



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

3542 N Geronimo Ave
Tucson AZ 85705 USA

tel 520-333-2577
fax 520-207-3166
caf@mesana.org
www.mesana.org



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Shaikh Hamad bin 'Issa Al Khalifa
Office of His Majesty the King
P.O. Box 555
Rifa'a Palace, al-Manama, Bahrain
Fax: +973 1766 4587

Your Majesty,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee of Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our vigorous protest at the 23 March 2017 sentencing of Khalil al-Halwachi, a Bahraini scholar and activist, to ten years' imprisonment for possession of a weapon following a pre-trial detention period of more than two years. Mr. al-Halwachi's conviction is part of a disturbing crackdown on freedom of expression and political opposition in your country since 2011. We are concerned at the apparent lack of due process that marked the detention and trial process of Mr. al-Halwachi, and we are profoundly dismayed by the death sentences handed down to three other defendants tried alongside him.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Khalil al-Halwachi is a Bahraini citizen who studied electrical engineering at the prestigious Imperial College London in the 1970s. He lived in Sweden for fourteen years but returned to Bahrain in 2001 after you initiated a process of reconciliation as part of the National Action Charter. On his return to Bahrain, Mr. al-Halwachi taught mathematics and conducted training sessions and workshops for university students and academics. He was also one of the founders of the Islamic Action Society, *Amal*, which was dissolved by the authorities in the wake of the February 2011 uprising in Bahrain. Mr. al-Halwachi himself was detained for five months in 2011 and, after his release, was unable to resume his employment as an educator and instructor.

Mr. al-Halwachi was rearrested in September 2014 by masked security forces in plain clothes who raided his home and did not produce a warrant for this search or his arrest. Mr. al-Halwachi maintains that during the search of his home, the security forces planted a Kalashnikov rifle that subsequently provided the basis for the charge of possessing an illegal weapon. He has further alleged that he was mistreated during his interrogation at the

Criminal Investigation Directorate, denied regular access to legal representation, and coerced into signing a false confession. His trial was postponed more than twenty times and his health deteriorated sharply during his long period of pre-trial detention; in fact, he suffered a stroke in September 2016. We are concerned by reports that while in detention Mr. al-Halwachi has not been able to receive proper medical treatment for his ailments, which include multiple blood clots.

During 2016, Mr. al-Halwachi's trial at the Fifth High Criminal Court was adjourned twice – on 30 June and 12 December – after witnesses for the prosecution failed to appear in court. When Mr. al-Halwachi spoke out against the judicial proceedings against him at a hearing in November 2016, he was additionally charged with “insulting the judiciary.” He refused to attend his sentencing on 23 March 2017 in person after sending multiple letters to the presiding judge, Ebrahim al-Zayed, that drew attention to improper practices and ill-treatment during his trial.

The sentencing of Mr. al-Halwachi to ten years in prison is consistent with a systematic targeting of individuals associated with opposition political groups in Bahrain. His interrogators focused on his association with *Amal*. We observe that *Amal* was forced to dissolve in 2011 and its General Secretary, Mohammed Ali al-Mahfoodh and that Mr. al-Halwachi already served five months in prison in 2011 for his association with *Amal*. We also note that other opposition political societies in Bahrain, namely *Al-Wefaq* National Islamic Society and *Wa'ad*, the National Democratic Action Society, have similarly been targeted. *Al-Wefaq* was suspended in October 2014 – the month before parliamentary elections in Bahrain – and formally dissolved in July 2016 while its leadership – Sheikh Ali Salman and Sheikh Isa Qassim – remain behind bars; Sheikh Isa Qassim was also stripped of his Bahraini citizenship in June 2016. *Wa'ad's* leader, Ebrahim Sharif, was jailed in 2011 for four years and rearrested only weeks after his release in 2015, and its Secretary-General, Radhi al-Musawi, was banned from international travel in November 2016. On 6 March 2017, the Government of Bahrain launched legal proceedings to dissolve *Wa'ad*, thereby removing the last remaining political opposition society active in Bahrain. We also wrote to you on 1 December 2016 to protest the travel ban placed on at least 28 members of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights.

At our annual meeting in 2011, we at MESA presented our Academic Freedom Award to all faculty, students, and staff of Bahraini institutes of higher education who had resisted and spoken out against state attacks on the autonomy and integrity of their institutions during that year. Nearly six years later, we are profoundly dismayed that the sentencing of Khalil al-Halwachi indicates that little, in practice, appears to have changed, in spite of

the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry and the multiple pledges to reform that followed. We call on Your Majesty to intervene to secure the release of Mr. al-Halwachi and other prisoners of conscience and to urge your government to respect internationally recognized standards of due process and freedom of expression and association.

Sincerely,



Beth Baron
MESA President
Professor, City University of New York



Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director
Associate Professor, University of Arizona

cc:

His Excellency Shaikh Khalid bin Ali Al Khalifa
Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Awqāf
Fax +973 1753 6343

His Excellency Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa
Minister of Interior
Fax +973 1757 2222

His Excellency Shaikh Khaled Bin Ahmed bin Mohamed Al Khalifa
Minister of Foreign Affairs
contactus@mofa.gov.bh

His Excellency Shaikh Abdullah Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Khalifa
Ambassador of Bahrain to the United States
Fax 202 362 2192
ambsecretary@bahrainembassy.org