Maris has made clear she intends to appeal the decision and fight on. She told the *National*, “I believe I have been removed from University Court because I called for an end to Israel’s war crimes against Palestinians, which is why I will be appealing this decision... Only the court will be able to explain why they’ve chosen to go further than the recommendations in the report, as I was not part of the discussions which led to this decision.”

Another open letter calls for reinstatement signed by a large number of academics, public figures and human rights lawyers, including Aamer Anwar, a former rector of Glasgow University.

Maris has also been backed by Glasgow University’s current rector, Professor Ghassan Abu-Sittah. Abu-Sittah, a former Glasgow University student, is a prominent British-Palestinian surgeon who has repeatedly offered his services in Gaza and other war zones. Returning from a trip to Gaza in November last year, he met with International Criminal Court investigators. In April this year, Abu-Sittah was banned from traveling to Germany where he intended to report on his terrible experiences.

Abu-Sittah said, “The silencing of pro-Palestinian or anti-genocide voices is the reason why this genocide is still going on after 10 months. These institutions have been part of a system of genocide enablement that has emboldened the Israeli government in its attempts to erase the Palestinian people.” Abu-Sittah was elected rector by an overwhelming majority of Glasgow University students in March this year.



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