BRISMES
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

Email: office@brismes.org **Website**: www.brismes.ac.uk

Professor Oron Shagrir, Rector of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Sent via email: rector@savion.huji.ac.il

24 November 2026

Dear Prof. Shagrir,

We are writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) to express our profound concern about reports documenting the arrest of Mahdi Tounsi, a Palestinian student at your university, on the morning of 8 November 2026.

Founded in 1973, BRISMES is the UK's leading academic association 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.

Mr Tounsi, a sociology and criminology student, 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. Mr Tounsi appeared at the previous 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 the 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 our 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 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.

We look forward to your response. As is our standard practice, this letter will be published on our website.

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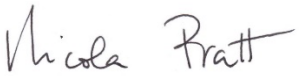
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Yours sincerely,





Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair, BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

On behalf of the BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

To read previous letters and statements from BRISMES CAF, please visit:
Committee on Academic Freedom

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Outlook

RE: Letter from BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

From Rector of the Hebrew University <rector@savion.huji.ac.il>
Date Tue 2026-11-24 09:50
To BRISMES Office <office@brismes.org>
Cc BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom <academicfreedom@brismes.org>

Thank you for reaching out and expressing your concerns.

We share your concern for Mahdi Tunisi's well-being and current situation.

The University is committed to protecting the rights of all its students, including the right to due process. We regard administrative detention as an extreme measure that should be used only under the most exceptional circumstances. At the same time, we are not privy to the specific allegations against Mahdi and are therefore unable to comment on their substance or merits.

Several days ago, we contacted the Attorney General and the State Attorney, requesting that they review Mahdi's case. In our correspondence, we emphasized our principled opposition to the use of administrative detention, the importance of safeguarding Mahdi's rights, and the need to obtain information regarding the circumstances of his detention. Depending on the response we receive, we will consider what additional steps may be available to us.
We wish to reaffirm the University's commitment to freedom of expression and political activity for all students, including Arab students. We will continue to safeguard freedom of expression and the right to protest on campus, while working to foster a safe, inclusive, and equitable academic environment for all members of our community.

Sincerely,
Oron

| Rector **Prof. Oron Shagrir**
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