BRISMES and SeSaMO CAFs Statement on the Arrest of Mahdi Tounsi

The Committees on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) and the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies (SeSaMO) are profoundly concerned by reports documenting the arrest of Mahdi Tounsi, a Palestinian student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, on the morning of 8 November 2026.

Mr Tounsi, a sociology and criminology student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is a well-known and active participant in numerous political groups, including joint Jewish-Palestinian initiatives such as Hand in Hand, and other student and community groups, particularly in the Silwan neighbourhood in occupied East Jerusalem. At the time of writing, Mr Tounsi continues to be held, subject to a further court hearing scheduled for 24 November. We understand that the Israeli authorities plan to detain Mr Tounsi for six months in administrative detention, a form of arbitrary detention that Israeli authorities apply routinely, and that is associated with widespread human rights violations. Tounsi appeared at the hearing via video link with his head shaved and without his glasses, which the police reportedly prevented him from taking when he was arrested. The judge ordered that his glasses be returned. His lawyer has also raised concerns about alleged physical violence during his arrest and detention, as well as restrictions to access to legal assistance.

We are particularly concerned by reports that Mr Tounsi's arrest took place in his student dormitory on university's Mount Scopus campus. This comes against a background of extensive discrimination against and political persecution of Palestinian students in Israeli universities, which has intensified greatly in the past three years, as BRISMES' Committee has previously noted. Universities must remain spaces of learning and critical inquiry, as well as freedom of expression, and universities have a duty of care to all of their students.

We call upon Israeli authorities to immediately release Mr Tounsi from detention. We further call upon the Hebrew University of Jerusalem to advocate for Mr Tounsi to either be released or that he be given a fair trial and to ensure that, upon his release, Mr Tounsi's physical safety, academic status, scholarships and right to housing are all protected.

BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom
SeSaMO Committee on Academic Freedom
23 November 2026