# University of St Andrews faces free speech storm over rector Stella Maris’s Gaza statements



The University of St Andrews has become embroiled in controversy following statements made by its newly elected rector, Stella Maris, in the wake of the escalating conflict in Gaza after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023. The fallout from her communications has raised significant questions regarding the delicate balance of free speech, institutional responsibility, and the safety of students amidst charged political rhetoric.

Eleven days after assuming her role, Maris sent an email to thousands of students claiming that Israeli forces were engaging in “genocidal attacks” in Gaza, while simultaneously condemning Hamas for its actions on October 7 that resulted in over 1,000 Israeli deaths. This statement ignited a substantial backlash within the university community, particularly from Jewish students, who reported feelings of fear and insecurity in response to her assertions. The university's Jewish Society described the email as “divisive, harmful and not based in fact,” demanding that Maris either retract her statements or resign.

In the wake of the uproar, Alastair Merrill, the university's governance chief and vice principal, found himself central to the unfolding drama. Emails obtained through Freedom of Information requests unveiled his behind-the-scenes influence in shaping the terms of an independent investigation led by Lady Morag Ross KC. In an exchange dated January 30, 2024, Merrill recommended changes to an email regarding the investigation's scope, seeking to narrow its focus to “actions and activities” rather than “duties and responsibilities.” His goal seemed to be to contain the inquiry within the framework of Maris's obligations as a member of the court, potentially limiting its breadth and implications.

The inquiry concluded with findings that Maris had breached her obligations as a member of the university court and had acted with “poor judgement.” While she retained her title, her removal from the court raised considerable debate, especially regarding its implications for free speech. Maris, firmly defending her comments, asserted that her statements were based on a “strong consensus” and expressed concerns over the potential chilling effect of the university's actions on freedom of speech.

The handling of the case, however, has not gone unnoticed in the broader political discourse. Mid Scotland and Fife Green MSP Mark Ruskell commented on the implications of the situation, expressing that the investigation appeared biased against Maris and demanding an apology from the university. Such calls highlight the ongoing tensions not only within St Andrews but also across various universities globally, where free speech disputes have surged alongside the Israel-Gaza conflict.

Critics argue that the university's reaction could set a worrying precedent that undermines the principles of academic freedom and open debate. Maris’s case has sparked discussions about the responsibilities that come with such freedoms, especially in an environment that must also ensure the safety and inclusion of all its students.

As the university navigates this turbulent period, the challenge lies in fostering an atmosphere that encourages robust discourse while also addressing the emotional and psychological impacts of such communicative actions on its diverse student body. The complexities of this situation reflect a broader societal struggle to reconcile deeply held beliefs and the need for dialogue, making St Andrews a microcosm of the divisions currently being grappled with around the world.

The outcome of this incident, along with the institutional responses, will likely continue to resonate, shaping the future of both governance and student engagement at St Andrews.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
2. Paragraphs 3, 4, 5, 6
3. Paragraph 2
4. Paragraph 1, 2, 3, 4
5. Paragraph 2, 3, 5
6. Paragraph 2, 3, 6
7. Paragraph 2, 3, 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/5247035/university-st-andrews-rector-emails-investigation/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://news.st-andrews.ac.uk/archive/statement-from-the-court-of-the-university-of-st-andrews-university-court-discharges-rector/> - On August 1, 2024, the University of St Andrews announced the discharge of Rector Stella Maris from her role as President of Court and charity trustee. This decision followed an independent investigation led by Morag Ross KC, which found that Maris's actions, including a November 2023 email to students accusing Israel of 'genocidal attacks' and 'apartheid,' breached her responsibilities and legal obligations. The university emphasized that Maris would retain the title and office of Rector until her term expires in October 2026, but would no longer sit on the Court. The statement also acknowledged the importance of freedom of speech while highlighting the need for responsible communication within the university community.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/28/jewish-students-st-andrews-rector-fostering-hate-claim/> - In November 2023, Jewish students at the University of St Andrews accused Rector Stella Maris of fostering hate after she sent an email to students accusing Israel of committing genocide in Palestine. The university's Jewish Society described the message as 'divisive, harmful and not based in fact,' urging Maris to apologize or resign. Maris defended her stance, stating there was a 'strong consensus' supporting her position and emphasizing her commitment to freedom of speech. The controversy highlighted tensions within the university community regarding the balance between free expression and the impact of such statements on student safety and inclusivity.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cye0rj48kg5o> - On August 1, 2024, the BBC reported that the University of St Andrews removed Rector Stella Maris from her role on the university court following an investigation into her comments on the Israel-Gaza conflict. Maris had sent an email to all students referring to 'genocidal attacks' by the Israeli government shortly after her election in October 2023. The investigation concluded that she had breached her responsibilities to students, but Maris argued that her removal set a 'dangerous precedent for freedom of speech.' She will no longer sit as president of the university court but will remain in a pastoral care role for students.
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/24/st-andrews-university-rector-israel-genocide-palestine/> - In November 2023, Rector Stella Maris of the University of St Andrews sent an email to students accusing Israel of 'genocide' in Gaza and linking to a website claiming it 'killed its own citizens' in the Hamas terror attack. Hundreds of students, alumni, and their families demanded that she apologize and retract her remarks or resign. Maris defended her stance, stating she would not apologize for speaking up about these issues. The university's leadership team expressed dismay at her comments, emphasizing the importance of freedom of speech while also considering the impact on student welfare.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-67529665> - In November 2023, the BBC reported that the University of St Andrews Rector, Stella Maris, faced calls to apologize over an email accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza. Maris stated that Palestinians had suffered 'apartheid, siege, illegal occupation and collective punishment' during the Israel-Gaza war. Hundreds of students demanded that she retract her remarks or resign just a month after taking up the role. The university expressed dismay at the rector's comments, highlighting the importance of freedom of speech while also considering the impact on student welfare.
7. <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/i-will-not-apologize-scottish-university-rector-dismissed-from-governing-body-for-criticizing-israel/> - In August 2024, the Palestine Chronicle reported that the University of St Andrews dismissed Rector Stella Maris from the governing body after she criticized Israel. Maris had sent an email to students condemning Israeli actions in Gaza as 'genocidal attacks' and 'imposing apartheid' on Palestinians. The university's independent investigation concluded that Maris's actions breached her responsibilities and legal obligations. Maris stated she would not apologize for speaking out against Israel's actions, emphasizing her commitment to freedom of speech and human rights.