

April 17, 2007

His Majesty Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud
Royal Court
Riyadh 11111
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
c/o Ambassador Prince Adel A. Al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the US
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Your Majesty:

We are writing on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom. We are deeply concerned about arbitrary restrictions that the government, including the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Higher Education, has placed on a number of Saudi academics. These restrictions include preventing professors from teaching and meeting with students, banning publication and distribution of their work, denying them access to Saudi and regional media, and prohibiting them from traveling abroad for professional purposes.

It appears that these restrictions have been imposed because these academics have, in their writing and public comments, criticized government policies. The government's response appears intended to punish these individuals for expressing their views, and to intimidate others who may be inclined to do the same. These restrictions clearly violate the internationally guaranteed right to freedom of expression and the right to impart and exchange information and ideas--the core elements of academic freedom. We therefore urge you to review these cases, take steps to remove these restrictions, and instruct the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Higher Education to cease policies that punish scholars solely for the peaceful expression of views critical of official policies and practices.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote 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 more than 2700 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.

The serious violations of academic freedom in Saudi Arabia that have come to our attention include the following:

- Dr. Matrouk al-Faleh, a professor of political science at King Saud University, is presently on sabbatical leave from his university post. His leave was approved by the university's Academic Council, and he hoped to spend the academic year at the University of Washington, but Ministry of Interior orders have prevented him from traveling for that purpose.

- Dr. al-Faleh has continued to speak out publicly on the need for comprehensive political and constitutional reform in Saudi Arabia as well as reforms in the governance of Saudi universities. You met with Dr. al-Faleh in August 2005 after pardoning him following his conviction on trumped-up charges for calling publicly for a constitutional monarchy.

In 2004, while he was in detention, MESA chose Dr. al-Faleh for its annual Academic Freedom Defender Award and we continue to monitor his situation. The Ministry of Interior should immediately revoke the restrictions it has placed on Dr. al-Faleh's travel and his ability to speak out publicly in the media.

- Dr. Abdullah al-Hamid, formerly on the teaching staff of Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University until his dismissal in the mid-1990s, is today a prominent public intellectual. He was among those convicted and subsequently pardoned along with Dr. al-Faleh for advocating peaceful political change. The Ministry of Interior has also prohibited his travel and his ability to express his views critically in Saudi media. We call on you to instruct the interior ministry officials to revoke the punitive restrictions they have placed on Dr. al-Hamid's right to travel and to express his views publicly.
- Hassan al-Malki had been an instructor at the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University and a consultant with the Ministry of Education until he was dismissed from both positions in 2002 as a result of his public advocacy of reforms in Saudi educational curricula. The government has also banned the sale and distribution of his books in Saudi Arabia. According to Dr. al-Malki, Ministry of Interior orders prohibit him from lecturing or writing in Saudi Arabia or traveling abroad as a result of his criticism of the policies and practices of the country's religious establishment in particular. We urge you to ensure that the Ministry of Interior revokes its orders preventing Dr. al-Malki from teaching, writing, and traveling.
- Abd al-Rahman al-Hakimi was preparing his thesis for a Master of Arts degree and teaching at the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University when he was dismissed from the university several years ago after he called publicly for greater tolerance of unorthodox views in Islam. According to Mr. al-Hakimi, no Saudi university has accepted his request to finish his degree. His dismissal and subsequent exclusion from any degree program appears to be in reprisal for his public advocacy of views critical of the Saudi religious establishment in particular. We urge you to take steps to ensure that no government ministries or public officials prevent Mr. al-Hakimi from resuming his higher studies and his ability to lecture.

Page 3

- Dr. Tawfiq al-Qusayyir taught physics at King Saud University until he was forcibly retired in 1994. He was among those detained in early 2004 for calling publicly for a constitutional monarchy. He was released from detention on March 30, 2004 after signing a statement that he would refrain from further advocacy of political reform. However, he remains banned from traveling abroad solely as a result of his advocacy of peaceful political change.

Your Highness, we are familiar with additional cases of individual academics and public intellectuals who do not wish to be named publicly but who have suffered similar punitive restrictions for exercising their right to freedom of expression, the right to impart, receive, and exchange information, and the right to participate in public affairs. We strongly urge you to address the grievances of the individuals raised in this letter and to take steps to see that the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Higher Education, and other official bodies end policies of punishing those who peacefully advocate political change and end policies aimed at silencing and intimidating a whole group of Saudi citizens.

Sincerely,

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MESA President

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