

## **SEMOMM, SeSaMO, and BRISMES Committees on Academic Freedom (CAF) Statement in Solidarity with François Burgat**

SEMOMM, SeSaMO, and BRISMES declare their solidarity with François Burgat and express their deep concern regarding the judicial process against him and, more broadly, the threats facing academic freedom and freedom of expression, especially when directed at scholars and researchers.

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. Its Committee on Academic Freedom monitors and defends academic freedom in the research, study and teaching of Middle East Studies, in the UK and across the world.

The Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMO) was established in 1995 and is the leading national association for the scholarly study of the Middle East and North Africa in Italy and Europe. Its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) defends academic freedom, understood as the inalienable right to the transmission and circulation of research and of knowledge.

The Society for Middle Eastern and the Muslim World Studies (SEMOMM), founded in 2014, is the professional scholarly association of this area in France. It is committed to defending academic freedom in connection with the study of the region.

On Wednesday 29 April 2026, François Burgat, a retired research director at the **Centre national de la recherche scientifique** (CNRS), appeared before the courts in Aix en Provence, on charges of glorifying terrorism. François Burgat is an internationally recognised expert on Islamist movements and the author of a number of important scholarly works, including, *Understanding Political Islam* (Manchester University Press, 2019) and *Islamism in the shadow of al-Qaeda* (La Découverte 2005 and U. of Texas Press 2008), amongst others. He has held a range of academic positions and advised a number of think tanks internationally.

Professor Burgat was first tried on 28 May 2025, resulting in his acquittal. However, the public prosecutor appealed the decision. At this latest hearing, the prosecutor requested a one-year suspended prison sentence. The judgement will be delivered on 27 May.

This new trial takes place in a context of increasing criminalisation of intellectual debates concerning the situation in West Asia, particularly Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip. This trend aims to silence criticism of the Israeli government regarding its policies toward Palestinians and of the military campaign that prompted the International Court of Justice, as early as 26 January 2024, to order provisional measures against Israel in light of a plausible risk of genocide.

We call on all public institutions to defend and uphold the right to academic freedom and freedom of expression, and to oppose all efforts to intimidate academics and silence them.

Furthermore, we call on the French authorities to ensure that laws relating to terrorism are not used in ways that undermine legitimate political expression, academic inquiry, or public debate. Freedom of expression — including sharp criticism of states and analysis of non-state armed actors — is protected under the European Convention on Human Rights and constitutes a fundamental principle of democratic society. The increasing criminalisation of political speech risks creating a chilling effect on scholars, journalists, and citizens engaged in debate on matters of major public concern.